



Contrasting the attitudes of farmers and the general public regarding the ‘multifunctional’ role of the agricultural sector



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ABSTRACT

Using separate nationally representative surveys, this study compared the views and perspectives of farmers towards agricultural related conservation issues with that of the general public. Results suggest that both the general public and farmers expressed similar levels of concern regarding the environment as a whole. This is an encouraging sign when it comes to environmental protection, as it indicates a certain level of agreement between farmers as the group whose activities largely shape the quality of the rural environment, with the views of the general public who are the major consumers of landscape related environmental public goods. The analysis did, however, reveal important differences in attitudes in relation to certain environmental issues such as the relative importance of maintaining wildlife and habitats and having wild flora and fauna in the countryside. These activities could be seen as in conflict with farmers' productivist attitudes. We found no significant difference in environmental attitudes between farmers who have participated in voluntary agri-environmental schemes and those who did not. Results also suggest that there is significant heterogeneity in public attitudes towards environmental issues. Specifically, age, income, place of residence and presence of children were all significantly associated with environmental preferences. The study concludes that consideration needs to be given to the different views and perspectives of farmers and the general public in formulating policy aimed at providing an optimal mix of agricultural related environmental public goods and services.

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Introduction

Historically farmland was valued primarily for its capacity to provide food and other raw materials necessary for growth and development. In more recent times, public concern has shifted from food production and food security towards protecting and enhancing the quality of the countryside landscape (Pruckner, 1995; Kantelhardt, 2006). Specifically, society now utilizes the rural countryside for a variety of purposes and its protection is now seen as much more important by modern consumers. As such, the agricultural landscape can be viewed as an economic resource and as a local public good in that it provides amenities and supports recreational as well as productive activities (Oueslati and Salanie, 2011). Changing farm practices have, however, been linked to biodiversity decline throughout Europe (Vickery et al., 2004).

As Vos and Meekes (1999) point out, there are numerous push and pull factors that can lead to significant changes in agricultural processes and outputs. The push factors are connected with trends

in agriculture, which can result in intensification or extensification as well as new functions such as bio-energy production and rural tourism. The pull factors relate to what the general public rather than the farming population want from the countryside. In particular, with increased urbanization and improved infrastructure allowing ever quicker access to the countryside there is increasing demands for recreational activities and nature conservation from the general public. Given these multiple dynamics, the sustainability of any particular farming practice may only be guaranteed through the commitment of both farmers as the major supplier of landscape related public goods and the general public as the major consumer of countryside amenities.

This paper investigates both the general public's and farmers' attitudes towards the multifunctional aspects associated with the agricultural sector. While much previous research has investigated the general public's attitudes towards environmental issues related to different farm management practices, little research has explored the environmental concerns of farmers. Even less common are studies that compare the attitudes and preferences of farmers with that of the general public. Integrating the views and attitudes of both farmers and the general public will be a vital tool in ensuring the provision of an optimal mix of environmental

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goods and services. The major contribution of this paper, therefore, is that it provides an analysis of the views and perspectives of both farmers and the general public towards conservation issues related to the agricultural sector. Public policy is expected to be both responsive to societal views and accountable to all citizens and as such, understanding public attitudes and preferences of various stakeholder groups is necessary. In addition to a democratic accountability perspective, understanding the attitudes and behaviours of the general public is important as these can influence a range of private consumption decisions that affect the rural landscape, such as recreational visits and buying locally produced goods and services. The role of farmers in conserving the landscape has been officially acknowledged in the EU Common Agricultural Policy since the beginning of the 1990s. Given the increasing emphasis being placed on farmers as ‘custodians’ of the rural environment as opposed to just providers of subsistence, it seems pertinent to examine farmers’ own perspective related to their role as providers of conservation related public goods. By comparing the views and perspectives of farmers and the general public, we can shed light on issues that could potentially be a source of conflict between the general public and farmers when it comes to the role and use of the rural landscape.

We compare the views and perspectives of farmers and the general public by utilizing three separate nationally representative survey datasets, one for farmers and two for the general public where similar questions were asked in relation to attitudes towards agricultural related environmental issues. Identifying similarities and/or differences between the views expressed by farmers and those of the general public can allow policymakers to tailor policies in order to maximize ‘buy-in’ from interested parties. A number of studies have discussed the importance of accounting for stakeholder views in designing environmental policy and for its subsequent operation (De Stefano, 2010; Özerol and Newig, 2008; Kloka et al., 2006; Bauer et al., 2009; inter alia).

