WATER RESEARCH COMMISSION

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The WRC operates in terms of the Water Research Act (Act 34 of 1971) and its mandate is to support water research and development as well as the building of a sustainable water research capacity in South Africa.

POLICY BRIEF

Water & Society

A recent WRC-funded project shed some light on the socio-cultural perspectives of conservation.

The implementation crisis in conservation

An implementation crisis in the conservation field is increasingly being recognised. Simultaneously, there is an ever-growing realisation that solutions for this crisis can only be found outside the conservation process and beyond the confines of the natural sciences. The broader socio-economic and political context within which conservation management and planning occurs needs to be taken into account in order to understand, influence and change the behaviour and attitudes that people and society have towards the environment.

It is necessary to make society more aware of the value of a healthy environment for the well-being of both current and future generations, in order to increase the success rate of implementing conservation action. For this, research that investigates the degree to which people **know** and **care** about conservation, and the degree to which they **act** on these beliefs and attitudes, is critically important to developing holistic and integrated policy recommendations that are locally driven but also provincially, nationally and regionally applicable.

It is felt that South African society's basket of values that currently drive knowing, caring and acting, does not adequately support a widespread conservation ethic and behaviour. Most urban rivers for example, are not celebrated or enjoyed, but are typically polluted eye-sores in the urban landscape.

However, influencing society to adjust their knowledge systems, their values and behaviour in greater support of conservation, is an enormous challenge. This is especially true in the context of freshwater ecosystems where the ecosystem benefits to society are often hidden and typically not felt in a commercial or market-oriented fashion.

This may make it difficult for people to develop an appreciation for the value of freshwater systems. Add to this a legacy of exclusion from conservation areas by apartheid policy, and the prospects for a more supportive way of knowing, caring and acting seem ever more remote.

In contrast to this reality, the drafters of South African environmental and natural resource protection policies have placed much value on the conservation imperative. They have created robust policies, with their motivation deeply rooted in the acknowledgement that the use and protection of natural resources and landscapes are interdependent, and that the sustained use of ecosystem services relies on maintaining (i.e. conserving) the ecosystem in a pre-defined state.

Seeking to understand and alleviate the crisis: Research objectives and approaches

The aim of recent research undertaken as a step towards alleviating the implementation crisis for freshwater conservation initiatives was to develop a conceptual understanding of how the conservation process is influenced by the knowing, caring and acting dynamic and by local socio-cultural perspectives, mainly within poor rural communities. Among the research objectives was to learn to use appropriate tools (for example qualitative research methods such as mental models methods, action research, case study approaches, participant observation, etc.) for acquiring this understanding.

Another objective was to design a methodology for classifying different clusters of actors based on their state of knowing/not knowing, caring/not caring and acting/not acting, and establishing the characteristics associated with each cluster. It was intended that generic barriers to changing the mental models of each of the actor clusters would be

examined and proposals made as to how barriers could be overcome to improve the effectiveness of freshwater conservation and to better align mental models to the development of catchment management strategies. The learning gained from pursing these objectives would then be tested and applied, and conclusions drawn as to how the conservation planning process is influenced by the knowing, caring, acting dynamic.

Another important aspect of this research was the examination of the relationship between (1) the policy intent as set out above, (2) conservation planning and management and (3) societal values and behaviours in relation to conservation. In this regards, the underlying assumptions that have formed the basis of qualitative research are that:

- There is a strong connection between policy intent and the conservation planning process.
- There is an important disconnect between conservation planning and an understanding of societal values and behaviours on the one hand, and between values espoused by policy and those held by the societal (user) clusters, on the other.

At the outset, the project questioned the perceived moral superiority of regarding existing conservation planning models as the means of "teaching" conservation practices to uninformed local community members. While unsustainable and environmentally damaging practices are rife at the local level, the view that society should be influenced by these models, and should adjust their knowledge systems, their values and behaviours in greater support of conservation, undermines the needs and challenges of local communities. Ultimately, therefore, the research also sought to address the key environmental and social challenges facing local communities, and how this influences their realities regarding knowing, or caring about conserving the environment, and the degree to which they act in a manner that conserves.

In order to achieve its objectives, the research adopted a multi-method approach. This included a literature review, desktop research, workshops and one-on-one interactions with experts, qualitative fieldwork through interviews and focus groups and quantitative research techniques such as questionnaires.

Research outcomes and policy-related recommendations

Findings based on preliminary focus group meetings revealed that the actor cluster dynamic, originally envisaged as a tool for understanding participatory processes, attitudes and beliefs on conservation and the degree to which people act on these, was useful but inadequate in capturing the dynamism and multi-faceted nature of people and the mental models they have relating to conservation. Moreover, it increased the risk of producing over-simplistic policy recommendations that are too rigid and unable to adapt to mental models that are constantly changing.

The key findings indicate that the two disconnects, i.e. between conservation planning and an understanding of societal values and behaviours; and between values espoused by policy and those held by societal clusters, can be attributed to an array of factors that centre around the lack of societal support, community buy-in, the recognition of constantly changing mental models, and the degree of heterogeneity.

A key connection made between participant responses and policy interventions, was the expressed perception by respondents that appropriate water conserving behaviour means saving water. This perception can be linked to the discourse and policies on water demand management endorsed by government, where the focus is also on reducing the amount of water used, using water sparingly and not wasting water. Policy interventions that are based on this definition of appropriate water conserving behaviour ignore the inability of some people to use less water than they already do, due to limited access and their use of water only for essential household tasks.

Water scarcity is not just physical, but can also be manufactured. This means that uneven access to water or varying perceptions about water use and water availability also come into play when discussing water scarcity at local community level. Huge inequalities in the distribution and supply of water still persist in South Africa, with many people experiencing problems in the supply and distribution of water.

In order to address this, conservation policy should not just focus on "saving water", but also on other activities (like storing and using multiple sources of water, or working to understand varying socio-cultural and socio-economic perceptions around water use) which also form part of effective water demand management strategies. Respondents in this research were often found to go without water for periods ranging from days to three weeks. To ask of such people to use even less water than they currently use is no solution to promoting appropriate behaviour around water conservation.

Efforts in conservation planning and management should, therefore, work to produce policy interventions and implementation strategies that factor in the range of

socio-cultural and socio-economic perceptions around water use and water availability, as well as the range of water access challenges born out of poverty.

A baseline for future research

The outcomes of the research to date can serve as a sound basis for future research on how socio-cultural perspectives influence the planning, policy and implementation aspects of conservation. Future research should, ***inter alia***, focus on:

- Unravelling issues of how communities understand, use and value water, and finding ways of harnessing such understanding to influence conservation planning, policy and implementation in a way that is not only scientifically sound, but also sensitive to the needs of poorer communities.
- Answering questions regarding the link between poverty and conservation, e.g., whether or not conservation is a 'luxury' for poorer communities.
- Exploring the argument that a successful conservation process requires a harmony of different voices – policy, science and society.
- Extending the study of conservation-related socio-cultural perspectives to include urban communities (both poor and rich) in addition to the predominantly poor, rural communities.

Further reading:
To obtain the report, ***Knowing, Caring & Acting: Making Use of Socio-cultural Perspectives to Support Biophysical Conservation*** (**Report No: 1800/1//10**) contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340; Fax: (012) 331-2565; E-mail: orders@wrc.org.za; or Visit: www.wrc.org.za