



NAMPAN

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Can optimism help your ocean conservation and management work?

By Sarah Carr, MEAM editor

So here are some examples of notices in my e-mail inbox^[1] this morning: A study links orcas' failed pregnancies to scarce food. Seafood is getting less nutritious. Ten percent of fish caught in oceans gets dumped. The plastic pollution crisis 'rivals climate change'.

I imagine some of your e-mail inboxes, Twitter feeds, Facebook updates, newspaper headlines, etc. look similar. And none of this is to mention the current direction of domestic environmental policies in my home country of the US right now.

So what is a newsletter editor whose job it is to read all of this (or an ocean conservation and management practitioner whose job it is to *deal* with this) to do to stay mentally afloat?

To find out, MEAM interviewed an all-star roster of ocean optimists this month – two founders and the coordinator of the Ocean Optimism movement (more on this movement later in this article) as well as two psychologists/conservation behavior researchers who study conservation optimism. We learned a lot about what makes them tick as well as psychological research as to why ocean optimism can benefit ocean conservationists and managers – both in their day-to-day decision making as well as in how they communicate with the public. (Spoiler alert: Negative messaging does not seem to work nearly as well as positive messaging.)

We also get some other viewpoints on this topic. We hear from Rowan Jacobsen, an independent science writer and author of one of the most talked-about (and shared) popular articles about the environment last year – the obituary for the Great Barrier Reef that appeared in *Outside* magazine. We learn how the obituary came about, what impacts it seems to have had on public discussion about the health of the Great Barrier Reef, and whether he would write the same article again knowing what he knows now. Finally, we hear from our contributing editor Tundi Agardy about the benefits of worry – because there are definitely some benefits to that as well.

Are you an optimist?

Find out how optimistic you are AND contribute to research into the role of optimism in conservation by taking this this simple psychometric test, the revised life orientation test (LOT-R), for optimism. This test is being administered by Sarah Papworth, a senior lecturer in conservation biology at Royal Holloway University of London and one of our MEAM interviewees this month (see below).

Take the test and let us know how you think optimism (or pessimism) has influenced your conservation work in the Comment box below.

Interview with Elisabeth Whitebread: Provide people with ways they can help overcome obstacles

Editor's note: Elisabeth Whitebread is a campaigner at Greenpeace and a co-founder of the Ocean Optimism movement. She

can be contacted via e-mail at elisabeth.whitebread@greenpeace.org and on Twitter @ElisabethJane.

MEAM: How do you define optimism personally and for your work?

Whitebread: Optimism for me is about trying to see the positives in every situation. Although this can sometimes be a challenge given the scale of the problems that we face, I have found that taking an optimistic approach to my work not only increases my resilience in the face of bad news, it also helps me to see different sides of the story and understand differing opinions about the best way forward.

MEAM: Why should marine conservation and management professionals be optimistic about their work? What are the benefits? Alternatively, what are the downsides of being pessimistic?

Whitebread: There is abundant evidence to suggest that sharing good news and presenting a positive outlook not only makes us feel happier ourselves but is also a key component to inspiring others and motivating them to get involved. In my work as an environmental campaigner, when presenting people with a problem, it's also really important to present them with a solution. Otherwise people feel helpless and will end up turning away from your message since it only brings them concern with no remedy. Experts (e.g., political ecologist Ingolfer Blühdorn, environmental educator and Ocean Optimism co-founder Elin Kelsey) have even suggested that increased feelings of despair about the environment can fuel hyper-consumerism, which is probably not what environmentalists want!

One of my fellow Ocean Optimism co-founders, Nancy Knowlton of the Smithsonian Institution, described how she watched as enthusiastic students gradually crumpled before her eyes over the course of a week's introduction to marine science. In her words: "An entire generation of scientists has now been trained to describe, in ever greater and more dismal detail, the death of the ocean".

Rather than constantly depressing the audiences who we are trying to reach, we should be providing them with positive solutions to the problems that we're working on and ways in which they can help us to overcome the obstacles that exist. Indeed, research suggests that positive emotions can lead to increases in creativity, openness to new ideas, and cooperation – all aptitudes that we'll need to solve the problems that our marine environment faces. The more people we can encourage to feel positively about the work that we're doing, the higher the likelihood that we'll succeed in motivating a movement of people to stand up for the marine environment.

MEAM: Are there any dangers in being optimistic about the current state and trajectory of ocean health? For example, is it possible that optimistic communications will not adequately convey the urgency of a conservation threat or problem?

