

Qatar University Life Science Symposium 2016: Biodiversity, Sustainability and Climate Change, with Perspectives from Qatar

Bridging a gulf between environmental attitudes and behavior: Assessment of motivating factors for the youth in Qatar

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ABSTRACT

To this day, there is a dearth of published research on environmental awareness, attitudes and behaviour in the Arabian Gulf, and there is no systematic data regarding the value people place on the environment. Understanding the operating social and political context, community values, and potential incentives in the face of environmental change is crucial for designing appropriate intervention measures and informing environmental policy of the region (Moran, 2010; Schultz & Kaiser, 2012). By narrowing the focus down to university-educated youth in Qatar, this paper aims to bridge the gap between reported environmental attitudes and actual behaviour by evaluating different factors that could motivate the younger generation to become more involved in Qatar's environmental conservation efforts and lead to a more sustainable social and economic growth. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is employed as the main conceptual framework, hypothesising attitudes, perceived behavioural control and social norms as predictive of pro-environmental behaviour. For the purposes of this study, the model was expanded to consider childhood activities in nature, education, and proximity to an environmental issue as additional factors that are deemed relevant for predicting pro-environmental behaviour. To test the hypothesised correlation between the different factors and environmental behaviour, a close-ended questionnaire was administered to 299 Qatar University undergraduate students in May 2016, with series of questions regarding their time spent in nature, environmental attitudes, social pressure to behave pro-environmentally and whether they feel in control over their actions. Statistical analyses of the gathered data revealed partial applicability of the theoretical model for understanding environmental behaviour, with several factors of the original TPB model (namely attitudes, positive social norms and internal locus of control) as well as supplementary factors (childhood time in nature and university-level education) emerging as significant predictors of pro-environmental behaviour. In addition, analysis of open-ended questions revealed religion and governmental incentives as additional factors that have the potential to motivate students into more pro-environmental behaviour. A general lack of awareness was reported by the respondents, who often blamed ignorance for people's unwillingness to act more pro-environmentally in their daily lives. Although the respondents held overwhelmingly pro-environmental attitudes, their willingness to engage in pro-environmental behaviour was not as evident, due to several factors at play. The paper concludes by suggesting ways how those factors can be utilised to help shape the environmental behaviour of younger generations; however, it also warns that only by bridging the gulf between academic research and policy-making can the gulf between stated environmental values and actual behaviour be truly overpassed.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/qproc.2016.qulss.26>

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