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Investigating societal attitudes towards the marine environment of Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a nationwide survey in Ireland that explored the values, concerns and preferences of individuals towards the Irish marine environment. The results of the Irish survey are also compared to the results from similar surveys carried out in other maritime countries in the EU. The results of the Irish survey demonstrate a reasonable level of knowledge of the main threats facing Ireland's marine environment and of the importance of non-market as well as market ecosystem services provided by the seas around the Irish coast. The results also suggest that the Irish public are sceptical of the ability of government and private industry to manage the Irish marine economy but instead place a large amount of trust in the competency of scientists. The perception of whether or not they consider where they live as being a coastal area would also suggest that the Irish public hold a much more narrow view of what constitutes a coastal area than that held by statistical agencies such as Eurostat.

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1. Introduction

Many people in Ireland rely upon the sea and its resources for their livelihood either directly or indirectly, while for others Irish seas and coasts are important for recreation. In 2010, the direct economic value of the Irish ocean economy was €1.2 billion, and it provided employment for approximately 16,300 full time equivalent individuals [1]. However, the views of the Irish public towards the seas and oceans around the Irish coast are relatively unknown. This is despite the fact that Ireland has sovereign rights over 900,000 km² of seabed (which is an area 10 times the size of the land area of Ireland).

While the positions of organised stakeholder groups are often captured through responses to policy consultations such as those provided for the recently launched Integrated Marine Plan for Ireland, the opinion of the 'ordinary person in the street' is difficult to include in the decision making process. However, it is the collective choices made by communities through the marine and coastal resources they use, the coastal areas they visit or reside in that drive many pressures on the marine environment. The viewpoint of the Irish public on the seas and oceans around Ireland will also play an important role in supporting policies such as the Integrated Marine Plan for Ireland and the EU Marine Strategy Framework Directive and for policies aimed at the deployment of marine renewable devices, large scale aquaculture projects, and

marine protected areas that have considerable social and economic consequences.

The marine environment policy agenda in Europe is moving forward as a result of directives such as the European Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the Bathing Waters Directive and through regional seas strategies such as the Atlantic Strategy. Across other areas of marine activity, such as planning and maritime development, policy is being driven by the Integrated Maritime Strategy; and for fisheries through the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy [2,3]. Indeed, the adoption of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive is an opportunity for a comprehensive policy for protecting, improving and sustainably using Europe's seas. It calls for an ecosystem-based approach to management where humans are regarded as a key system component [4].

The ever increasing and diverse use of the marine environment is leading to human induced changes in marine life, habitats and landscapes, making necessary the development of marine policy that considers all members of the user community and addresses current, multiple and interacting uses. In recent times, the governance of the marine environment has also evolved from being primarily top down and state directed to being more participatory, inclusive and community based. Coupled with this fact is recent research that demonstrates how higher levels of citizen involvement in the management of the marine environment would greatly benefit the marine environment [5,6].

In what follows, Section 2 will briefly review previous studies that have examined public attitudes to the marine environment. Section 3 will present an overview of the survey instrument and the sampling strategy followed in conducting the survey.

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Section 4 will then present an analysis of the survey responses while Section 5 provides some concluding discussion.

2. Previous studies that have examined public attitudes to the marine environment

A number of previous research studies have examined the public awareness, attitudes and perceptions to the marine environment using public surveys to attain their results [7–13]. A recent European briefing report carried out by Potts et al. [2] explored the values, concerns and aspirations of the ordinary person regarding the marine environment. The authors pointed out that it was important to gain the views of the public as they play an important role in supporting reforms. A large sample across seven countries was taken. The findings revealed that the public had a good understanding of the marine environment, especially in relation to ocean and atmospheric systems; that the importance placed on the marine environment for scenery provides a justification for further incorporation of ecosystem services into the decision making process; and in terms of environmental issues that immediate problems, such as the cost of living, health and pollution, were of greater concern to the public than more abstract elements of sustainability. The survey presented an optimistic picture for support for marine planning and protection at the national scale, with considerable goodwill in the public mind for the development of marine planning initiatives.

