

Wetter But Not Better: New Research Into Public Engagement With The 'Undersea'

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Summary: *a large project of qualitative and quantitative research¹ conducted for Natural England shows ways to engage – and not to engage – the English public in a positive appreciation of the undersea landscape. The research suggests that most conventional campaigns to promote Marine Protected Areas are unlikely to 'work' for 60% of the population and this will probably undermine attempts to create a political constituency for the same. Less than 1% of the population can name a real undersea landscape feature and there is no sense of place for the undersea in England in the way there is for terrestrial landscapes, despite a high affinity for the sea as the coast. Lacking real knowledge, responses to conventional polling are determined by values and transposed views about actors and issues taken from other experiences. The common positive denominator is dramatic topography. The Natural England research has been used to design communications that should work across all main psychological groups.*

Introduction

In the UK, considerable efforts by NGOs and others have focused on promoting Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). After many years of lobbying by conservation groups the government has committed itself to implement a Marine Act, which amongst other things, will enable it to establish some form of MPAs. But what will actually happen? How much will the government use its powers?

The precedents from use of existing powers are not good – England has only one no-take (no fishing zone), a tiny area around the island of Lundy. Talk to any former Environment Minister and the reason is not hard to find. One once told me (I paraphrase but this was the gist): "Whatever you say and whatever I may think, if it involves a conflict with fishing, I say the science shows we need controls but then a blue-eyed fisherman is filmed doing his piece to camera in a yellow sou'wester on a windswept quayside talking about the threat to his livelihood, and we are stuffed".

On the face of it, the British, an island people immersed in the culture of the sea, care a lot about the marine environment. Polls² show a consistently high level of concern about threats to the marine environment, and even support for MPAs. Supermarkets increasingly demand sustainable fish. Many English people visit the sea, daydream about the sea, or have a memento if it at home.³ So what's the problem? Why hasn't this sort of concern yet translated into political support which really makes a difference?

Research For Natural England

Over the past eighteen months I have been involved in a campaign-design project for the government conservation agency Natural England (NE), developing their 'Marine Campaign'⁴. The working hypothesis behind this research included:

- whatever powers Parliament might pass, no government would have the political space to fully utilise them unless there was support for MPAs. As MPAs are [almost always] place-based mechanisms, this meant support for protecting parts of the undersea – the seabed – as places.

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- in the public mind the sea-is-the-sea-is-the-sea: unlike terrestrial landscapes it looks much the same everywhere, at least around England. Therefore there probably is no real sense of 'place', or a landscape, and without that, nothing to identify with or protect. Support for the concept of MPAs might therefore remain latent and general rather than actual or specific.

Whatever consultation and dialogue takes place between the interest groups and policy community – from fishing organisations to minerals companies and Wildlife Trusts – will be more robust and realistic if the wider public have some real understanding of what actually lies beneath the waves. In the last year therefore we set out in collaboration with qualitative researchers KSB⁵ and values analysts Cultural Dynamics⁶, to investigate the way the English public perceives what might be under the sea.

So far as we know this is the largest study of perceptions of the undersea. We conducted 18 moderated focus groups around England of 8 adults each. All had children of school age and who were not directly engaged in any marine activity or environmental lobbying. The groups were values segmented according to underlying psychological needs: Settlers (Security Driven about 20% of the population), Prospectors (esteem driven about 40%) and pioneers (Inner Directed, about 40%). These are 'Maslow Groups'⁷. We then ran a quantitative baseline awareness study of over 3000 people, against a values-segmented quota (this time also to the 12 Values Modes level).

The process and results are described in a Natural England report, *Qualitative and Quantitative Research into Public Engagement with the Undersea Landscape in England*, Natural England Research Reports, NERR019 now online at <http://naturalengland.communisis.com/naturalenglandshop/docs/NERR019.pdf> Even if you are not interested in marine issues you may find the process and data of interest – for example there are tables showing the correlation between standard demographics, region and values.