Whitebread: Ocean Optimism is not about pretending that everything is going swimmingly for the marine environment. It is neither credible – nor an effective tool for mobilization – to simply ignore the problems that our oceans face. However, it is an error to think that the acquisition of knowledge, conveyed to policy makers or the general public, will necessarily lead to action. Repeatedly telling people, in increasingly desperate tones, how difficult things are and how urgent the situation is, could in fact have precisely the opposite effect to the one we intend as people switch off from our message.

We need both. We need to let people know about the specific problems that we are trying to address as well as the potential solutions and the ways they can help. In this way, we needn't gloss over the state of ocean health, but should always be thinking about how we can highlight causes for hope.

MEAM: Can you provide some examples of how optimism has inspired change in the marine conservation and management field?

Whitebread: The idea that hope is a necessary ingredient for success in conservation science is beginning to catch on, and the success of the Ocean Optimism movement is good evidence of this (read more about the movement below). While the various strands of the Ocean Optimism movement are focused on how we communicate about our work, the point is that in adjusting our communications we will bring about a step-change in interest and engagement from decision makers and the general public that should allow us to succeed in our conservation efforts. As we all know, impact on the ground can take a little time in conservation, but the evidence suggests that if we communicate with hope, we should be more likely to reach the outcomes we seek.

The Ocean Optimism movement and optimism in the field

The Ocean Optimism movement launched in June 2014 as [#OceanOptimism](#), a Twitter-based initiative to share inspiring stories about the marine environment and successful marine conservation initiatives. Since its inception, the [#OceanOptimism](#) hashtag has reached over 80 million Twitter accounts. An Ocean Optimism [website](#) and [Instagram](#) account have followed. And in April of this year, optimism events were held around the world – including the [Conservation Optimism Summit in London, England](#) and the [Earth Optimism Summit in Washington, DC](#). The movement seeks to empower marine conservation and management by reframing conversations – moving them away from negative messaging that can lead to hopelessness

and apathy and towards positive action that can result in progress.

Optimism in the field

When asked about specific outcomes that can be attributed to the Ocean Optimism movement, co-founder Nancy Knowlton, the Sant Chair for Marine Science at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, said that attributing specific outcomes in marine conservation and management directly to the Ocean Optimism movement is difficult. According to Knowlton, the primary outcome of the movement is "inspiring people, especially young people, to get involved. People learn about successes when they are prominently featured and then reach out to leaders from these ventures to learn more. So in the end, you have more people contributing to ocean conservation with better information."

Marianne Teoh, coordinator for the Ocean Optimism movement and a conservation project manager for Fauna & Flora International in Cambodia, shared this example of ocean optimism in action from Cambodia.

"Cambodia is a country with a fragile and threatened coastline facing ever increasing pressures. A coastal collective of community fishery groups, government teams, NGOs, and business owners has been formed to develop realistic conservation solutions to protect habitats, species, and livelihoods within the nation's largest island archipelago. The conservation approach has not been through fear and law but rather through communicating what can be done, what can be saved, and how local leadership can drive this change. This hope and collaborative action has empowered local fishery teams and engaged all levels of government in Cambodia, leading to the development of the nation's first large-scale marine protected area – the Koh Rong Archipelago Marine Fisheries Management Area.

"As a conservation manager, my optimism comes from the local team I have the pleasure of working with in Cambodia. The collaborative team from Fauna & Flora International and the government's Fisheries Administration are determined in their efforts – in the face of significant challenges – to empower both local communities and local government in marine conservation. Their approach has been practical, without complaint and driven by hope. Their optimism and drive is inspiring and makes every challenge worth overcoming."

Future of the movement

So what is next for the Ocean Optimism movement? Knowlton says there is a desire to do another large summit in 2020 around the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. In the meantime, they will support summits in other places around the world and continue telling success stories. According to Knowlton, "I have been collecting marine conservation success stories for years and, still, hardly a day goes by that I don't learn about a new one. So if I learn about new ones all the time, the number of untold successes still out there must be enormous."

Nancy Knowlton can be contacted at knowlton@si.edu, and Marianne Teoh can be contacted at marianne.teoh@fauna-flora.org.

Interview with Sarah Papworth: Current research suggests that the benefits of optimism outweigh the downsides

Editor's note: Sarah Papworth is a senior lecturer in conservation biology at Royal Holloway University of London. Her research laboratory Conservation and Behaviour conducts worldwide field-based research to understand human and primate behavior and apply this knowledge to conservation science. She is currently studying how optimism impacts decision making in conservation. She can be contacted at Sarah.Papworth@rhul.ac.uk.

