

Tackling the psychology of poaching

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Researchers believe a new approach to policing marine parks, including tackling the psychology of poaching, could yield massive benefits for fish numbers.

Dr. Brock Bergseth from James Cook University led a study that looked

at how Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) could be made more effective. He said most of the world's MPAs are considered "paper parks"—existing on paper but not in reality.

"This is because they are plagued by a combination of persistent poaching, inadequate funding, and a lack of management capacity," said Dr. Bergseth.

The research team used a global dataset of coral reefs to quantify the potential gains that could be made if MPAs were more effectively governed. The research is published in the journal *Fish and Fisheries*.

"Increased compliance in no-take MPAs could nearly double target fish biomass (91% increases) and result in a 292% higher likelihood of encountering top predators, such as sharks, that are vital for the health of our oceans," said Dr. Bergseth.

He said optimizing enforcement is still critical, but a range of other approaches can also be used to help improve compliance.

"Figuring out what makes people tick, and how to pull on those behavioral levers to increase compliance is going to be crucial if we want marine parks to function properly," said Dr. Bergseth.

He said harnessing [social norms](#)—perceptions about what others are doing and what they think is acceptable—could help improve compliance.

"Often times, people engage in [illegal activities](#) like poaching because they think other people also do and approve of it. Correcting these misperceptions by emphasizing how most people do the right thing can have big results," said Dr. Bergseth.

"This is especially important when we consider social tipping points—or situations where a small, but vocal group of people can shift norms in entire populations."

He said in contexts where poaching is prevalent, a committed group can establish a new norm to where poaching is no longer acceptable or common—research suggests this often occurs when groups are roughly 20%–30% of the population.

"Other things besides norms also influence our tendency to follow rules—we tend to support and follow rules that are equitable (fair and impartial) and align with our incentives.

"For instance, using market-based instruments (license fees from tourism and other activities to fund enforcement activities) can also increase [compliance](#)," said Dr. Bergseth.

He said people need to be aware of, and contemplate the rules, before they follow them, and this is where communication science comes in.

"Tailoring communications to the different situations people are in when they make the decision to poach is crucial. A spur of the moment decision and a considered decision need different strategies to counter them," said Dr. Bergseth.

He said the problem is enforcement is often the most expensive component of MPA management.

"Many of the world's MPAs lack the resources to maintain high-end management and enforcement programs. With these new strategies in place, we can move towards a vastly cheaper and much more effective way of protecting our oceans," said Dr. Bergseth.

More information: Brock J. Bergseth et al, Closing the compliance gap in marine protected areas with human behavioural sciences, *Fish and Fisheries* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/faf.12749](https://doi.org/10.1111/faf.12749)

Provided by James Cook University

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