

Understanding Humans to Conserve Birds

Bird conservation fundamentally includes humans, and the most successful conservation actions are those aligned with the values, well-being, and perspectives of people. When conservationists work to conserve birds, they are often trying to change or reinforce human behavior. Therefore, studying and understanding the human dimensions of bird conservation are essential to develop effective bird conservation strategies.

What is Human Dimensions?

Human dimensions (HD) is a field of study that applies the social sciences to examine research questions that have implications for wildlife conservation efforts.

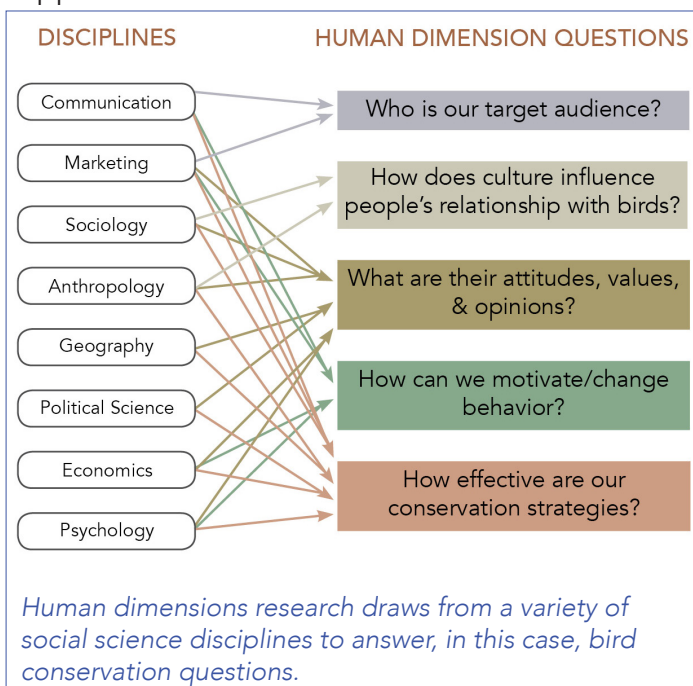
Integrating Social and Ecological Understanding Increases Success

Combining expertise from the fields of human dimensions and ornithology can improve bird conservation approaches and outcomes. It can lead to a better understanding of why people implement conservation actions or support funding for habitat conservation. It can also help inform where actions should be taken to benefit birds.

Human dimensions research can maximize limited financial and staff capacity by supporting the design of conservation programs that work with and for people. Such information can aid practitioners in determining the best ways to motivate and engage citizens to care about and support bird conservation.



*Flooded rice fields in Arkansas benefit birds and farmers.
Mike Checkett*



HD Success Story: Piping Plover Conservation at a Public Beach in Nebraska

Piping Plovers are state and federally threatened migratory shorebirds that nest on the beaches at Lake McConaughy, a popular recreation area in western Nebraska. This recreation area hosts over 1,000,000 visitors every year, most of whom visit during the plover nesting season. Management and recreation activities on this beach, especially off-leash dogs, have caused social conflict between recreationists and those supporting plover conservation.

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and The University of Nebraska conducted a human dimensions study that

used various social science disciplines including political science, psychology, and communication science. Their study surveyed dog owners to examine reasons for using (or not using) leashes while visiting the lake. The researchers also evaluated communication strategies aimed at increasing compliance with leash laws.

Research Insights and Outcomes

1. Awareness of the law was not a barrier to dog owners leashing their pet; 80% of dog owners were aware of the leash law but compliance was less than 20% for all dog owners. Thus, simply providing information would be ineffective and a poor use of resources.
2. Pro-leashing messages that emphasized avoiding dog bites and dog fights were the most persuasive of the messages evaluated.

Human dimensions research was crucial in defining the reasons behind low leash law compliance at Lake McConaughy. This improved understanding led to an examination of existing communication techniques and evaluation of how communication strategies could be more effective.

Along with increased enforcement, human dimensions research influenced how park staff and agency personnel communicated with visitors about pet and human safety to



*Recreationists enjoying Lake McConaughy in Nebraska next to a Piping Plover nest. Joel Jorgensen
Inset photo: Piping Plover. Jim Fenton*

improve threatened and endangered species conservation. Although evaluation of the effectiveness of these communication strategies is still in progress, leash law compliance at Lake McConaughy increased from 16% in 2013-2014 to 67% in 2016.

This Piping Plover case study is one of many bird conservation success stories made possible by integrating human dimensions. Countless other projects could benefit from the inclusion of human dimensions research as well. Learn more about this study at <https://goo.gl/5p6Kyc> or contact Joel.Jorgensen@nebraska.gov.

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative (NABCI) is a coalition of state and federal government agencies, private organizations, and bird initiatives in the United States working to ensure the long-term health of North America's native bird populations. Its vision is to support healthy and abundant populations of North American birds that are valued by future generations and sustained by habitats that benefit birds and people.

The NABCI Human Dimensions Subcommittee aims to integrate the science and tools of human dimensions into bird conservation.

For More Information
NABCI Human Dimensions Subcommittee
<http://nabci-us.org/how-we-work/human-dimensions/>

Ashley Gramza, National Bird Conservation Social Science Coordinator
agramza@vt.edu