



Conflicting social norms and community conservation compliance



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 June 2013

Received in revised form

22 November 2013

Accepted 23 November 2013

Keywords:

Behaviour change

Norm-conflict

Sea turtle conservation

Social norms

ABSTRACT

Though the success of conservation initiatives relies on changing behaviour, little social psychological research has examined factors such as attitudes and social norms in the context of actual conservation campaigns. In the context of reducing light pollution around sea turtle nesting habitats, researching technological solutions has clear merit. Problems such as light glow are, however, fundamentally about human behaviour, and so finding ways to effect behavioural change is critical. Social norms, or perceptions about what other people think and do, have been widely used in behaviour change campaigns across various domains, including campaigns to promote conservation behaviour. Here, we investigate how the norms of different groups may influence our behaviour in the context of a campaign to alter behavioural norms about light glow pollution in a community. We examine attitudes, social norms, and the degree of conflict (versus congruence) between the behaviours of different groups, and their relationship with intentions to engage in conservation behaviours relevant to sea turtle conservation. We show that attitudes and norms are related to behavioural intentions, and conflicts between social norms influence intentions, over and above the norms themselves. This highlights an important consideration for conservation campaigns utilising social norms-based behaviour change appeals.

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Introduction

A major barrier to the success of conservation programs worldwide is getting people to change their behaviour (Mascia et al., 2003; Schultz, 2011). Psychologists have identified a range of variables underlying people's pro-environmental behaviours (or lack thereof), including attitudes, values, social norms, and self-interest (e.g., De Groot & Steg, 2009; Stern, 2000). While compliance with environmental campaigns has been of great interest to psychologists (Cialdini, 2003), comparatively little research in conservation settings addresses these psychological factors, compared to a focus on documenting problems and finding technical solutions (e.g., Bertolotti & Salmon, 2005; Frazer, 1992). Sea turtle conservation initiatives – the focus of the present paper – are no exception. Research focuses on technological solutions to threats such as light pollution (Bertolotti & Salmon, 2005; Frazer, 1992), which draws turtle hatchlings away from the ocean to die on land, yet light pollution stems directly from human behaviour. The current study aims to investigate the importance of psychological factors in the context of an ongoing conservation campaign to protect nesting sea turtle populations.

Sea turtle populations worldwide are under threat from a range of sources, from illegal harvest of turtles and eggs to accidental capture in fishing equipment (Heppell et al., 2003). The Woongarra Coast area of Queensland, Australia, is home to an internationally significant nesting ground for loggerhead turtles (Pfaller et al., 2009). Although conservation efforts such as the implementation of turtle exclusion devices on fishing trawlers in Australia have minimised some pressures on the population (Brewer et al., 2006), increasing coastal development now poses a new threat. In response to the increasing levels of light pollution in the area, the state government implemented the "Cut the Glow to Help Turtles Go" campaign in 2008. The main aim of the campaign is to reduce light pollution, which is a serious concern for sea turtle conservation, given the propensity for artificial light to cause disorientation and associated mortality among turtle hatchlings, and impact nesting behaviours of adult turtles (Longcore & Rich, 2004; Salmon et al., 1995).

Conservation campaigns have traditionally sought to change people's knowledge or attitudes toward issues in an attempt to get them to change their behaviour (Stern, 2000). However, there is often a significant gap between knowledge or attitudes and subsequent behaviour (e.g., Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Owens, 2000). For example, while people may have positive attitudes to saving sea turtles, and relatively good knowledge of the threat of light pollution, it may still be difficult to change their lighting use radically. People are used to certain patterns of behaviour, and using

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outdoor lighting is the norm in many communities, making changes to routine behaviours difficult. In the current paper we explore the influence of social norms and attitudes on people's motivation to engage in light glow reduction behaviours.

Social norms and conservation behaviour

Social norms are the accepted or implied rules about how people should, and do, behave (Sherif, 1936). A large body of psychological research has examined the power of both perceptions of what others do (descriptive norms), and perceptions about what others approve of (injunctive norms) to influence individual behaviour (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1990; Rimal, 2008; Schultz et al., 2007; Terry & Hogg, 1996). This literature has demonstrated the power of social norms to influence people's own behaviours. For example, Cialdini and colleagues (1990), showed that littering rates jumped from six percent to fifty-four percent after participants saw another individual drop a piece of litter into a littered environment (conveying a pro-littering norm) as opposed to a clean environment (conveying an anti-littering norm).

