

Engaging people in biodiversity issues

The biodiversity strategy for England, *Biodiversity 2020*, aims to put people at the heart of biodiversity policy and to increase significantly the number of people engaged in biodiversity issues, aware of its value and taking positive action.

However, many in the biodiversity sector recognise that the language of 'biodiversity' may not be best suited to the task of engaging the public. A successful reframing of biodiversity issues needs to make sense in the context of people's everyday lives and against the backdrop of big everyday stories about nature and humanity already circulating in our culture.

This study clarifies what those stories are and presents new evidence regarding existing levels of public engagement. The report draws out the implications for policy-makers, communicators and others seeking to identify and understand key audiences, increase public engagement, and enable and encourage positive action.

Key findings

- 30% of people are unaware of any current loss of biodiversity, either in England or in the world, and do not anticipate any loss in the future either. 25% of people are aware of current or future biodiversity loss and express concern about this, but do not report taking action (the so-called value-action gap). Finding an effective way to frame biodiversity issues will be an essential part of efforts to raise awareness, build engagement and encourage action in this 55% of the population.
- An effective framing of biodiversity issues needs to reflect everyday stories about nature and humanity that are already circulating in our culture. Two everyday stories about nature, "Nature finds a way" and "Nature can't keep up", appear to contradict but in fact work on different timescales. The process of growth, adaptation and recovery described by the "Nature finds a way" story inspires genuine awe and wonder in people; but it also leads them to wonder if we really can damage the balance of nature since, *in the long run*, nature will recover. The "Nature can't keep up" story works on more human timescales: humans are failing to strike a balance between positive and negative impacts on nature, and are taking too much, too fast.
- The awe and wonder people feel for the regenerative capacity of nature could be linked to these more human timescales by concepts such as 'making time for nature', 'creating space for nature', or 'helping nature to help itself'. To avoid defensive reactions, it will be important to celebrate the *positive* impact humans can have on nature – while of course highlighting the continuing imbalance between negative and positive.
- Those seeking to build engagement and promote action need to challenge the idea that humanity can find a way to solve the problems it faces *without* relying on nature. On an everyday basis, people experience human spaces as created and maintained by *excluding* or *checking* natural processes – making it hard to get to grips with the idea that those same human spaces are in fact *dependent* on natural processes (provisioning, regulating and supporting ecosystem services). The focus should be on *showing* people how nature works for them – and not just *telling* them that it matters or how much it is worth.
- The idea of nature as a place where one reconnects – with nature, with each other, across generations, with what really matters, with oneself – has a key role to play in engagement.
- Overall, it is not people who need to change so they fit better with the concept of biodiversity: it is the framing of biodiversity issues that needs to change so it resonates more effectively with people.

Background

Defra commissioned the Biodiversity Segmentation Scoping Study to support delivery of Outcome 4 of the *Biodiversity 2020* strategy: “By 2020, significantly more people will be engaged in biodiversity issues, aware of its value and taking positive action.”

