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Public Support in the Human-Dominated Landscape of the Anthropocene

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Description

Many of these acts were a direct response by society to the well-documented era of exploitation where depletion of animals and resources resulted in public outrage and shifting societal views on wildlife conservation. More recently, a debate is underway on how conservation biologists should embark on “new conservation” and elicit engagement and public support in the human-dominated landscape of the anthropocene. The analysis of newspaper media and more recent social science research is a tool for both increasing the understanding of how information on imperiled species is conveyed and a method for guiding strategies which can support conservation efforts. It is vital for conservation efforts to assess public perceptions, as positive attitudes toward a species correlate with concern and support for the conservation of that species.

However, many questions remain to test if these conservation eras spanning long time spans truly reflect changing attitudes toward species of conservation concern or species involved in wildlife human conflicts. For example, do we see portrayal of species in media change, potentially becoming more favorable over time? Do conservation efforts, many of which have increased over the last decade or more, translate to changes in attitudes conveyed toward conservation species? Do we need a new conservation era more reflective of ever expanding technology, social media, and almost instant access to information in the digital conservation age.

Methodology

Public support can be captured through media, such as newspapers. One methodology quantitative researchers use is content analysis, which can utilize descriptive statistics to assess public perceptions and opinions related to conservation issues or species of conservation concern. Content analysis can take many forms, either qualitative, descriptive of specific conceptual themes or quantitative, traditionally summarizing data extracted from printed media. Printed media is generated through reader interest, holding a record of citizen perspectives from in-person interviews that are otherwise impossible to obtain from the past. Indeed, media newspapers often report on natural resource and wildlife issues of importance to the public and may be interpreted as a measure of public interest in either species of conservation concern or human wildlife conflict species. Most conservation related content analyses have focused on human-wildlife conflicts of either predatory or financially problematic species, such as bears, cormorants, leopards, panthers and sharks. While there is a growing body of scientific literature on species associated with human-wildlife conflict, other species of conservation value have been ignored. Few content analyses have focused on non-charismatic and at-risk species such as amphibians, many of which are in decline even while still receiving some media coverage related to worldwide amphibian decline. Moreover, herpetofauna are underrepresented in both popular printed and social media coverage as well as academic library holdings, when compared to charismatic megafauna such as mammals. Therefore, content analysis provides a tool to measure how public opinions and thus support for conservation change over time.

An ideal taxonomic group to assess how public perception follows conservation eras include amphibians and reptiles. Amphibians and reptiles are mostly harmless and ecologically important, yet despite this, they are often feared and persecuted, with few studies investigating public perceptions of herpetofauna or how likely public attitudes toward amphibians shape support for conservation actions. Of amphibians, the hellbender salamander is an ideal species to perform media content analysis given its large geographic range, recent declines, and history of persecution. Moreover, animals labeled ugly or slimy, like hellbenders, often provoke fear and negative appraisal by humans and as less charismatic wildlife elicit repulsion by the public. Hellbenders have an intriguing, often alarming, morphology when initially captured and examined by the public. Many people describe hellbenders as “troublesome”, “poisonous” and that they “steal bait”.

Taxonomic Group

Perceptions of stakeholders toward hellbenders has shown positive attitudes prevail among riparian landowners or previous exposure and familiarity with the hellbender, however research is lacking framing the historical legacy of conservation in media coverage of the hellbender, an

enigmatic animal. Understanding how wildlife-human dimension trends influence conservation management requires collection and analysis of human-nature interaction data from both a historical perspective and incorporation of more recent media communication. Therefore, we ask “whether public opinion follows policy changes?” and “do public attitudes, recorded from print media, toward a species follow legislative actions in the form of shaw's conservation eras?” We chose an amphibian, the hellbender salamander because of a long history in print media for its public and scientific curiosity to address this question. Since hellbenders were not deemed declining until late in the conservation era, we hypothesize a spike in attitude change might follow if media drives public perception. Alternatively, if attitudes change with policy, then we might expect changes in attitude to occur slightly earlier. To determine whether public attitudes toward a species would follow legislative actions.

We examined 153 years of media coverage across the hellbender salamander's distribution in the United States. Specifically, this is a test of Shaw's conservation eras, whereby we can determine whether public sentiment aligns with large-scale policy changes. We characterize content of newspaper articles across several variables, including whether the articles were positive, negative, or neutral in nature (frame), story location, level of understanding (based on natural history reported), persecution of hellbenders (fishermen reports), coverage (thematic or episodic), and article topics. We also report on more recent trends in online media coverage of hellbender salamanders. Lastly, we relate these historical and present findings to future conservation efforts to better inform the public perception and management of hellbender salamanders and other species of conservation concern. Can we use content analysis along with shaw's conservation eras to determine if we are progressively preserving a species.