One further contribution of this study is that in addition to examining differences between farmers and the general public, it also examines whether socio-demographic factors such as age, income, place of residence (i.e. urban vs rural) and the presence of children are associated with environmental attitudes. Such differences may be important in assessing which sectors of the community are likely to be supportive of conservation efforts and in assessing how attitudes may change as demographics change over time, mitigating or exacerbating the differences between farmers and the general public.

Agricultural public goods

Agriculture, in addition to supplying market goods, jointly produces a number of public goods such as landscape elements and services that are valued by society (Bromley and Hodge, 1990; Vanslebrouck et al., 2005; Junge et al., 2011). Individuals are now more aware that agriculture can have negative impacts on, among other things, biological diversity, soil and water quality and landscape and habitats (Burrell, 2004; Moreddu et al., 2004; Firbank, 2005; Boel, 2005). The term ‘multifunctionality’ has been widely used to conceptualize these wider external effects of the agricultural sector on society. These public goods may be characterized as non-market goods as it is usually not possible for residents or farmers to purchase or sell amenity services in market transactions. There is, however, in many instances a strong social demand for these public goods provided by the agricultural sector (see Arriaza et al., 2004).

Much previous work has examined the public’s tastes and preferences and even willingness to pay (WTP) towards the range of public goods associated with the agricultural sector. For instance, in

an Irish study, Campbell et al. (2006) found that the landscape benefits associated with the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme in Ireland alone amounted to almost the entire cost of the scheme. Highest WTP values were found for preserving ‘rivers and lakes’ and ‘wildlife habitats’ which was followed by ‘cultural heritage’, ‘mountain land’, ‘farmyard tidiness’, ‘stonewalls’, ‘pastures’ and ‘hedgerows’. Columbo et al. (2009) in a study in the North West of England found that the public were willing to pay €12.11 per household per year to conserve upland hill farming. In a survey of Irish residents, Howley et al. (2012a) found that individuals rated agricultural landscapes in terms of beauty quite highly, but given a choice prefer traditional more extensive over more intensive farming landscapes. Landscape features associated with more traditional farming activities are generally held in a positive fashion by individuals, since they are regarded as providing “identity, personality and cultural significance” for local communities in Europe (Vos and Meekes, 1999; Bruns et al., 2000; Glebe, 2003; Jones and Daugstad, 1997; Hynes and Campbell, 2011; Junge et al., 2011). In contrast, individuals generally have a negative perception of intensive farming landscapes as these are associated with more uniform and homogenous structures (Hunziker, 1995; Hietala-Koivu, 1999; Kaltenborn and Bjerke, 2002; Soliva et al., 2010; Howley et al., 2012a).

In terms of public attitudes towards farmers, Shortall (2007) found that, generally, the public were supportive of the farming community and felt farmers, for the most part, make a positive contribution in providing goods of public benefit. Similarly Howley et al. (2012a) report that the majority of the general public feel that restrictions on farmers’ behaviour if it results in environmental damage is appropriate, but the vast majority of individuals feel that farmers are on the whole good caretakers of the countryside. To date, little attention has been given towards understanding the views of farmers towards environmental issues. Some of the research in this area includes a study by Winter (2005) which investigated the area management preferences of farmers, environmentalists and the general public. The study found a polarization of views between farmers and environmentalists with farmers having much lower levels of support for conservation activities. The views expressed by the general public were in between these two groups.

In terms of landscape preferences, farmers, in comparison to the general public, have been found to respond negatively to wild unmanaged nature scenes which could be attributable to their different interactions and experience with the landscape (Van Den Berg et al., 1998). Brush et al. (2000) found in a study of roadside landscapes in rural Wisconsin that preferences differed significantly between farmers and other groups. These differences were partly explained by varying levels of knowledge regarding the landscapes under examination. Tourists preferred to drive through forest landscapes over farm and urban edge landscapes, while farmers perhaps because of their greater knowledge of farm practices preferred to drive through farm landscapes. Macdonald and Johnson (2000) found that farmers, for the most part, held positive attitudes to the wildlife value of habitats on their farm. Junge et al. (2011) investigated the preferences of non-farmers and farmers for landscape scenarios in the Swiss lowlands. The study found that both farmers and non-farmers preferred a mixed land use type or one dominated by arable crops over one dominated by grassland, but that the proportion of ecological compensation areas in the rated landscapes had a more significant impact on farmers landscape preferences.

Research design

The data utilized to elicit preferences of the general public comes from two separate nationally representative surveys. While each of the surveys had differing overall aims, combining a number of

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