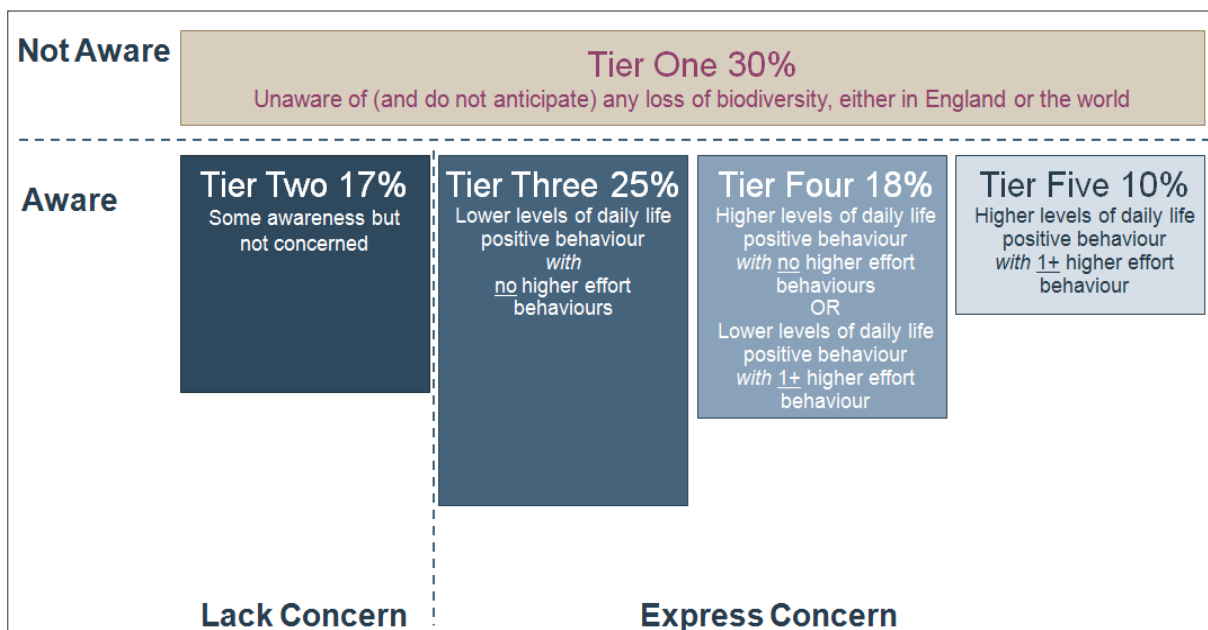
The research comprised stakeholder interviews, a literature review, a quantitative survey and qualitative workshops, all carried out between October 2012 and March 2013. The team worked closely with the *Biodiversity 2020* People Engagement Group, which is leading efforts by the biodiversity sector to deliver Outcome 4.

The full report presents detailed findings from the research and makes recommendations for work to raise awareness, build engagement and promote positive action; for the development of indicators; and for further research.

Findings

The scale of the engagement task

How engaged are people currently with the issues around biodiversity? Analysis of survey responses identified five groups or tiers in the adult population, defined by different levels of awareness, concern and action in relation to ‘the variety of all life on Earth’. (The term ‘biodiversity’ was not used in the survey until the very last question.) The graphic below gives an overview of the five tiers.



30% of people (Tier 1) are unaware of any current loss of biodiversity, either in England or in the world, and did not anticipate any loss in the future either. This finding suggests there is much work to be done just to make people aware of the nature of the problem.

Are there really so many people who are not aware of what is happening? It is important to remember that this does not mean 30% of the population are unaware of *individual species* at risk of extinction. One can be aware of species at risk, but not think this has an impact on the *overall* variety of life.

25% of people (Tier 3) say they are aware of biodiversity loss, and also express concern about this, but do not report any action in response – the so-called value-action gap. There is a clear opportunity to build engagement and promote action here.

A further 28% of people – 18% in Tier 4 and 10% in Tier 5 – are aware, concerned, and *also* report taking action. Tier 5 reports higher levels of action, both day-to-day behaviours like consumer choices and high effort behaviours like volunteering and lobbying.

For many people, practical constraints on time and energy may mean that Tier 4 is a more realistic destination than Tier 5. The aim of efforts to raise awareness, build engagement and promote action should therefore be to move people from Tiers 1 to Tiers 3 or 4, and from Tier 3 into Tier 4.

That leaves Tier 2, the 17% of people who are aware of biodiversity loss but do not see it as a cause for concern. In the longer term, it may be important to engage Tier 2. In the shorter term, these people will probably prove the hardest to engage. Given the amount of work there is to do raising awareness and building engagement with Tiers 1 and 3 (while also validating the actions taken by Tiers 4 and 5), Tier 2 is unlikely to be a short term priority.

The reframing challenge

The way in which policy-makers and communicators frame an issue can have a big impact on how much sense it makes to people, how engaged they are, and how likely they therefore are to take action. Finding an effective way to frame biodiversity issues will be an essential part of efforts to raise awareness, build engagement and promote action in the 55% of the population who make up Tiers 1 and 3.

The literature review suggested that a successful framing of biodiversity issues needs to:

- identify something people either already value or will readily value – something that has emotional *resonance* as opposed to something people need *reasons* to care about
- articulate clearly how that something is at risk – even if people do not see the threat
- give people a positive role as individuals in protecting or nurturing that something
- create an admirable but achievable model of the kind of person who takes on this role

The study found that many in the biodiversity sector already wonder how useful the concept of ‘biodiversity’ is for these purposes. The evidence shows that the term is not widely recognised or understood. However, this should *not* be seen as implying a need to educate people. It is not people who need to change so they fit better with the concept of biodiversity: it is the framing of biodiversity issues that needs to change so it resonates more effectively with people.

