Dr. Kathleen A. Blanchard

Recent increases in populations of seabirds that were depleted severely during the middle of the twentieth century demonstrate the efficacy of conservation strategies that work within the context of local culture. Along the North Shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in Quebec, Canada, direct exploitation and disturbance of breeding seabirds caused severe declines for several species between 1955 and 1978, including 84 percent and 76 percent declines for Razorbill and Atlantic Puffin, respectively. Significant reductions also occurred for populations of Common Eider (Somateria molissima), Common Murre (Uria aalge), and Black Guillemot (Cygus grylle).

Research by the Quebec-Labrador Foundation, a nonprofit conservation organization, into root causes of the population declines along a 400-km stretch of coast revealed conflicts between conventional enforcement of migratory bird regulations and cultural norms. A household survey conducted in 1980 of the approximately 6,000 residents found that more than 70 percent of households engaged in illegal harvest of seabirds, 95 percent considered the harvest acceptable for reasons of food, and the vast majority did not know the legal status of many species. The Quebec Lower North Shore is a remote, isolated region, accessible only by boat or airplane. The harvest stemmed from the traditional semi-subsistence lifestyle of both English- and French-speaking residents, plus a small population of Montagnais Indians. Residents valued wild birds and eggs as sources of fresh food and the preparation of a meal of birds as an important tradition. The harvest of seabirds was linked to cultural norms and no longer served vital food needs.

Based on this research, and in-depth consultation with residents, the management goal was to increase populations of nesting seabirds while preserving the integrity of the local culture. There were two broad educational goals: (1) increased conservation knowledge, attitudes, and behavior among residents; and (2) greater local involvement in the management of seabird populations. These goals presumed that understanding and participation were needed in order to change attitudes and practices toward wildlife. The educational objectives included (1) to teach practical seabird biology and conservation principles; (2) to encourage and enhance the culture’s own conservation ethic; and (3) to train residents for leadership roles in conservation.

Many strategies were developed over 25 years, in response to research findings, yearly evaluation, public input, and available funding. They included school and community programs, local training, radio and television documentaries, ecotourism development, poster contests, and wildlife clubs. The cornerstone activity was an experiential conservation camp program for children and teenagers, conducted at one of the seabird sanctuaries located several kilometers offshore. The program sparked discussions among children and their parents over long-held practices that had been disturbing seabirds on their breeding grounds. Rather than teach the need to stop hunting, the program fostered the traditional belief that natural resources should not be overexploited. Children played an important role in showing parents that, through better understanding, seabird populations could be conserved for future generations to enjoy. The conservation message spread from families to throughout the communities.

By 1988, the strategies were successful in achieving the education objectives and in contributing to the attainment of the overall management goal. From 1977 to 1988, most populations of breeding seabirds on sanctuaries along the North Shore increased. Increases were greatest among Razorbill (3,600 to 7,000 individuals), Common Murre (10,200 to 26,000), and Atlantic Puffin (15,000 to 35,100). Populations continued to increase through 1996, when the last census was reported.
Environmental Case Study
The Conservation of Seabirds along the North Shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence

The results of a follow-up household survey in 1988 showed several significant improvements in knowledge about wildlife regulations, attitudes toward hunting and regulations, and levels of illegal harvest. Another survey taken in 1995 revealed continued changes that favored conservation. For example, the average number of birds reported as needed by a single family each year dropped from 44 in 1981 to 24 in 1988, to 14 in 1995.

The increased productivity among seabird populations would not have been possible without the marked reduction in illegal harvest, which in turn resulted from the education and enforcement program. Thus the recovery of seabird populations depended on a combination of education and enforcement, which appealed to local citizens’ conservation values and desire to participate.

The project along the North Shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence recognized that within the local culture were deep-seated conservation values that needed to be expressed and enhanced. It took cooperative work among residents of the coast, the Quebec-Labrador Foundation, and the Canadian Wildlife Service to help people become more aware of those values and to empower them to participate in the management of their own natural resources.

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