

Scientists investigate how best to ask difficult questions

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Asking people whether they are involved in an illegal activity is difficult as those involved may not wish to incriminate themselves. Managing natural resources often depends upon influencing people's behavior; including discouraging illegal activities such as killing protected species.

However, targeting interventions is difficult as rule-breakers may not wish to identify themselves. Scientists at Bangor University's School of the Environment, Natural Resources and Geography used a technique designed for investigating sensitive behaviours to estimate the proportion of South African farmers killing carnivores on their land. They found that nearly 20% of farmers have killed leopards within the last year; a

worryingly high figure given that this species is declining in much of its range.

They also explored whether innocuous questions, such as ‘what proportion of farmers do you think kill leopards on their ranches?’ can be used to identify rule-breakers. They found that a person’s attitude towards the existence of carnivores on their land, and their estimate of the number of their peers they think carry out the illicit activity can indeed be used to identify those involved in illegal behaviors.

Freya St. John, the PhD student who led the study said “Conservation is not just about understanding species and habitats, the threats facing [species](#) in the wild are mostly caused by people so we need ways of understanding human decision making and behaviour’.

The paper is published in the proceedings of the *Royal Society series B*.

More information: *Proc. R. Soc. B* [doi: 10.1098/rspb.2011.1228](https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2011.1228)

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