MEAM: How do you define optimism personally and for your work?

Papworth: For me, being optimistic is about seeing the glass as half full – taking a positive attitude. In my work, I've been looking at two different types of optimism. The first is dispositional optimism, which is the type of optimism I just mentioned – a general tendency to expect positive outcomes. This is a personality trait that is relatively stable over time, indicating some people are just generally more optimistic than others. In my work, I've measured dispositional optimism using a standardized survey called the [Revised Life Orientation Test](#). (Take the test [here](#).)

The second type of optimism is situational optimism. This is how optimistic people are about a specific circumstance – for example, how optimistic somebody is about whether we can prevent the extinction of the polar bear.

MEAM: Why should marine conservation and management professionals be optimistic about their work? What are the benefits? Alternatively, what are the downsides of being pessimistic?

Papworth: In general, current research seems to suggest that the benefits of optimism outweigh the downsides. Although a

lot of the research on dispositional optimism has looked at the effect of optimism on health, there are a lot of behaviors we know are associated with being optimistic. For example, when there is uncertainty about the future, optimists are better at making future plans and setting goals. They are also better at switching to a new strategy if things aren't working.

So for marine conservation and management professionals, this might mean that optimists can identify when the current management strategy isn't working and switch to a new, more appropriate strategy. There are some potential downsides to being optimistic, though. For example, since optimists tend to expect positive outcomes, they have higher expectations from risky ventures.

MEAM: Are there any dangers in being optimistic about the current state and trajectory of ocean health? For example, is it possible that optimistic communications will not adequately convey the urgency of a conservation threat or problem?

Papworth: I think there's a big difference between saying "everything is OK" and "we can make a difference", and the second one of these is definitely a better reflection of what optimism is. The difference between optimists and pessimists is in their expectations for the future. I think we can make a much bigger difference to the current state and trajectory of ocean health if we recognize that there is a problem but also believe that we can do something to change that trajectory. Even if we don't manage to achieve everything we hoped for, if we take a pessimistic outlook, we might not even get started trying to make those changes in the first place.

MEAM: Can you provide some examples of how optimism has inspired change in the marine conservation and management field?

Papworth: I really like the Twitter handle @OceanOptimism – they started off as the hashtag #OceanOptimism, which has now been seen by tens of millions of Twitter users. I think changing the conversation from problems to potential solutions is a really important step for a more positive outlook and more positive change to tackle the problems that the marine environment faces.

Successful ocean conservation and management is about changing human behavior: Lessons from marketing

So if messaging that focuses almost exclusively on ocean problems is not effective at getting people to change their behavior, what is? In February 2016, MEAM heard from three marketing experts about what conservation and management practitioners can do to get people to change their behavior – whether it is ending behavior with negative environmental impacts (such as poaching), encouraging positive behaviors (such as the purchase of sustainably sourced seafood), or convincing skeptical or disinterested stakeholders to participate in a collaborative ocean planning processes.

Here are just a few of the great take-home messages and tips from the article:

1. **Ensure target groups are at the center of all outreach messages, activities, and campaigns** “It is common for conservation and management actions to be framed around the values of those conducting or sponsoring them rather than around the values of the groups that are most affected or most central to success ... To be able to get your message across, you need to really understand your target audience and be able to see the issue through their values and within their social and cultural context.”
2. **Connect with people around their relationship to the resource to be protected** “Is it a source of jobs for the community? Is local seafood important to the region? Are there beloved coastal areas that will be addressed in the plan? ... [Then] identify the problem(s) your work is designed to address in terms that will be familiar to your audience. What are the *specific* threats, and how will they impact people’s lives (especially their plates and pocketbooks)? Finally, explain how EBM will help solve that problem and invite people to get involved.”
3. **Start where your audience is, not where you want them to be** “Your objective should be to bring your stakeholder groups with you on the ‘project journey’ to the outcomes for which you have planned. Find out what they know and understand and listen carefully to what they have to say. Then design your project with them as active participants, not bystanders.”

Read the full article [“Start where your audience is, not where you want them to be’: What EBM and MSP practitioners can \(and should\) learn from marketing”](#).

View a webinar [“To Target Everyone Is to Target No One’: What Social Marketing Can Offer Conservation and Management”](#) by Diogo Verissimo of Rare and Georgia State University on this topic.

