



## Public priorities for conservation revealed in European survey

**Conservation efforts** should focus on species that have recently declined in number, are harmless or are perceived as high value, according to a European public survey. Participants also felt that disappearing habitats should be targeted for protection. The results suggest that, by choosing different criteria that more closely match the public's values and criteria, conservationists could improve public support for their work.

**Public support for conservation initiatives** can ensure they are implemented more effectively, but this support could be undermined if the public disagree with conservation managers about the most important priorities for conservation.

The survey, conducted by a European team of researchers and supported by the EU-funded ALTER-net<sup>1</sup> project, found that public views on conservation differ from those of biodiversity managers and conservationists. For example, conservationists often focus on native species, but many members of the public interviewed for the survey did not consider 'nativeness' to be important. Instead, the researchers recommend conservationists focus on other criteria, such as recent population changes, harmfulness and value when setting conservation goals. Measures such as Mean Species Abundance (which measures trends in average species population size) could reflect both public and conservationist criteria.

The researchers surveyed 2378 individuals in 8 European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Hungary, The Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and the UK). They asked the respondents if they would like to see a moderate population increase in three types of local species within different habitats: a large mammal (e.g. red deer,) a garden spider, and a non-native plant) as well as non-native species in other regions e.g. African Elephants. Participants were also asked to rate the three local species according to seven traits: whether participants thought a species had increased or decreased in number, whether it was seen as foreign or native, strong or vulnerable, its attractiveness, value, rarity, and harmfulness.

The results revealed that the respondents tended to prefer a moderate increase in population for species which they thought had recently suffered a fall in numbers. Participants also wanted to see increases for species they judged to be harmless or valuable. Attractiveness, nativeness and rarity were less important for participants, suggesting that respondents did not use these traits to judge whether a species should be conserved.

As well as answering questions about public views on conservation, the survey also demonstrated that the public seem to have an implicit understanding of the ecosystem services provided by some species. Most strikingly, the garden spider was rated as 'somewhat' or 'extremely' valuable by 48 per cent of respondents (excluding the Romanian participants, who had significantly more negative views of garden spiders compared to the other nations). As there is no obvious economic value to garden spiders, the results suggest the spiders were seen as being of value in a broader sense.

1. A Long-Term Biodiversity, Ecosystem and Awareness Research Network (ALTER-net) was supported by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme. See: [www.alter-net.info](http://www.alter-net.info)

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