

MS Thesis Defense

Candidate: Kristen Donahue

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Title: Public Perception of Cetacean Conservation in the DC Metropolitan Area

Thesis Director: Dr. E. C. M. Parsons

Committee: Dr. Larry Rockwood, Dr. Greg Guagnano

ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions held by the public about cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises) and the conservation issues they are facing. The District of Columbia metropolitan area served as the sample area and residents were the focal population for these assessments. The survey was conducted via face-to-face interviews using a standardized questionnaire. The main questions asked were:

1. What did the survey respondents perceive to be the greatest threats to cetacean populations?
2. What was the effect of demographic factors such as age, gender, education level, political leaning, and profession on level of basic knowledge about cetaceans?
3. What is the effect of age, gender, education level, political leaning, and profession on support for marine conservation and education legislative initiatives?

The eight threats that the largest percentage of respondents (N=260) listed as a “serious threat” included: commercial whaling (49.61%); entanglement in fishing gear (38.08%); marine litter/debris (53.08%); introduction of exotic species (31.15%); bacteria/viruses from sewage (48.08%); oil spills (58.08%); loss of coral reefs (39.23%); lack of political interest (38.08%); and climate change (37.69%).

A majority of participants did not know that the United States conducts any kind of whaling - 81.54% were unaware of aboriginal whaling in Alaska. Neither could participants correctly identify the most endangered whale and porpoise species in North America (88.85%, 90.38% failed, respectively) or the world (93.08%, 96.92% failed, respectively). About three-quarters (77.69%) of participants had not heard of the US Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Respondent participation in water-borne activities was the factor most strongly associated with more pro-cetacean behavior and higher levels of knowledge about cetaceans. Age was also found to be correlated with behavior toward cetaceans, with increasing age showing less pro-cetacean behaviors (such as supporting cetacean conservation legislation). A higher average level of knowledge was also found to be correlated with more pro-cetacean attitudes and behaviors.

In order to minimize the impacts that human actions and behaviors have on cetaceans, it is important to understand the current level of knowledge and perception of cetacean conservation issues held by the public, policy makers, and managers. The results of this study will provide useful information for management and decision-making communities involved in marine conservation efforts. The low levels of knowledge observed in this study indicate that increased efforts to educate the public about cetaceans, and the conservation issues they are facing, may be needed in order to increase support for more cetacean conservation legislation and initiatives.