

Scientists should advance management of behavioral norms

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Researchers should study how people's social and personal norms are influenced by behavior and use their insights to help governments promote pro-environmental actions, a distinguished group of scholars writes in the March issue of *BioScience*. The authors maintain that effective policies induce not only short-term changes in behavior but also long-term changes in norms. More effective management of social norms will be necessary, they write, to persuade the public to accept the inconvenience and expense of many environmental policies.

The interdisciplinary group, led by Ann P. Kinzig of Arizona State University, includes noted environmentalists and ecologists as well as two Nobel Prize winners, the economist Kenneth Arrow and the [political scientist](#) Elinor Ostrom (who died last June). The group argues that although values obviously influence behavior, "what policymakers need to exploit is that behaviors can also influence values." This is how domestic recycling, for example, has become the accepted habit of many people who were at first resentful of having to separate recyclable items.

Governments can influence behaviors by many means, including exhortation, regulation, and financial pressure, as well as in more subtle ways. But ignorance of how behavioral norms change can lead to useless or counterproductive campaigns. There is now a "woeful lack of information" about how policy, behavior, and norms affect each other, Kinzig and her colleagues write.

Anticipating possible objections to an increased role of government in

influencing norms, the authors argue that their recommendations can be carried out in a way that "abides by the principles of representative democracy, including transparency, fairness, and accountability." Moreover, they point out, many other parties in democratic systems act to influence personal and [social norms](#), including charitable organizations, corporations, neighborhood groups, and organized religions.

The article provides an agenda for [life scientists](#) to tackle. It notes, however, that the academic community will have to change its own norms to "increase its capacity to work with policymakers." Kinzig and her colleagues suggest, among other things, that social and behavioral scientists should more often be included in assessments of environmental trends, to ensure their plausibility.

Provided by American Institute of Biological Sciences

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