

ECOS 40(2): Prudential value and the meaning of nature conservation

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Land managers' motives for caring for nature may be more deeply personal than we realise...

Landowners on a mission?

Being in nature tends to be good for people [1]. Exposure to vegetation and other elements of natural environments have been associated with such benefits as healing, increased energy, reduced stress, lower levels of anger and anxiety, and spiritual experiences [2–4]. Here I would like to build on this idea by considering whether the act of conserving nature might also be good for people.

I recently completed my doctoral research, a social science analysis focused on people who had created or purchased privately-owned nature reserves to protect wildlife or ecosystems. I became a story collector, recording and analyzing landowners' narratives about how they became involved with private land conservation (see [5] for an example of methods).

One key finding was that engaging with conservation on their properties added something positive to landowners' lives, improving their wellbeing. Most landowners

talked about the experience of being in nature and the joy, ease, or wisdom it brought to them. But beyond exposure to nature, they saw value in their actions. This occurred through a number of mechanisms. For example, some spoke of doing their part and the feeling of contributing to a collective global good. Others talked about the skills they developed, the opportunity conservation provided to test their ideas and make decisions about land management, or the social connection to other landowners involved in similar projects. A significant component was beneficence, or the sense of having done something good for others [6]. Landowners used terms such as a *mission*, *obligation*, and *sacrifice* when speaking of their work on the nature reserves, but they also spoke of the work as *fulfilling* and even *addictive*.

Beyond wellbeing

Personal projects are known to contribute to quality of life; this is one of the reasons we have hobbies and vocations [7]. But for a personal project to enhance a person's wellbeing, it must be meaningful to that person [8]. In the case of the landowners I spoke with, meaning had two components. Meaning was derived, in part, from the role the reserves played in protecting ecosystems and providing habitat, particularly in the face of threat. Nearly every landowner discussed the ecological value of their work. Meaning was also derived from the prudential value of their actions. Prudential value is rarely if ever discussed in nature conservation circles, despite development of the concept elsewhere [9–11], but there has been increasing attention to the closely-related concept of wellbeing. If wellbeing is the condition of being satisfied with one's own life, prudential value is the value something contributes to one's wellbeing, from the perspective of that person: "well-being is what *someone* has if their life goes well; prudential value (for that person) is what *something* has if it contributes toward making their life go well" [12].

My study used purposive sampling, not probability sampling, so the results are not intended to represent a broader population. Yet it is clear from this research that at least some people find prudential value in the act of conserving nature, and I would speculate that the prudential value of protecting wildlife is broadly applicable to the field of nature conservation. It applies to any of us who work on conservation activities that engender a sense of purpose or feeling of contributing to something important. Landowners, yes, but also researchers, project managers, park rangers, and volunteers (see, for example, [13]). The rise in scholarship on conservation and wellbeing is an important step forward, contributing to a valuable "people and nature" ethos [14]. The difference between wellbeing and prudential value is subtle, but I think prudential value is an even more useful concept for those interested in the meaning of nature conservation to people [15]. The concept of wellbeing itself has some limitations, the foremost being that it is a global construct. That is, well-being is a measure of the quality of a person's life as a whole [16], yet exposure to nature, for example, is but one of many factors that affect quality of life. As a result, wellbeing as an indicator is sensitive to factors other than those of concern to conservationists. Prudential value, in contrast, can be measured in ways that are specific to nature conservation, shifting our thinking toward the incremental contribution (positive or negative) that conservation adds to a person's life.



Oystercatchers make use of a newly created floating island.
Photo: Philip Ashmole

Behaviour traits

There are other benefits of the concept of prudential value. One is that, by virtue of its concern with conservation's additionality to quality of life, prudential value is more proximally connected to conservationists' concerns than are assessments of well-being. Compared with wellbeing, prudential value maintains a narrower focus on the direct personal, social, and community impacts of conservation. Additionally, prudential value offers a way to explain behavior. As the body of research showing that people take conservation actions for personal and psychological reasons grows [e. g., 17], we get closer to understanding the factors that affect decision-making in conservation.

Prudential value can also inform our deliberation on ways to engage more people in nature conservation. It may be tempting to ask how we can use the concept to make people value wildlife more, but perhaps this is not the most fruitful question. People often resist others' overt attempts to change their values or behaviors [18]. An

alternative way to frame the issue is to consider activities, like private land conservation, where prudential value and ecological value overlap. Engagement efforts will be more effective if they do not aim to change people's values but rather to identify ways that conservation fits within their existing values. The area of overlap between prudential value and ecological value is ripe for voluntary conservation action. And, because people are more likely to pursue conservation activities when they derive prudential from them, compared to activities they perform as an obligation or duty, these actions have the potential to be longer-lasting.

Activities that provide both prudential value and ecological value will vary geographically and demographically and by the sheer diversity of people's interests. Some people may find that overlap by creating wildlife habitat in their gardens, while others may enjoy volunteering together with loved ones or organizing community events. Conservationists can determine what activities fall in this space by asking people directly, then using this information to inform program design.

Prudential value is a useful concept for understanding nature conservation's meaning to people. With its potential for broad applicability in our field, it will be of interest to conservationists pursuing the links between people's wellbeing and the health of nature.

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