In 2011 the FP7 project CLAMER (Climate change and marine ecosystem research) prepared a report [7] that discussed what the European public knows and cares about in relation to marine climate change risks and impacts. The survey spanned 10 European countries and was undertaken as a result of the perceived gap between what is known through research and what policy makers and the public knows and understands about the impacts of climate change in the oceans and seas around Europe. The EU Commission conducted a similar report in 2009 in preparation for the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen that was aiming to reach a follow-up agreement to the Kyoto Protocol [9]. The results from both reports show that the public cares about climate change, ranking it second overall from a list of major global issues, and almost everybody polled believed climate change is at least partly caused by humans. It also showed that estimates provided by the public for rates of sea level rise and temperature change matched well with scientific consensus, suggesting some fundamental messages are getting through to the public domain. However for some issues, especially ocean acidification, public awareness was extremely low. Potts et al. [2] also highlighted a split between the public and the scientific community over their respective perceptions of environmental problems in the sea. Elsewhere, research by Cobham Resource Consultants [14] on the attitudes and aspirations of people towards the marine environment of Scotland with respect to its uses, controls and conservation importance concluded that both the public and marine stakeholders appear to have a restricted understanding of the full range of uses and importance of marine resources. However they found that generally, stakeholders had a better knowledge of the environmental issues such as pollution, waste disposal and impact of overfishing.

Several broader socio-demographic themes also emerge from the literature. Staying longer in education, higher income and use of the internet has an impact on people's opinions of the marine environment [9]. A number of studies comparing responses between genders found that women were more concerned about the issues facing the marine environment than men [9,14,15]. Additionally, the proximity to the sea and perceived level of risk to

the marine environment has also been found to shape the perceptions of the public towards the marine environment [11].

Research has also shown that by enhancing public awareness and knowledge of oceans can lead to increased public support for ocean restoration efforts [12]. The literature suggests that there has already been some degree of effective communication between policy makers and the public in relation to the marine environment, although there still remains a gap between public and scientific understanding about many of the threats to marine ecosystems. Steel et al. [12] conclude that the public is not well informed on the environmental terms and knowledge about ocean issues. The survey conducted by the authors found that coastal residents say that they are slightly more knowledgeable than those residing in non-coastal areas, however both sets of respondents had trouble identifying important terms and answering ocean related quiz questions, implying that both coastal and non-coastal communities need access to better information that is delivered in an effective manner.

More recently, Ahtiainen et al. [16] contributes to the expanding literature on social preferences for marine ecosystem services by assessing recreational usage and perceptions of the condition of the Baltic Sea from the perspective of the general public within the coastal states surrounding the Baltic. They find that citizens of coastal countries are concerned over the state of the Baltic Sea, especially in Finland, Russia and Sweden and that the Poles, Danes and Finns have the most positive attitude towards contributing financially to improving the state of the Baltic Sea. Other research that has examined the attitudes, values, concerns and aspirations of individuals regarding aspects of the marine environment include work that has focused on climate change [17,18], environmental quality and beach use [19], cetacean conservation issues [20] and off shore wind farms [21,22].

This paper adds to the above body of research by reporting on the results of a nationwide survey in Ireland that explored the values, concerns and preferences of individuals regarding the Irish marine environment. The results of the Irish survey are also compared to the results from similar surveys carried out in other maritime countries in the EU. The results of this study also feed into the emerging literature on 'Ocean literacy' where an ocean-literate person can be defined as one that understands the influences of the ocean on society and society's influence in turn on the ocean, can communicate ocean related information, and is able to make informed decisions that affect the ocean. As Steel et al. [12] point out; with an understanding of the depth and breadth of ocean understanding held by the general public, more effective public education and marine and ocean information dissemination efforts may be targeted. With this in mind, the depth and breadth of ocean and marine knowledge held by the Irish general public is investigated and reported on in the following sections.

3. Questionnaire design and study sample

A survey of 812 individuals living in Ireland was conducted in the latter half of 2012. A quota controlled sampling procedure was followed to ensure that the survey was nationally representative for the population aged 18 years and above. Quota sampling sets demographic quotas on the sample based on known population distribution figures. The quotas used here were based on known population distribution figures for age, sex, occupation and region of residence taken from the 2011 National Census of Population. Interviews were spread across different days of the week and across different times of day to ensure all population sub groups had an equal chance of being interviewed.

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