Interview with Niki Harré: Act as if people are on your side

Editor's note: Niki Harré is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Auckland. Her research and teaching

focus on social and community psychology and the psychology of sustainability, including sustainable communities and social and political activism. In 2007, she co-edited the book Carbon Neutral by 2020: How New Zealanders Can Tackle Climate Change, and in 2011, she published Psychology for a Better World: Strategies to Inspire Sustainability. She can be contacted at n.harre@auckland.ac.nz.

Editor's note: For more insight into the psychological and neurological basis of what Niki Harré discusses below, I highly recommend watching her YouTube video [Psychology for a Better World](#) (15 minutes, 21 seconds).

MEAM: How do you define optimism personally and for your work?

Harré: Optimism is the attitude that it is worth attempting to create a world better aligned with human and ecological flourishing. I have extraordinary faith in human nature. All around me I see people acting out of a desire to love and connect with others. I see them responding to the beauty of our planet. I also see people repelled and ashamed by acts of violence and destruction. Yes, people do terrible things to each other and the natural world, but I feel that there is a deeper part in all of us that yearns for life – and not just for ourselves. While I cannot “prove” this directly, there is a great deal of evidence that people flourish when they are connected to others and to nature. And like all living creatures we strive to flourish. I am simply not convinced that people are essentially self-interested – that is, that they attempt above all to acquire goods for themselves and their families. When we find people scrambling to succeed and brutalizing the natural world as they go, I think this is a signal that society has gone wrong. Under the right social conditions almost everyone responds well – that is, they become respectful of life. Unfortunately, our current society is distorted by the forces of power, competition and bureaucracy – what I call finite games – that have become disconnected from what matters most to us as human beings.

MEAM: Why should marine conservation and management professionals be optimistic about their work? What are the benefits? Alternatively, what are the downsides of being pessimistic?

Harré: As a psychologist, I suggest marine conservation and management professionals can be optimistic because their work promotes the flourishing of life forms and biodiverse ecosystems. All work that is focused on flourishing is good work and people everywhere recognize that. Of course, this does not mean that such work goes smoothly – you don't need me to tell you that! But, if you are able to, I recommend you act “as if” people are on your side. It is not about telling people why they “should” care more about our oceans, it is about working from the assumption that we are in this together.

I also recommend that you act consistently with what you are attempting to promote in your organizational practice. People are strongly attracted to integrity in others, and they struggle to understand intellectual messages that are not aligned with people's actions. I pay a lot of attention to the food at events I run – and attempt to avoid excessive packaging, offer vegan and vegetarian options when possible (sometimes this is almost impossible due to the limitations of caterers and cafes!), and favor local products. I certainly never provide imported fruit – why would I when we always have seasonal fruit in New Zealand and I advocate for more localized food networks? If you are seen to treasure the oceans, people will listen much more closely to your message.

It is also very risky to be constantly negative about the state of the world. Not only does this make people feel helpless and scared, but it also keeps alive the idea that people don't care. And when you tell people that they are a useless lot, guess what? They become useless! Without being inauthentic, I think it is important to try and focus on what is possible – again, because people are essentially oriented toward “life”.

MEAM: You were a keynote speaker at the Conservation Optimism Summit held in London April 2017. Can you share some of the most interesting insights you gained into conservation optimism at the summit?

Harré: It was a fantastic event with a wonderful range of people working in conservation projects all over the world. I was very impressed with how many positive stories there are in the conservation world. Conservation is a very messy business and it is always complicated by the socio-political climate of the region concerned. But, by working alongside people and persisting, a lot can be done. I don't think I heard one story that was framed as a “battle”. The breakthroughs came when local people and policy makers were able to figure out a way, together, to preserve the natural landscape concerned. In the end, I want to be in a world where people get up in the morning and attempt to preserve what they love – be it turtles or kauri [tree native to New Zealand] or human creativity. We may get through these difficult times as a species or we may not. But I am not sure what better way to live, here and now, than to keep doing what we do!

Further reading on these topics:

- [“Start where your audience is, not where you want them to be”: What EBM and MSP practitioners can \(and should\) learn from marketing](#)
- [“To Target Everyone Is to Target No One”: What Social Marketing Can Offer Conservation and Management”](#)
- [Will optimistic stories get people to care about nature?](#)
- [Ocean Optimism website](#)
- [Doom and gloom won't save the world](#)
- [The Psychology of Optimism and Pessimism: Theories and Research Findings](#)

- Common Cause for Nature: Values and Frames in Conservation

[i] These updates are coming from OpenChannels.org. If you wish to stay abreast of current news and be similarly depressed, you can sign up at <https://www.openchannels.org/about/manage-your-notifications>.

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