Governments and interest groups spend millions on norms-based approaches to behaviour change in various domains, yet their outcomes are not always straightforward (Blanton et al., 2008; Schultz et al., 2007). This may be due in part to the somewhat constrained contexts in which norms-based appeals are often tested, such as when people are told what a single other person, or a single social group does (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2007; Terry & Hogg, 1996). While such studies provide valuable insights about decision making in specific contexts, they do not shed light on how people respond to norms in their larger social world, where they are exposed to information about the norms of multiple groups. In the current study we examine the influence of the social norms of multiple groups in the context of a campaign to promote turtle conservation, and investigate why norms-based appeals may motivate some, while discouraging others.

Theorists have argued that many high profile environmental campaigns fail to produce positive outcomes because people ironically infer counter-productive social norms from the content of the appeals. Cialdini (2003) cites the "Iron eyes Cody" campaign as an example of an appeal that, in attempting to draw attention to the regrettably high incidence of littering, succeeds in doing just that: highlighting the high incidence of littering, and thus (contrary to campaigners' intentions) reinforcing such behaviour as a social norm. One study demonstrated this experimentally (Cialdini, 2003). Theft of petrified wood from the U.S. Petrified Forest National Park was higher (7.92% vs. 1.67%) when signs conveyed a descriptive norm of theft ("Many past visitors have removed petrified wood from the Park, changing the natural state of the Petrified Forest"), compared to signs conveying an injunctive norm against it ("Please don't remove the petrified wood from the Park, in order to preserve the natural state of the Petrified Forest").

Examples such as these underscore the need for social and natural scientists to work collaboratively to achieve conservation goals. In the current study we address this by applying social psychological research on social norms to a conservation context and critically, we examine the larger social context, whereby the norms of multiple groups may impact conservation behaviour.

The effects of multiple norms for conservation behaviour

Though previous research has demonstrated the power of social norms to influence behaviour, one critical aspect of norms that has received little attention is the recognition that we are all members of multiple social groups. When considering these multiple groups (such as family, friends, colleagues and neighbours), we must also acknowledge the possibility that the norms of these

different groups may conflict (McDonald et al., 2014). In the context of an intervention designed to alter the light use norms of an entire community, during the process of behaviour change, some groups will change their behaviour whereas others will not. We propose that, in this context, it may be difficult for people (especially those not committed to the issue) to ascertain what behaviour is normative and appropriate. One's household and one's neighbourhood may have markedly different norms when it comes to light use. One's neighbours may continue to use outdoor lighting, while one's family members attempt to embrace the campaign, installing sensor lighting and taking care to draw the curtains after dark. If some groups are not taking action on a collective problem, it may undermine the perception that action is effective (Olson, 1971) and thus reduce intentions to engage in the behaviour (Ellen et al., 1991).

In this scenario, we suggest two potential reactions to this highly visible *norm-conflict*. In the face of norm-conflict, some people may continue to see their individual contribution to reducing the problem as important, and therefore be relatively immune to the effects of conflicting norms. On the other hand, others could appraise the efforts of their family as ineffective given the lack of action from others, and thus be less inclined to act. Previous work has demonstrated that conflict or congruence between the norms of people's groups influences their perceptions that taking environmental action is effective, and their actual pro-environmental intentions and behaviours, and that norm-conflict is particularly demotivating for people with less positive attitudes toward conservation (McDonald et al., 2014). These divergent responses to norm-conflict may arise because, for those less interested in environmental issues, norm-conflict signals that not all others are acting, and taking action is therefore ineffective and futile. In contrast, for those with positive attitudes to environmental issues, the knowledge that some are not acting may have little impact on their intentions; they may continue to act either to compensate for a lack of action by others, or try to set a positive pro-environmental example.

When deciding whether to comply with the recommendations of the "Cut the Glow" campaign, people are likely to be aware of the extent to which their neighbours, friends, and the community are taking action to reduce their light glow. The current paper investigates psychological variables that may influence compliance with conservation measures across the norms of multiple groups. We ask whether a lack of consistency among norms, which are an inevitable stage of a norm change process, undermines the power of a message urging people to adopt a 'dark community' norm. Though the current study explores the influence of norm-conflicts on behaviours related to sea turtle conservation efforts, we propose that the effects of norm-conflict are likely to be relevant to other conservation behaviours, particularly where the behaviour in question is visible and needs to be enacted collectively.

Method

Case study

The "Cut the Glow to Help Turtles Go" campaign was launched in the Woongarra Coast region of Queensland, Australia in 2008 by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. The campaign was initiated in response to concerns that increasing coastal development in the region may be negatively impacting the populations of nesting sea turtles in the area, due to the increased ambient light glow in coastal areas. The "Cut the Glow" campaign aimed to establish a dark community norm, such that residents and businesses avoid the use of unnecessary lighting, and undertake simple measures to reduce light glow from their homes and offices during the turtle nesting season.

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