

Navigating Environmental Attitudes

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Navigating Environmental Attitudes

By: Thomas A. Heberlein

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Recent decades have seen an increased willingness by wildlife biologists to engage in two-way communications with management officials, agencies, stakeholders and the public. Many of us have probably, one time or another, had the thought that 'it would be easier and more efficient to implement management policies, if only people would change their attitudes'. More than one biologist has left meetings in frustration over what they feel is the audiences' negative attitudes and lack of knowledge. Not uncommon, such meetings are often followed by a call to quickly find someone who can explain complicated biological mechanisms and educate the public, or at least investigate their attitudes to understand what needs to be done! Many wildlife biologists have also engaged themselves in the production of informative material to educate the public, and by making questionnaires to describe peoples' attitudes.

In North America, the intersection of human society and wildlife biology is the focus in a recently developed field of research and teaching, Human Dimensions of Wildlife. One of the pioneers in this field is Professor Emeritus Thomas A. Heberlein, Department of Community and Environmental Sociology, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA. He came to Sweden on a sabbatical in the early 1990s, and is still a Visiting Professor at the Department of Wildlife, Fish and Environmental Studies, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. He has spent his research career on environmental attitudes, social norms and human behaviour, and has recently summarised his research in a book entitled *Navigating Environmental Attitudes*.

This book describes, with embarrassing clarity, several of the misconceptions and naivety on information, attitudes and behaviour that many of us natural scientists may have. One is the assumption of a strong relation between attitude and behaviour, and another is the power of information, which is treated in chapter (5) Public Education . . . and Other Disasters. Throughout the book, Prof. Heberlein successfully uses the analogy of going down a river in a canoe, with the rocks in the river representing attitudes. We have to know where they are, but cannot really change them as we go down the river. The book contains eleven chapters that are all nicely tied together, but each with its own story; a beginning and an end. The stories build on the author's own research and experience, but are not written as any ordinary scientific text. There is no disciplinary jargon, no complicated statistical models, but rather concrete examples with real people who build a scientific framework for us where values, attitudes, norms and behaviours are included. This is accomplished, almost without the reader noticing it. It has several passages where extracts of Aldo Leopold's life and thinking are used; one such example is when Aldo Leopold had changed his attitude to wolves late in life but still voted to restore bounties on the last wolves in Wisconsin.

This book is a must for all wildlife managers and biologists who try to solve wildlife problems by implementing research into policies and management actions. You can find Thomas Heberlein on the European Wildlife Network (<http://europeanwildlife.net>) where he has created a group for Human Dimensions of Wildlife. He will most likely be at the IUGB congress in Brussels next year.

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