

What makes them follow the rules: the case of Ostional turtle egg harvesters

Understanding the reasons why some people are more prone to break the rules than others reveal some of the challenges that local people and policy makers must overcome in order to let local institutions endure.

BY RÓGER MADRIGAL – DECEMBER, 2012



Community based approaches could become a feasible alternative to regulate turtle egg harvesting and to involve local people in the protection of turtles. However, its success depends on the compliance of rules devised for this purpose. The factors that trigger the motivation to comply over time with these rules might be linked to economic incentives, the perception of rule legitimacy, moral issues and social norms, among other important elements. We analyzed these issues in Ostional National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR), located in the pacific coast of Costa Rica,

one of the largest olive ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) nesting beaches in the world. After considerable conflicts between local dwellers and the Costa Rican government, turtle egg harvesting is legally allowed to a community organization. This community organization needs to comply with certain harvesting thresholds monitored by the central government.

Most locals in Ostional village are members of this organization, which has sufficient autonomy to devise and enforce different rules that aim to coordinate collective action activities related to eggs harvesting and packing, maintenance of the nesting beach, and protecting the hatchlings. These rules compel individuals to provide labor and monetary sanctions are applied to those who do not comply. Compliance with these rules is easily monitored, including social control (everybody observes if somebody comes late for a task or does not show up at all). Despite these local arrangements, the individual degree of compliance with these rules varies. Some individuals have a perfect record of fulfillment of obligations while others show erratic patterns of compliance behavior.

In this study we found that the degree by which local harvesters obey some rules depends on their economic dependency from the income generated egg sales. Since infractions represent an income reduction from these sales, harvesters with fewer

Key Points

- Normative and economic factors are associate to compliance
- Incentives for non-compliance with rules represent a significant threat for the permanence of the actual co-management institution.
- Women recognize the flow of benefits depends on the permanence or success of the project. This is intrinsically linked to the compliance with existing rules.

RESEARCH BRIEF

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sources of income, other than the commercialization of eggs, have strong incentives to comply with some rules, especially those where noncompliance represents a high cost. However, we identified other factors that positively explain adherence to some rules, such as the individual perception on rule legitimacy. In addition, we found that as age increases, the tendency of individuals to obey some rules increases as well. One explanation for this result might be based on the fact that older people are the ones who invested, some decades ago, a lot of time and effort on having the approval of the government to harvest and design the actual set of rules.



These factors might have influenced the development of a sense of ownership and responsibility that positively affect compliance with the set of rules that senior members crafted directly.

In some cases, we also found that being a woman was a good predictor of compliance. This might be linked to local aspects of local culture as some activities might be perceived as a duty for women. In addition, in many of our interviews, women did recognize that the egg harvesting project provide them with many benefits besides a significant monetary retribution, it also provides self-esteem, empowerment, and economic independency. This suggests that women recognize that this flow of benefits depends on the permanence or success of the project, which is intrinsically linked to the compliance with existing rules.

Conclusions

Understanding the reasons why some people are more likely to break the rules than others reveal some of the challenges that local people and policy makers must overcome in order to let local institutions endure. Our study suggests that some internal and external forciers generate strong incentives for non-compliance with the actual set of rules and hence, represent a significant threat for the permanence of the actual co-management institution for turtle eggs use and protection. Which type of incentives must be set to promote a higher motivation for compliance is a question of paramount importance for policy makers and for future scientific research.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This summarizes an extensive research conducted in Ostional during 2010 and 2011. For details see further reading.

FURTHER READING

2013. Madrigal, R., Schlüter, A., & López, M. C. What makes them follow the rules? Empirical evidence from turtle egg harvesters in Costa Rica. *Marine Policy*, 37, 270–277. doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2012.05.009

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