

Flagships for the future?

For many years conservationists have relied on attracting the attention, and donations, of a potentially fickle public by publicizing the threats to the animals and plants they care most strongly about. In many cases these species have been high-profile large mammals and birds. The role of mammals as 'flagship species' for wider conservation action is exemplified by species such as pandas, tigers and whales where, by implication, protection of these species will also protect a broad habitat and a wide range of other animals. In addition, advertising the threats to these species also acts to increase general awareness among the public of the true issues facing our planet and brings home the growing crisis with regard to biodiversity loss.

In recent years the success of the 'flagship approach' has been questioned, and there has been a blurring in the use of this term (see Caro & O'Doherty, 1999; Leader-Williams & Dublin, 2000). There is recognition that single-species conservation techniques are too frequently used as the mechanism to protect those species labelled as 'flagships', thus reducing the potential benefits to other species in the same habitats. A clear demonstration of this comes from the case of the giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*), whereby removal of individuals from the wild, along with a primary focus on captive breeding in previous decades, detracted attention from the conservation of their biodiversity-rich mountain forest habitat. Research has since exploded many of the previous myths about the biology of this species and the current situation of site-based protection and community involvement is proving highly successful for maintaining panda populations (Lu *et al.*, 2000).

Other problems have been noted with the current use of 'flagship species'. Species presented as 'flagships' appear to be more often selected for their inherent public appeal, rather than their ecological role and potential to ensure protection of a wider group of fauna and flora. Might it not be more appropriate to determine the purpose of a project first and select your flagship later, on the basis of ecological role, as well as charisma? In addition, when identifying 'flagship species' the audience is often considered to be western or international. In some cases such an approach may be at odds with the values held by local people, and large mammals (particularly carnivores) may rarely be effective ambassadors for conservation to those people most affected by such projects (see Entwistle & Stephenson, 2000). If 'flagships' are to have effective

symbolism to a range of audiences, a consideration of local cultural values for different species will be essential within the selection of flagships.

While, in general, the public is more likely to react to the threat facing elephants (as demonstrated by the reaction to the recent discussions at the CITES Conference of Parties) than that facing smaller species such as rodents or even reptiles, this does not have to be the case in all events. Indeed, 'non-traditional' flagships may play an important role for conservation, particularly where more traditionally charismatic species are absent, or where they build on existing local cultural references or practical values. For example, on the island of Bermuda the Critically Endangered endemic skink (*Eumeces longirostris*) has become a *cause célèbre*, with a high level of response from householders asked to report sightings, and promotion of this species by a local soft drink manufacturer on their cans. Also taxa such as bats have proved effective flagships in areas where there are strong cultural associations with these animals, or where they play an important role in the diet. This demonstrates that even seemingly less-charismatic species may appear appealing if awareness-raising and educational activities are targeted at appropriate audiences.

Such examples illustrate the potential for development of novel flagship species, and emphasize that we should not be governed solely by what is currently 'in favour'. While membership surveys of conservation organizations may re-emphasize the importance of large mammal conservation, surely this reflects not only personal preference, but also the legacy of campaigns promoting the conservation of these very species? Perhaps the onus lies on conservation organizations to broaden the range of species they promote as 'flagships', and to develop further programmes that use trees, frogs or insects as important symbols, alongside the ever-present mammals and birds.

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