

Improving Conservation Programs with Social Data



This report is the result of a five year interdisciplinary, international project to understand how social science methods can optimize the results of conservation programs.

Payment for ecosystem services (PES) programs are commonly used to promote environmental conservation behaviors and are widely used around the world.

Our research shows that when PES programs place social understanding at the center of their design and implementation, they can improve outcomes and increase the chances that people continue conservation behaviors even after payments stop.



The way a PES program is designed works together with the social dynamics of the people participating, and this affects the success or failure of the program. Our team analyzed this process in several PES programs in an ecologically important region in China to create recommendations for culturally responsive PES design.

The kinds of PES programs studied included payments for community members to reduce cattle herd size to prevent over-grazing of grasslands, and payments for community members to patrol the local areas for signs of poaching.

We include 5 main findings from our research that can increase the effectiveness of PES worldwide.



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Practical Implications



Social Norms

Findings

It is important to understand the existing social norms in communities where PES is being considered - those norms will influence the extent to which people are willing to participate in these programs.

Recommendation

Identify attitudes, social norms, and community relationships related to the specific topic of the PES program by implementing a data-driven design of PES. Undertake surveys, interviews, or community discussions in proposed PES area. When possible, design PES to align with social norms and values already present.

Evidence

Community-oriented people (as opposed to more individualistic people) were more likely to participate. People were more likely to adhere to PES if they believed community members would judge them for not participating.



Motives

Findings

Motivations for participation in PES vary. Understanding motives will make payments more cost-effective. Generally, socioeconomic status will affect willingness to participate.

Recommendation

Conduct surveys, interviews, and community discussions in the proposed area. Understand socioeconomic factors that may influence responsiveness to payment for behavioral change.

Evidence

Older people and parents of younger children were more likely to participate in PES. People with higher income were less likely to participate in PES. Participating in a previous PES program increased likelihood of participating in a later program.



Communication

Findings

Well-informed, careful communication of a PES program introduction in a community can strengthen the effects of payments, resulting in better short- and long-term results.

Recommendation

Engage with the community to determine how different ways that the incentive is communicated influences how they think about it and respond to it.

Evidence

When community members were involved in the design of the PES program, they were more likely to adhere to the program and continue conservation behaviors after payments stopped. This community valued internal involvement in the project, and inviting their contribution to the design helped communicate it in a way they liked. This contributed to higher participation.



Clarity

Findings

Participants are more likely to adhere to requested behaviors if they clearly understand why they are receiving payments.

Recommendation

The connection between incentives and requested behavior must be explicitly communicated to participants and periodically reinforced. Ensure that attention is paid to explanations for payments.

Evidence

Herders who did not understand the reasons behind payments did not adhere to the plan. Reasons for lack of clarity included: language barrier, not enough information conveyed.



Leaders

Findings

Certain community members are important sources of information and social influence. These people can be effective agents for disseminating information about conservation policies.

Recommendation

Identify community leaders, and determine their areas of expertise, as well as which behaviors could assist with dissemination of conservation information.

Evidence

When members of our study population went looking for information related to herding, they went to those they perceived as experts. Also, conservation issues were almost exclusively discussed at village meetings where the issue was raised by community leaders.



Terms used

Social Norms

The expected or most common form of behavior in a given situation. Varies between communities and cultures.

