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Natalia V. Czap

University of Michigan-Dearborn, nczap@umich.edu

Hans J. Czap

University of Michigan-Dearborn, hczap@umich.edu

Gary Lynne

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Mark E. Burbach

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mburbach1@unl.edu

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Empathy Conservation: Experiments Suggest a Need for More Attention in Policymaking

One of the major challenges of environmental policy with regard to conservation is that it must often rely on voluntary and non-selfish actions of individuals. Traditionally policy makers rely on direct regulation and financial incentives, but both approaches face problems. Regulations may lead to resentment and the costs of perfect enforcement are prohibitively high. Financial incentives can be perverse and may lead to unintended consequences, including crowding out of intrinsic motivation. In addition, behavioral economics and economic psychology studies demonstrate that the assumptions of the neoclassical economic models (such as self-interest only, rationality, and willpower) on which the policy design often relies do not always hold in the field.

CAFIO-PRG Research

Our research is based on the metaeconomic framework and dual-interest theory that posits that, in addition to self-interest, individuals are motivated by other (shared with others)-interest arising out of empathy, and that empathy tempers selfish profit-maximizing motives and moves individuals towards more balanced voluntary conservation decisions – “empathy conservation”. Our group has run several framed laboratory experiments exploring the role of empathy/walking-in-the-shoes-of-others/taking-the-perspective-of-others in conservation decisions.

CAFIO-PRG Findings

In the course of this research, some of which was funded by the USDA grants, we have learned that:

- Individuals are willing to empathize and walk in the shoes of others when making environmentally-relevant decisions.
- Empathy considerations can temper self-interest. These can lead to sacrifices in profit and a decision in which self-interest and other-interest are more in balance.
- Individuals scoring higher on empathy personality scales are more likely to be moved by other people’s behavior and as a result “join the cause” for conservation, and sustainability more generally.
- Frequent reflection on “who I am” and “how do I treat others” can result in more balanced and environmentally friendly actions.
- Nudging for empathy via emotions works. The expression of negative emotions/disapproval of conservation decisions by victims can lead to more conservation by the polluters.
- Nudging for empathy via calling to “walk-in-the-shoes-of-others” works well in conjunction with financial incentives and can lead to higher conservation than financial incentives alone.
- Imposing monetary fines for low conservation can be counterproductive and lead to even lower conservation levels as compared to empathy nudging via negative emotions/disapproval.
- If those who are responsible for conservation decisions also experience the consequences of such decisions, they conserve more even if conservation leads to reduced profit.
- A certain proportion of choices is purely altruistic/not involving financial incentives (for example anonymous donations) and is independent of the opportunity cost.
- There is a positive relationship between the behavior of leaders/first movers and followers in the environmental context.

CAFIO-PRG Environmental Policy Recommendations

Based on our findings we recommend that agricultural policy makers increase their reliance on empathy-driven conservation and soft nudges. Specifically, in developing conservation policy we recommend more attention be given to the:

- Incorporation of non-pecuniary incentives and soft nudges into the narrative.
- Combination of financial incentives with empathy/take-perspective nudging.
- Wider inclusion of communities in the coordination of conservation efforts to facilitate producers joining the shared cause of conservation.

Natalia V. Czap and Hans J. Czap, University of Michigan-Dearborn; Gary D. Lynne and Mark E. Burbach, University of Nebraska-Lincoln