

A man wearing a blue polo shirt and a grey baseball cap is leaning over a large orange plastic basket, sorting through fruit. He is outdoors, with a wooden structure and a green hillside in the background. In the foreground, there are more baskets containing yellow and green fruits.

Behavior Change for Nature: A Toolkit for Practitioners

Moving beyond awareness to action.

Based on research by Rare and The Behavioural Insights Team.

Biodiversity loss is driven by millions of daily human decisions.

THE GLOBAL STAKES

60%

DECLINE

in vertebrate species
(1970–2014)



90%

OF CORAL REEFS

projected to be
wiped out by 2050



40%

OF FORESTS

converted to crop
and pastureland



THE BEHAVIORAL ROOT

These trends are the aggregate result of individual choices:



What a farmer plants
(e.g., monoculture
vs. agroforestry)



What a consumer buys
(e.g., wild meat,
sustainable timber)



How a fisher fishes
(e.g., dynamite fishing
vs. hook-and-line)



Conservation is not just about biology; it is about managing human behavior.

The limits of the “Rational Actor” model.

For a century, conservation has relied on three primary levers, assuming that if people know better, they will do better.

Legislation & Regulation

If we ban it, they will stop.

Flaw: Difficult to enforce;
creates black markets.



Material Incentives

If we pay them, they will do it.

Flaw: Can crowd out intrinsic
motivation; hard to sustain.



Information & Awareness

If they know the facts, they will care.

Flaw: The Value-Action Gap.



“Information alone is a weak route to behavior change... Knowledge simply doesn’t equate to action.”

Shifting the Paradigm: Three insights from behavioral science

Conventional Wisdom	Behavioral Science Reality
 Conscious, deliberate, and rational choices.	 Non-conscious & Automatic (System 1).
 Driven by internal motives (beliefs, values).	 Driven by Context & Setting (Choice Architecture).
 Change attitudes to change behavior. → 	 Target Behavior directly (Attitudes often follow). 

A Toolkit for Behavior Change



1. MOTIVATE the Change

Harness incentives,
emotions, and
biases.



2. SOCIALIZE the Change

Leverage social
norms and peer
pressure.



3. EASE the Change

Remove friction and
build supportive
environments.

This framework offers 15 specific strategies to use when regulations are impossible to enforce and information campaigns fall short.

LEVER 1: MOTIVATE the Change

We don't need to promote conservation solely on the merits of conservation. We can harness powerful self-interests: profit, convenience, security, status, and enjoyment.

1. Leverage **positive emotions** (Pride > Guilt)
2. Frame messaging to personal **values**
3. Personalize and **humanize** messages
4. Harness **cognitive biases**
5. Design behaviorally-informed **incentives**



STOP SELLING GUILT. START SELLING PRIDE.

STRATEGY: LEVERAGE POSITIVE EMOTIONS.

Fear and guilt lead to avoidance. Pride, joy, and gratitude drive engagement.



Rare Pride Campaigns turn local species into community icons.

STRATEGY: FRAME TO PERSONAL VALUES.

Don't sell "saving the planet."
Sell profit, efficiency, or status.

CASE STUDY: 'THE STRENGTH OF CHI'

The campaign in Vietnam reframed rhino horn use from a "cruel" act to a "crutch for the unsuccessful," leveraging the business value of self-made success.

Make incentives smarter, not just bigger.

Strategy: Design Behaviorally-Informed Incentives

Humans overweight small probabilities. We focus on the size of the prize, not the odds.



Case Study: The Receipt Lottery in China. By printing lottery numbers on receipts, the government turned tax compliance into a game of chance.

DID YOU KNOW?

Loss Aversion: We feel the pain of a loss twice as much as the pleasure of an equivalent gain.

LEVEEVER 2: SOCIALIZE the Change

Humans are herd animals. We look to others to determine what is “normal” and “right.” Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom proved communities can self-regulate without heavy-handed laws.

6. Promote the desirable norm

7. Harness reciprocity

8. Increase behavioral observability

9. Encourage public commitments

10. Choose the right messenger



The invisible pressure of “The Herd”.

Strategy: Promote the Desirable Norm.

Standard

Help save the environment.

→ Standard reuse rates.

Social

75% of guests in this room reused their towels.

→ Significantly higher reuse rates.

Descriptive Norms:
Tell people what others are actually doing.



Case Study: Hotel Towel Reuse. By highlighting the behavior of others, hotels significantly increased towel reuse rates.

Who says it matters more than what is said.

Strategy: Choose the Right Messenger.

We trust "people like us" more than authorities.



University of Delaware study: Students paired with an in-group mascot were **75%** more likely to achieve clean water goals.

Strategy: Increase Observability.

We behave better when we are watched.



UK Road Tax: Including a photo of the recipient's car (caught on camera) in the fine letter increased payment rates by **20%**.

LEVER 3: EASE the Change

The best way to get someone to do something is to make it easy.
Friction costs—even minor hassles—kill good intentions.

11. Make it easy by removing frictions

12. Provide support with planning

13. Simplify messages

14. Alter the choice setting

15. Use timely moments



Planting made easy: Supporting actions reduces friction.

Remove the friction.

Don't rely on willpower. Rely on design.



The Problem:

Measuring live lobsters is **difficult** and a hassle.

The Solution:

A simple handheld plastic gauge. It turned a **cognitive decision** into a **simple physical check**.

The Result:

One major processor in the Bahamas recorded close to **zero undersized lobsters** for the first time in 40 years.

THE ETHICS OF INFLUENCE.

Nudging bypasses conscious deliberation.
This power requires a strict ethical code.



PRINCIPLE OF WELL-BEING.

The intervention must help humans and nature flourish.



PRINCIPLE OF INTEGRITY.

Never deceive or misrepresent facts.



PRINCIPLE OF EMPOWERMENT.

Increase agency. Help people make the decisions they would make if they had better information.

Influence is unavoidable. The goal is to nudge for good.

From Theory to Practice.

- ✓ 1. **Identify the specific behavior**
(not just the threat).
- ✓ 2. **Diagnose the barrier**
(Motivation? Social pressure? Difficulty?).
- ✓ 3. **Select the strategy**
(Motivate, Socialize, or Ease).
- ✓ 4. **Test and measure the impact.**



*We're only going to make
conservation work when we...
help lots of people change too.*

— Aileen Lee, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.

Influence is unavoidable. The goal is to nudge for good.