In the focus groups people were shown concept stimulus material which described real undersea features and their life, for example kelp forests, seabed communities of reefs worms and anemones, the currents and rocky reefs of the North East, and spawning areas (referred to as creches) of herring in the Thames Estuary. In the quantitative work they were asked a series of option questions informed by the qualitative findings, and an open question about the seabed.

Results

In brief, we found a common ignorance about what actually lies beneath the sea across all segments (under 1% could recall a real undersea place-based feature in the quantitative work) and very marked differences between the values groups (stronger and more consistent than any demographic or regional differences).

We found that the English really have no idea of what lies under the sea. Around half were inspired to guess at the obvious, fish and weed for example, so the undersea has no psychological or social place-based constituency of the type enjoyed by terrestrial landscapes such as the Pennines, Broads or South Downs. We also found that:

- all the groups but especially the outer-directed Prospectors, felt ashamed that 'our seas' had got into a (largely assumed) state of disrepair and damage. Many spontaneously cited damaging activities such as pollution or industrial fishing in support of this and were inclined to believe there was 'not much there'. In addition both Settlers and Prospectors tended to think that seas in other countries were the

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only 'nice' ones (with the possible exception of Southwest England), and there was a strong sense of fear and disgust about 'under the sea' – because it was dark, cold, slimy and dangerous. It was not something they had thought about or wanted to think about.

- in contrast the Pioneers reacted more positively to ideas or features of mystery and beauty and enthusiastically elaborated more possibilities but for Prospectors and Settlers, the unknowable triggered feelings of insecurity rather than interest: you might get entangled in a kelp forest for example

- the Settlers, and to a lesser extent the Pioneers, reacted positively to ideas of community: it was a positive 'result' to think that communities of little creatures are successfully living-together in places around England, 'minding their own business'. For Settlers this naturally translated into a thought that they ought to be left alone, and that they were of value simply for having survived.

- the only concept which really engaged positive interest from Prospectors, and worked for the other groups, was dramatic topography. Prospectors could get enthusiastic about the scale of the Dogger Bank (underwater sand dunes as tall as Nelson's Column), or the Lune Deep (a vertiginous trench off Northwest England). Prospectors in particular wanted this proved – by seeing it, or better still, experiencing it. "You should have a submarine to enable us to fly through it – zoom up and down it ..."

Mention of 'issues' or 'problems' quickly triggered a cut-out for Prospectors in particular: they did not want to know about anything 'political' and it triggered the feelings of shame, guilt, fear and distaste. Therefore communications efforts which start from here, are likely only to engage a small subset, mainly the Concerned Ethical Values Mode (a Pioneer subset making up about 10% of the population). This of course applies to much conventional practice.

The very word 'environment' was associated by many Prospectors as a sign that criticism was on its way – they were about to be told not to do something. This provided another reason not to engage. (Consequently the Natural England campaign is now framed as a *Landscape Awareness Campaign*).

Less obviously, mention of what conservationists see as solutions also had the same effect. The idea of more 'Protected Areas', although broadly understood, was taken to indicate to signify that there were problems, although there was also surprise that if there was anything worth protecting, it had not already been protected, potentially leading to a judgement against those in authority. This is also an illustration of why you first need to build awareness (in this case awareness that there is something there – an undersea landscape), before moving on to problems or solutions, let alone engagement for action based on perceiving problems and solutions⁸.

Conclusions

This research shows that the main elements of conventional marine environmental communications: talking about problems and solutions, issues, policies, laws, politics and the weird-and-wonderful mysterious creatures of the sea, all had a chilling effect on the majority (60%) of the population.

