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Empathy Conservation: What Did We Learn From the Experiments Testing the Metaeconomic Framework and Dual-interest Theory?

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Market Report	Year Ago	4 Wks Ago	8/15/14
Livestock and Products,			
Weekly Average			
Nebraska Slaughter Steers, 35-65% Choice, Live Weight.	125.00	156.86	154.63
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame, 550-600 lb.	182.24	268.00	262.05
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame 750-800 lb.	158.34	270.55	231.82
Choice Boxed Beef, 600-750 lb. Carcass.	192.13	250.15	257.35
Western Corn Belt Base Hog Price Carcass, Negotiated.	96.85	127.60	104.71
Pork Carcass Cutout, 185 lb. Carcass 51-52% Lean.	102.85	135.23	115.35
Slaughter Lambs, Ch. & Pr., Heavy, Woolled, South Dakota, Direct.	117.75	154.38	154.50
National Carcass Lamb Cutout FOB.	282.15	358.21	360.55
Crops,			
Daily Spot Prices			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W. Imperial, bu.	6.76	5.72	5.47
Corn, No. 2, Yellow Nebraska City, bu.	5.84	3.53	3.49
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow Nebraska City, bu.	13.94	12.37	11.97
Grain Sorghum, No.2, Yellow Dorchester, cwt.	8.82	6.18	6.09
Oats, No. 2, Heavy Minneapolis, Mn, bu.	4.05	3.76	3.74
Feed			
Alfalfa, Large Square Bales, Good to Premium, RFV 160-185 Northeast Nebraska, ton.	245.00	207.50	192.50
Alfalfa, Large Rounds, Good Platte Valley, ton.	165.00	100.00	100.00
Grass Hay, Large Rounds, Good Nebraska, ton.	160.00	100.00	87.50
Dried Distillers Grains, 10% Moisture Nebraska Average.	215.50	105.00	95.75
Wet Distillers Grains, 65-70% Moisture Nebraska Average.	72.50	36.00	37.63
* No Market			

This article summarizes our experimental research testing the metaeconomics framework (MEF) and dual-interest theory (DIT), which suggests an important and substantive role for empathy in the design of conservation policy to achieve sustainability (for more detail, see

<http://agecon-cpanel.unl.edu/lynne/metaecon/Lynneetal2014TragedyCommons.pdf>

MEF and DIT posit that individuals are motivated by two inseparable, yet conflicting interests: self-interest and other (shared with others)-interest. This conflict gets resolved through empathy tempering self-interest, resulting in a balanced decision, in which neither of the interests is maximized, but we rather observe sacrifices in both interests. Empathy is based on imagining the struggle of others, on “walking-in-the-shoes-of-others” and, as a result, perhaps joining in sympathy with a shared cause like conservation and sustainability.

Conservation is one of the domains of economic decisions where empathy potentially plays a very important role. Agricultural producers, moved by empathy, sometimes join voluntary programs to protect valuable and vulnerable resources. Our group experimentally explores what motivates conservation behavior and in particular the relevance of empathy. Based on our findings we recommend that agricultural policy makers transform environmental policy into greater reliance on empathy-driven conservation rather than only the traditional incentives and regulation-driven conservation. In the course of our framed experiments funded by various U.S. Department of Agriculture grants, we have learned the following:

1. Individuals are willing to empathize and walk in the shoes of others when making environmentally-relevant decisions. Moreover, individuals readily respond to this other (shared with others)-interest framing that invites empathy and imagination of how others feel. Self-interest framing, on the other hand, does not work as well.
2. Empathy considerations temper self-interest. These lead to sacrifices in profit and a decision in which self-interest and other-interest are in balance. These sacrifices result in both greater sharing with other people who are affected by the decisions and higher levels of conservation.
3. Individuals scoring higher on empathy personality scales are more likely to be moved by other people's behavior and as a result "join the cause" for conservation, and sustainability more generally.
4. Frequent reflection on "who I am" and "how do I treat others" results in more balanced and environmentally friendly actions.
5. Nudging for empathy via emotions works. If victims express negative emotions/disapproval of conservation decisions, this leads to more conservation by the perpetrators.
6. Nudging for empathy via calling to "walk-in-the-shoes-of-others" works well in conjunction with financial incentives. This type of empathy nudging showed superior performance in terms of increased conservation levels and led to more profit sharing/more equitable distribution of profits as compared to only financial incentives.
7. Imposing monetary fines for low conservation is counterproductive and leads to even lower conservation levels as compared to empathy nudging via negative emotions/disapproval.
8. If those who are responsible for conservation decisions also experience the consequences of such decisions, they conserve more even if zero conservation is still the optimal choice from a profit-maximizing perspective.
9. A certain percentage of behavior is purely altruistic/not involving financial incentives (for example anonymous donations). This percentage is independent of the opportunity cost, i.e. the financial incentives offered to deviate. The remaining percentage of decisions is affected by a mix of intrinsic

and financial incentives, and hence varies with the financial incentives offered.

10. There is a positive relationship between the behavior of leaders/first movers and followers in the environmental context.

These experimental results offer insights into conservation behavior and offer several suggestions for environmental policy makers:

1. Incorporating non-pecuniary incentives and soft nudges into the conservation policy narrative. For example, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service webpage on the Conservation Stewardship Program and the factsheet is mostly devoted to the explanation of payments and eligibility. It is not clear why an agricultural producer should participate if not for the money. It would be beneficial to redesign the page, the factsheet, and other communications about the program to outline the challenges and the environmental benefits of the program with *concrete* cases (including pictures) of improved watersheds, saved habitats, etc.
2. Complementing financial incentives with empathy nudging. For example, the USDA Farm Service Agency regularly sends out letters to join/renew the contracts for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Along with information about the financial benefits, these letters could include a statement inviting the reader to imagine the state of the land with and without environmental protection, for example along the lines "before making a decision about participation/reenrollment in CRP, please contemplate how your decision will affect ...".
3. Including communities in the coordination of conservation efforts. The USDA service centers and/or extension offices can support agricultural producers to become leaders in conservation in order to provide a good example to other farmers in the region. To more directly expose farmers to this leadership effect, conservation work-groups could be created, including both high and low conservation level producers.

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