

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Talking Up Nature

One of the difficulties in environmental management is garnering public support for a course of action designed to address a particular problem. A new study by UC Santa Barbara scholars suggests that the way a project is framed can make a big difference in how it's received by the public.

[“Economic losses or environmental gains? Framing effects on public support for environmental management”](#) in the journal PLOS ONE, by Alex DeGolia, a 2017 UC Santa Barbara Ph.D. graduate in political science, Elizabeth Hiroyasu, a doctoral candidate in UCSB’s Bren School of Environmental Science & Management, and [Sarah Anderson](#), an associate professor of environmental politics at the Bren School, explores “which types of benefits or losses environmental managers should communicate and how to frame those attributes to achieve greater public support.”

The study, which surveyed more than 1,000 Californians, was unique in that it focused on invasive species — a subject that, the authors note, has not been politicized, unlike climate change.

The authors suspected that, as a politically neutral issue, invasive species would allow them to test different messages based on either preventing losses or facilitating gains. How people react to these messages, the paper said, is rooted in prospect theory, “which proposes that people are more responsive to potential losses than equivalent potential gains — the psychological effect of losing \$100 is greater than the positive effect of gaining \$100.”

“We didn’t really know whether that could be applied equivalently for something that you don’t actually own — this public good,” said DeGolia, who is now deputy director of the Catena Foundation in Colorado.

What’s more, he said, climate change has become so politicized that merely talking about the environment is seen as signaling political affiliation, making people less likely to change opinions.

“They interpret information through an already politicized lens,” DeGolia explained, “and they’re less open to evaluate that information from a less-biased perspective.”

But the authors hypothesized that might not be the case with a less-politicized issue like invasive species. So they created press releases for a fictional program to manage invasive wild pigs that mirrored those of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW).

The releases centered on “framing, which highlights information that connects to people’s core concerns or beliefs,” the authors wrote. “Frames contextualize policy issues, making them more immediately accessible and more relevant and understandable for the public.”

In addition to a control release that didn’t mention losses or gains, they drafted four other releases; two referenced potential gains and two referenced averted losses. Of those, one referenced economic gains vs. losses, while the other referenced ecological gains vs. losses.

DeGolia said that while the authors expected an economic argument would be more effective with conservatives and liberals would be more responsive to an environmental appeal, they were in for a surprise.

It turned out political moderates and conservatives both responded positively to an environmental argument when the issue wasn’t freighted with political baggage. Given that, DeGolia said, “maybe you don’t have to be as precise in terms of who you’re going to talk to. You don’t have to necessarily highlight the economic benefits to conservatives and environmental benefits to liberals if it’s not really closely aligned with political identity. Instead, maybe you can just talk about the environmental benefits of a program like this and expect that that is going to elicit fairly positive responses across the board.”

DeGolia noted that it's often assumed that "people don't actually really care that much about the environment for its own sake. They care about their pocketbook. So when we talk about climate we should be talking about our jobs." This work showed that managers don't necessarily need to focus on economic benefits, but can emphasize the environmental benefits of programs in areas less politicized than climate.

And that talking about avoiding losses was more effective than talking about what could be gained by implementing the project.

"People were most supportive when we highlighted that the program would avoid further habitat and species loss," Anderson said. "Managers in less-politicized areas like water management and endangered species management can take a lesson from this research in how to communicate to the public about their management strategies: talk about avoiding ecological problems in the future."

The study was funded through the H. William Kuni Fellowship at the Bren School of Environmental Science & Management.

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