At first sight this may seem to run counter other evidence but in fact it fits with it. For example the great love of the sea apparently reported in surveys by Wildlife Trusts, the National Trust and others is not as much about the sea, and even less about the under-sea, as it is about *the coast* – a known and explored place where the perceived negatives of the undersea are kept at a safe distance. The high levels of concern about problems such as pollution, themselves probably generated or reinforced by

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decades of campaigns about pollution, are consistent with the idea that the undersea around our coasts is empty and degraded. This is not to dismiss the worth of other surveys (some of which are summarised in the report) but shows that they cannot be used to design campaigns to actually build support for undersea place-based conservation measures.

Natural England's campaign to increase awareness of undersea landscapes therefore focuses mostly on the dramatic underwater topography, and finding ways to show that 'there is something there'. NE hopes to create experiences and generate media and word-of-mouth about those which 'prove' the existence of these features, including through an Undersea Landscape Explorer motion ride, working rather like a flight-simulator. It also tries to communicate the idea of communities, and it sets aside the potential of the 'beauty spots' which so intrigued the Pioneers, as these had a negative effect on other groups. Of course a more segmented campaign, could select and tailor communications for any one Maslow Group, more precisely.

The NE campaign has also involved creating event-based workshops for children, including landscape-making, in part to reach their parents. If something 'works' for their kids, this is almost invariably seen as a 'result' they will go along with: being a parent is so important to identity that it over-rides or bypasses many of the judgement filters that adults would otherwise apply. In this study we also found that all Groups could actively rationalise this greater enjoyment of the undersea by children because they believed their offspring to have what the researchers termed 'a higher disgust threshold' than did adults.

How applicable these particular findings are to anywhere outside England is unknown. The principle of research to produce a communications campaign which resonates with motivating needs certainly applies. In countries with clearer water and more divers and snorkelling (etc), there will probably be far greater awareness that there is a landscape-under-the-sea. Take a look at websites such as *Divernet*⁹ or *Sea Search*¹⁰ and it's obvious that even around England, the experience which many divers get is far different from that of the general population. Having these people enthuse about the undersea, usually around some individual creature dislocated from location may work for the Pioneers but even the much-celebrated BBC Series *Coast*, and the popular nature mega-documentary *Blue Planet* which was watched up to 8m people, appears to have had no impact on awareness of the undersea as a place or a landscape around England. If divers painted a word picture of an undersea landscape and then were able to connect this to a known piece of coastline, that might be more successful but the principal need is to create visual and experiential proofs – hence the simulator (the Undersea Explorer) and other products and outreach which Natural England is trying to undertake.

In England at least there is also the complicating factor that turbidity /cloudiness is often equated with pollution, and not being able to see, reinforces all those fears and feelings that there might be something cold, slimy and dangerous just underfoot.

The words of the song from Disney's *Little Mermaid* have it that '*Everything's better, down where it's wetter, under the sea*' but 60% of the English population at least, is more than sceptical about this idea. They are saying, as they do when going to the cinema, "show me".

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¹ ROSE, C., DADE, P. & SCOTT, J. 2008. Qualitative and Quantitative Research into Public Engagement with the Undersea Landscape in England. Natural England Research Reports, NERR019.
Download at <http://naturalengland.communities.com/naturalenglandshop/docs/NERR019.pdf> and see also <http://naturalengland.communities.com/naturalenglandshop/docs/RIN019.pdf> The original KSBR debrief will also be posted at the NE website if it isn't there already – in case of difficulty email the author chris@campaignstrategy.org

² See report ref (i) op cit

³ National Trust research cited in the report

⁴ the views in this article are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect those of Natural England. Enquiries about the campaign should be addressed to Karen.Mitchell@naturalengland.org.uk The Campaign website is at <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/campaigns/marine/default.htm>

⁵ www.ksbr.co.uk

⁶ www.cultdyn.co.uk

⁷ For an explanation see the report or *Using Values Modes* at www.campaignstrategy.org

⁸ The motivation sequence awareness> alignment> engagement> action see p. 6 of *How To Win Campaigns*, Chris Rose 2005, pub Earthscan

⁹ www.divernet.com

¹⁰ www.seasearch.org.uk