
Exploring the Potential of Conservation Psychology

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The need for more effective networks linking the social sciences and conservation is clear, but the pathway for achieving that is not at all obvious. This special issue places an emphasis on the role of psychology in understanding how humans relate to the natural world, and to each other, in order to result in more harmonious and sustainable patterns of life. As we explore how to best utilize the insights from researchers and practitioners, an important challenge will be to consider any psychological dimensions in the context of what Bonnes and Bonaiuto (2002) call a “full ecological environment” — one that includes humans and non-human species.

The past several years have seen a growing interest in using psychological frameworks to understand and promote environmental experiences and actions. Although a number of psychologists are currently working in areas related to conservation, it appears that many more initiatives could benefit from the perspective and research that psychologists provide. Zoos and aquariums offer one interesting setting for psychologists since they serve a large portion of the American public and most of these organizations now want to measure if they are making any progress toward their conservation missions. In particular, they want to know if they are having any impact on the public’s understanding, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors toward animals and their conservation.

In seeking answers to such questions, Brookfield Zoo, a large zoo in the suburbs of Chicago, began to systematically invite psychologists and other social scientists to a series of think tanks and workshops. Teams of researchers and practitioners were asked to review what was known about topics such as how caring relationships with the natural world develop or how to inspire people to adopt new conservation behaviors. Those insights were then applied to the development of new exhibits and programs, which were then evaluated for their effectiveness. Along the way, the need for additional basic research became clear and problem-based studies were initiated, using zoos and aquariums as laboratories. In the process, a critical mass of experts began to form and productive collaborations developed. It became useful to describe these mission-driven studies as “conservation psy-

chology,” inspired in part by the model of conservation biology (see Saunders and Myers 2001).

Although zoos and aquariums have been one focal point for conservation psychology studies, there are many other possible partners. Ideas were explored at the 8th International Symposium on Society and Resource Management held in June 2000 at Western Washington University. Myers and Saunders organized a series of sessions under the general theme of Conservation Psychology. Over 35 papers addressed a variety of topics: sense of self/sense of place, perceptions of the environment, environmental experience and development, relational caring/ethic of care, cultural aspects of caring/cultural constructions of nature, meanings and values of nature, and caring for nature/conservation behaviors. Participants also discussed how to build a broader professional identity for psychological research about conservation issues.

Conversations about conservation psychology continued at the American Psychological Association meeting in August 2000, and on the conservation psychology listserv that was formed in September 2000. The general feeling from all these discussions was that despite the increasing number of people studying the connections between psychology and conservation issues, there was no cohesive community nor a clear profession conservation-oriented identity. While most people agreed that some term was needed to encompass social science research that is oriented toward environmental sustainability, there was lively debate over whether a new field was needed, how broad this new field should be, and what this new field should be called (see Brook 2001; Myers 2001; and Reser 2001). The website that was formed (<http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~gmyers/cp/>) documents the nature of these discussions, offers a portal to the listserv, and provides a list of relevant organizations and related links.

At the same time, several special issue journals were appearing that brought together many of the leading voices for psychological approaches to conservation (e.g., the May 2000 edition of *American Psychologist* about environmental sustainability with articles by Oskamp, Howard, Winter,

Stern and McKenzie-Mohr; the fall 2000 *Journal of Social Issues* about promoting environmentalism edited by Zelezny and Schultz). There was a conservation psychology session at the 2002 annual convention of the American Psychological Association, along with continued efforts to make the APA a greener organization through changes to its own operations. Since 2000, a number of books about the psychology of people-nature relationships have been written, such as those reviewed in this issue.

In May 2002, Brookfield Zoo invited a group of 65 leaders from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, environmental education, and conservation biology to the country's first Conservation Psychology conference. Supported by a grant from the Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Foundation, researchers and practitioners gathered to discuss different approaches to real-world conservation initiatives, and to explore ideas for creating stronger links between the social sciences and desired conservation outcomes. The conference was organized around four problem areas. Each panel consisted of problem advocates and researchers. The problem advocates were asked to describe certain conservation initiatives in need of social science research, and the researchers provided thoughts about how their research perspective could inform those practical issues. Then the discussion was opened up to the entire invited audience.

The first panel was about connections to animals. Orienting questions included: How do caring relationships with the natural world develop? How might caring about animals lead to caring about the environment in general? The problem advocates focused on how to document the ways zoos and aquariums contribute toward developing a caring attitude towards animals. This is part of a larger effort by the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums called the Multi-Institutional Research Project (MIRP). The researchers offered various ideas from the human-animal literature that would be helpful for creating more effective educational and interpretive programs, and for evaluating their success.

The second panel was about connections to place. Discussions started around questions like: How can urban settings help their populations celebrate local biodiversity and develop a sense of regional pride? What techniques would be helpful to encourage people to get involved with stewardship activities and conservation behaviors at the community level? The problem advocates focused on the communication goals of Chicago Wilderness, a collaboration of public and private organizations working to protect and manage natural plant and animal communities of the Chicago metropolitan area. The researchers offered various ideas ranging from social marketing techniques to what we know about creating a place-based environmental identity in an urbanizing world.

The third panel was about encouraging environmentally-friendly behavior. Questions included: How do we choose among the array of theoretical models and practical approaches for encouraging behavior change? How do we select the appropriate level of analysis? For example, should we encourage changes in the highest impact individual behaviors, persuade people to desire a "simple lifestyle," or build support for things like restructuring the tax code? The Center for a New American Dream helped focus the discussion on how to encourage the American public to consume responsibly. The researchers explored which approaches might be most effective and why.

The fourth panel was about values related to the environment. The panelists considered questions like: How can we create values-based communications that address different types of environmental concern? How do we build public support and influence national policy, especially under challenging political circumstances? How can we change the way that Americans talk about and value their relationship to nature? The problem advocates focused on efforts by the Biodiversity Project, a group that advocates for biodiversity through research-based strategic communication campaigns. The discussion explored various value systems that underlie environmental concern and how to measure them.

These four discussion topics provided the themes for the main articles in this special issue of *Human Ecology Review*. We asked a representative from each panel to write a synthesis of the research and application issues related to their problem area. The resulting papers were not intended to summarize the panel discussion, nor to exhaustively review literature, but rather to offer a deeper look at some research approaches to the questions. Within each paper is a sidebar that provides information about the work of the organization or group that played the role of problem advocate during the conference panel.

Also in this issue is a *Forum* target article by Saunders that provides a definition of conservation psychology for consideration. The article was sent to 35 colleagues in related fields, representing a diversity of backgrounds. Of those, 17 agreed to write a short commentary with suggestions for how to broaden or deepen the idea of conservation psychology. There are undoubtedly many other viewpoints relevant to the future of this field that are yet to be uncovered. Despite the temptation to offer a reply to the thoughtful and stimulating essays that were submitted, Saunders and Myers would prefer to share their views at a later time, perhaps through the conservation psychology listserv. We very much want to keep the flow of ideas open and welcome as many voices as possible.

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