Chapter 8
Contextual Considerations for Eco-Behavioral Change Among Aquatic Recreationists

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws from Australian studies to explore policies associated with behavioral interventions for environmental stewardship. Each case focuses on attempts to influence the eco-behaviors of recreational users of aquatic environments and the division of eco-responsibility between individuals, communities, and government. The first case considers coercive policy approaches to effect change in recreational boaters' sewage disposal practices to reduce vessel-sourced marine pollution. The second case considers suasive policy approaches to encourage recreational fishers to voluntarily engage in positive eco-behaviors associated with the restoration and rehabilitation of fisheries habitats. In each case, ascriptions of causal responsibility for environmental degradation and responsibility to act are identified, and how these shape responses to eco-behavioral expectations are discussed. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the potential utility of a complex model of behavior change which pays specific attention to context in the development of the behavioral intervention policy mix.

INTRODUCTION

Achieving significant progress toward sustainability goals requires the active involvement and cooperation of citizens, particularly the users of these environments (Australian Public Service Commission, 2007). However, policymakers have found a major barrier to the achievement of policy outcomes is a disengaged and passive public, particularly concerning environmental policy which requires significant behavior change. Traditionally governments seeking to create behavior change have relied on providing incentives or rewards for demonstrating desired behaviors (the carrot), applying disincentives or punishments for failing to demonstrate desired behaviors (the whip or stick), and encouraging change through moral suasion (the sermon) (Vedung, 1997). The carrot, whip and sermon approaches are based on ideas of rational decision making (Tummers, 2019). This rational choice approach to behavior change has been critiqued as overly simplistic due to its heavy reliance on cognitive psychological processes (de Jonge, 2011) and lack of sensitivity to contextual factors (Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011). This is particularly true in the pursuit of eco-behavioral change in recreationists, as much of the published research on behavioral-based interventions to encourage eco-behaviors suffers from issues surrounding replication and reproducibility and it is very rare for studies to report null or negative findings (Brick & Lange, 2020).

Because influencing human behavior is very complex, policymakers require a sophisticated and highly contextualised understanding of the factors influencing human behavior and how traditional policy tools can be supplemented by insights from behavioral change theory and evidence at the individual, interpersonal and community levels. Human behavior not only plays a significant role in environmental degradation, it is also key to reversing this damage and protecting environments (Klöckner, 2013). As the human population continues to grow, altering destructive human behavior and promoting positive environmental behaviors becomes more critical than ever (de Groot & Steg, 2008). Drawing on two Australian case studies, this chapter focuses on behavioral-based interventions targeting recreational users of natural spaces which could be considered to have enjoyed only mixed success. The first case considers attempts to modify recreational boaters' sewage disposal behaviors to reduce vessel-sourced marine pollution. The second case considers attempts to encourage recreational fishers to voluntarily engage in positive eco-behaviors associated with the restoration and rehabilitation of aquatic environments. In each case, ascriptions of causal responsibility for environmental degradation and responsibility to act are identified and the ways these shape negating responses to eco-behavioral expectations are discussed. Despite the context of the cases presented, the findings and discussion presented in this chapter are generalizable to other jurisdictions and recreational activities. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the potential utility of a complex model of behavior change to achieve specific eco-behavioral actions and outcomes in aquatic recreational environments.

BACKGROUND

Typically, theories of behavior are linear and attempt to predict why a behavior is performed while theories of behavior change are often more cyclical, however, these differences are subtle and many theories and models can be identified as both (Davis, Campbell, Hildon, Hobbs & Michie, 2015). The dominant theory in behavior and behavior change prediction is Ajzen's (1985) Theory of Planned Behavior. The Theory of Planned Behavior builds on the work of previous rational choice theories to incorporate further

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