

Survey results give insight into public attitudes about coastal issues

Restoring native salmon runs in Oregon and building sustainable fisheries in the Pacific Northwest are issues that are having a direct impact on the lives of many Oregonians. These issues have been and will continue to be the subject of lively, sometimes contentious, public debate.

In the belief that the course of that debate should be directed by good scientific information, Oregon Sea Grant researchers Denise Lach and Brent Steel conducted a study to learn how much the public knows about salmon restoration and how it learned what it knows.

Steel and Lach studied what different groups of Oregonians know about ocean policies, what their primary or most-trusted sources of information are, which sources provide higher levels of relevant knowledge, and how the media shape the public agenda. They also looked at the relationship between a high level of relevant knowledge and the attitudes supporting public policies aimed at restoring salmon and sustaining Pacific fisheries.

Lach, co-director of Oregon State University's Center for Water and Environmental Sustainability, and Steel, a professor of political science at OSU, be-



Sea Grant researchers found that people who visit the ocean know and care more about coastal issues such as fisheries, erosion, and pollution.

lieved that identifying the most trusted sources of information among different groups in the state would allow relevant information to be targeted to specific groups, raising the level of discourse.

In a mail survey of more than 3,000 Oregon and Washington residents, Steel and Lach asked questions such as “In general, how well informed would you consider yourself to be concerning Oregon coastal policy issues, such as fisheries, beach erosion, pollution, etc.?” and “How often, if ever, do you visit or use Oregon’s coastal areas for recreation or leisure time?”

They also asked respondents which information sources they used the most to learn about Oregon’s coastal areas and fisheries,

and how much they know about such terms as *ecosystem*, *biodiversity*, *non-indigenous species*, and *nonpoint-source pollution*.

“We were trying to figure out what variables predict how much knowledge people have about coastal management,” Lach said, “and whether any of those variables are changeable. It turns out that there are variables that affect knowledge levels, such as age and gender, that aren’t very changeable. If

you can’t do anything to change factors that have an impact, you have to think about different ways of communicating.”

The results of Lach and Steel’s study are revealing—and perhaps a bit disconcerting. For example, in response to the question about how well-informed people consider themselves on coastal issues, 27.5 percent of noncoastal residents said they are “not informed”; 58.2 percent are “somewhat informed”; and only 14.2 percent are either “informed” or “very well informed.” In response to the question about how often they visit the coast for recreation or leisure, 33.8 percent of noncoastal residents said “Rarely, no more than once or twice a year”; only 10.5 percent said either



“somewhat” or “very” frequently. And in response to the question about information sources, both coastal and noncoastal residents indicated that they rely most on television news for information about the Oregon coast, next on newspapers, then on radio news.

Other sources of information included the Internet, watershed councils, recreation groups, elected officials, Extension, and Oregon Sea Grant. Although only 18 percent of respondents indicated that they rely on Oregon Sea Grant or Sea Grant Extension “frequently” or “very frequently,” those respondents are significantly more likely than non and infrequent users to consider themselves “informed” and “very well informed.”

Steel and Lach’s survey also included an “Ocean Quiz” that asked five multiple-choice questions about what factors affect ocean fisheries, what part of the ocean most sea life lives in, and what by-catch, El Niño, and upwelling are. Only 7.9 percent of the noncoastal residents and 10 percent of the coastal residents correctly answered all five questions; the median score was about 2.5—an “F” by public school grading standards.

From their survey results, Lach and Steel concluded that citizens who are knowledgeable about ocean conditions are most supportive of ocean and coastal protection, that certain circumstantial factors are important predictors of knowledge, and that some sources of information are more directly connected to knowledge than others.

“There are some things that are kind of disturbing,” Steel said. “We asked people about risks for wild salmon, and people said they realize that dams are a big risk but they don’t want them removed. People know the dams are bad but [they] aren’t into the technical fix.”

Lach made a similar observation. “People tend to get involved when there’s been some kind of adverse effect on them, and often times it turns into a negative interaction or adversarial reaction. There’s long been this understanding that if there was some way to get people involved earlier, their input could

to the coast is very important; people’s knowledge levels increase dramatically and they become more concerned about ocean issues.”

Lach concurred. “People who go to the coast and actually do things there, whether it’s at the [Oregon Coast] Aquarium or at Hatfield Marine Science Center or on a marine tour . . . that’s how they’re learning about the coast—not through the television, not through the radio, not through our traditional kinds of communication. People are most likely to learn when they’re actually out in the field.”

“Going to the coast leaves you thinking, ‘This is a really special place and it needs to be protected. Let me learn how to do that.’”

Sea Grant’s involvement in this project influenced the way Steel and Lach thought about its consequences and implications. “If the National Science Foundation,

be used more effectively and, potentially, more satisfactorily. But it turns out that it’s very difficult to get people involved in issues that aren’t their main concern in life.”

Lach said that she and Steel were interested in finding out what the correlation was between different variables and whether or not people get engaged in issues around coastal management. “It’s really an academic question, trying to understand what it is that motivates people to get engaged in issues that aren’t life threatening or job threatening: Can you get people engaged at a level that’s more conducive to conversation and reasonable input?”

Steel said one way to get people to care about coastal issues is to have them visit the coast. “A trip

for example, had funded this,” Lach said, “we would have just said, ‘This is what we found.’ But because it was Sea Grant, we were thinking, ‘Okay, so what does this mean for Sea Grant?’ And I think that’s really critical in these cases, especially when you’re looking at issues about public involvement and public understanding of science; it’s important to think about what the implications are.”

Lach and Steel seem to agree on what those implications are. “I think that what’s really critical is to get people out in the field,” said Lach. “It just changes the way people think about natural resource issues. Going to the coast leaves you thinking, ‘This is a really special place and it needs to be protected. Let me learn how to do that.’”

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