In particular, policy-makers and communicators need to recognise that a framing of biodiversity issues does not exist in a vacuum, but interacts with big everyday stories about nature and humanity already circulating in our culture. In their efforts to raise awareness, build engagement and promote action, policy-makers and communicators need to frame biodiversity issues in ways that make sense against the backdrop of these stories.

Everyday stories about nature

Qualitative research with members of the public identified two big everyday stories about nature of which policy-makers and communicators need to take account. At first sight, these stories contradict each other: but on closer inspection, it can be seen they work on different timescales.

“Nature finds a way”

Nature has a remarkable capacity to regenerate and adapt. Whether damaged by human activity – from new bypasses to Chernobyl – or by natural disasters – from volcanoes to meteor impacts – nature always finds a new balance. Living things are the agents and products of this amazing natural process. No species is irreplaceable: the history of life tells us species loss is a natural process, and that lost species are replaced by new ones.

The first story (left) describes how, over longer timescales, nature always finds a way. The process of growth, adaptation and recovery described by this story inspires genuine awe and wonder in people. It can play a central role in a framing of biodiversity issues as something people intrinsically value.

But there is a catch. On its own, this story can lead people to wonder if we really *can* damage the balance of nature. That balance is something nature itself looks after and, *in the long run*, nature will always recover.

There is a particular problem with the concept of ‘biodiversity’ in this respect. People understand that different living things have different roles to play in a larger, interdependent system; that the parts of the system balance; and that the loss of any one species can therefore have knock-on effects. But thinking in these terms also seems to prompt people to think on the timescales of the “Nature finds a way” story – and so quickly to discount the knock-on effects of species loss: another species will come along to fill the gap, and nature will find a new balance.

As one research participant put it: *“I don’t believe that we can reduce the variation of nature. Because everything we’ve learned about nature, be it at school or elsewhere, is telling us nature is all about diversity and variation...”*

The second story (right) works on a much shorter, more human timescale, and acknowledges that nature can’t keep up with the damage that we are doing.

By keeping the focus on the shorter timescales of this second story, policy-makers and communicators can restore the element of ‘risk’ missing from the “Nature finds a way” story. A successful framing of biodiversity issues needs to resonate with elements of both stories, but to stick to the timescale of the “Nature can’t keep up” story. For example, the awe and wonder people feel for the regenerative capacity of nature could be combined with the need to strike a better balance between the positive and negative impacts of human activity in the short term by using concepts such as ‘making time for nature’, ‘creating space for nature’, or ‘helping nature to help itself’.

“Nature can’t keep up”

Human beings inevitably have an impact on nature. Not everything we do is bad: sometimes we have a positive impact on nature. But to meet our own needs we do sometimes have to do things which have a negative impact. The ideal is to strike a balance between negative and positive impacts, between human needs and nature. However, we are failing to strike this balance and taking too much, too fast: and nature can’t keep up.

Policy-makers and communicators should also note that, according to the “Nature can’t keep up” story, human activity can be *positive* as well as negative. The qualitative research suggested that too much focus on the negative impacts of human activity can prompt defensive reactions. There is a need to celebrate the positive things humans do – while of course highlighting the continuing imbalance between negative and positive.

Everyday stories about humanity

The qualitative research also identified two big everyday stories about *humanity* which have a bearing on how biodiversity issues are framed – though it is important to note that not everyone in the workshops subscribed to these two ways of thinking.

“Humanity finds a way”

Human beings are not like other living things. We use our creativity and ingenuity to solve the problems we face, and in doing so have developed incredible technologies. Even if natural systems break down, we will develop new technologies which enable us to survive.

The first of these two stories about humanity (left) suggests that, through technological advances, humanity will find a way to solve the problems it faces *without* having to rely on nature. As such, this story needs to be challenged by a successful framing of biodiversity issues.

The study confirmed previous research which shows stubbornly low awareness of and engagement with provisioning, regulating and supporting ecosystem services. The reason for this

may lie in people’s everyday experience of human spaces such as cities, roads and homes. In line with the “Nature finds a way story”, people are aware that nature would quickly recolonise these spaces if nothing were done to maintain them. On an everyday basis, people experience human spaces as created and maintained by *excluding* or *checking* natural processes – making it hard to get to grips with the idea that those same human spaces are in fact *dependent* on natural processes.

