

Power of the pen: constructing social-ecological narratives of coral reefs in news media and links to policy action

Award Year:

2018

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Associated Program:

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Coral reefs play a critical role in the livelihoods and well-being of some of the world's most vulnerable populations; but these important ecosystems are threatened by both local and global anthropogenic stressors. Despite considerable attention to coral reef degradation, reefs continue to be in rapid decline worldwide. The emergence of conservation culturomics, a field that analyzes large bodies of digital texts to assess cultural attitudes and trends, presents opportunities to identify and understand themes that comprise the socio-political dialogue on coral reefs. By examining this dialogue, we aim to engage with this burgeoning field and explore hypothesized feedbacks between media, policy, and conservation status. Specifically, we ask whether, and how, different discursive themes in the popular news media affect reef-related policy by reflecting or altering both public and scientific understandings of reef issues. We propose integrating three case studies from around the world into a conservation culturomics approach. We will synthesize long-term reef monitoring data, a corpus of thousands of local and global media articles, and policy and management actions into a single analytical framework to assess direct and indirect linkages that may influence conservation efforts in unexpected ways. Our replicable, standardized approach takes advantage of new technology and an untapped data source—news coverage of reefs—to draw novel conclusions about how culture interacts with science and policy to affect reef conservation. By identifying the themes with the greatest potential to spark policy change, our proposed research could inform how reef conservation advocates utilize public narrative and design effective media outreach.

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