To get over this experiential tendency, there is a need to *show* people how nature works for them – and not just *tell* them that it matters or how much it is worth. In just a few cases, participants already had an everyday story or metaphor of how nature works for them – bees and pollination, for example, or trees and forests as ‘the lungs of the earth’. These examples provide a model for the wider communication of ecosystem services.

The second story about humanity (right) is very different in character. Far from seeing technology as something that will save us, this story reflects the alienation that people can feel in a fast-changing world, and describes the sense that humanity cannot keep up.

The “Humanity can’t keep up” story is not really about nature at all. But natural spaces feature prominently in it, as the site of experiences of a simpler, slower lifestyle, less hemmed in by the structures and demands of modern life. The idea of nature as somewhere one reconnects is an important part of the reason why people care about specific places, and may therefore be a critical element in framing biodiversity issues for certain purposes – e.g. in local community-based schemes.

“Humanity can’t keep up”

Our society is moving faster and faster, becoming more complex and more inhuman. It is not practical to turn the clock back; nor would anyone want to lose the benefits of our modern lifestyle. But natural places provide a vital opportunity to reconnect – with nature, with each other, across generations, with what really matters, with oneself. We need to pass on these experiences of nature to our children as well.

Conclusions

Framing biodiversity to increase public engagement and promote action

The study recommends that a successful framing of biodiversity issues needs to:

- invoke both stories about nature (“Nature finds a way” and “Nature can’t keep up”), but stick to the human timeframes of “Nature can’t keep up”: for example, using concepts such as ‘making time for nature’, ‘creating space for nature’, or ‘helping nature to help itself’
- tap into awe and wonder at nature’s capacity to grow, adapt and recover; and position living things as the products and agents of this process

- focus on the imbalance between the negative and positive impacts of human actions, celebrate the positive – and not focus exclusively on the negative
- show people how nature works for us – not just tell them that nature matters or how much it is worth
- draw on the idea of nature as a place where one reconnects – with nature, with each other, across generations, with what really matters, with oneself

Indicators and further research

The study recommends that indicators for public engagement in biodiversity issues should build on the tier definition approach, e.g. using the percentages of the population in each of the five tiers. One option would be to embed relevant questions from the tier definition questionnaire in a larger survey with a nationally representative sample, such as MENE. Priority behaviours should also be identified as indicators for ‘taking positive action’: these are unlikely to be the behaviours currently being used as indicators for public engagement.

The tier definition is *not* an explanatory model: it does not explain *why* people sit in particular tiers. A full-scale segmentation, building on the tier definition, would shed light both on the reasons why people sit in particular tiers and on the interventions that might change their level of engagement. For example, a segmentation could help policy-makers and communicators to understand *why* people in Tier 3 are not taking action, and what might prompt them to do so.

The study recommends that a full-scale segmentation should be undertaken, building on the findings from this research and focused on priority tiers. Further research and testing required as part of the creative process of developing a framing of biodiversity issues should be incorporated into this segmentation work.

About the project

Quantitative survey: Online self completion interviews lasting approximately 5 minutes each were conducted with 1187 England residents, aged 18-65, drawn from an online market research panel, between 27th November and 5th December 2012. Robust numbers of responses were achieved in all age and gender groups and the data weighted prior to analysis using data from the ONS 2010-based population projections.

Qualitative work: Twelve exploratory interviews were undertaken in three locations (rural, urban, peri-urban). Nine two-hour workshops were carried out in the same three locations, with a total of 62 participants. Recruitment was guided by the tier definition: six workshops were undertaken with participants from Tiers 3 and 4 (Phase 1), and three with participants from Tier 1 (Phase 2). Three further small group discussions were carried out with a total of 13 individuals actively involved (in a voluntary capacity) in managing or improving local places. The total qualitative sample was 87.

This Research Briefing and the full report *Engaging people in biodiversity issues* by Simon Christmas, Lindsay Wright, Leigh Morris, Annabelle Watson and Cait Miskelly are published by Defra (Defra Project Code WC1056) and are available from the Department’s Science and Research Projects Database at <http://randd.defra.gov.uk>. While the research was commissioned and funded by Defra, the views expressed reflect the research findings and the authors’ interpretation; they do not necessarily reflect Defra policy.