Evaluating the Impact of a Pilot Marine Conservation Youth Program in The Bahamas

Evaluación del impacto de un programa piloto juvenil de conservación marina en Las Bahamas

Évaluation de l'impact d'un programme pilote pour les jeunes sur la conservation marine aux Bahamas

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Building capacity to create a pathway for local Bahamian youth to enter marine conservation careers has been one priority for the Perry Institute for Marine Science's Community Conservation Education and Action (CCEA) program since its inception in 2019. In order to facilitate this goal, the Rising Tides program was launched in 2022 on the island of New Providence. Although other marine and environmental education programs exist locally, CCEA's Rising Tides program features curriculum focused on conservation, management, and stewardship; content framed specifically within a Bahamian context; and activities intended on promoting behavior change to support local conservation efforts. Additionally, measuring success based on both outputs and outcomes was prioritized. This project examines the impact of this pilot program on youth participants' marine science knowledge and awareness; environmental attitudes, values, and behaviors; motivational processes; and levels of career support using a mixed-methods evaluation approach.

The main objective of this project was to analyze the extent to which participants exhibit an increase in knowledge of marine conservation and management, shifts in behavior and attitude changes. The methodology included the use of pre and post electronic surveys that were distributed among the participants at the beginning of the sessions and at the last session respectively. Survey questions included participants' current relationship to the environment along with their personal level of environmental responsibility. Several scales based on the Theory of Ecological Attitude and the Social Cognitive Career Theory were adapted. Participants were assessed at several points during the program. Participants were engaged in monthly spring sessions and four weeks during the summer session. At the end of the summer session, the results were collected and analyzed to gauge changes in marine conservation skills, knowledge and stewardship. During the sessions, participants engaged in various skill building activities such as open water dive training, marine species identification, social media awareness campaigns to educate and inform the public as well as environment and habitat education, such as mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs

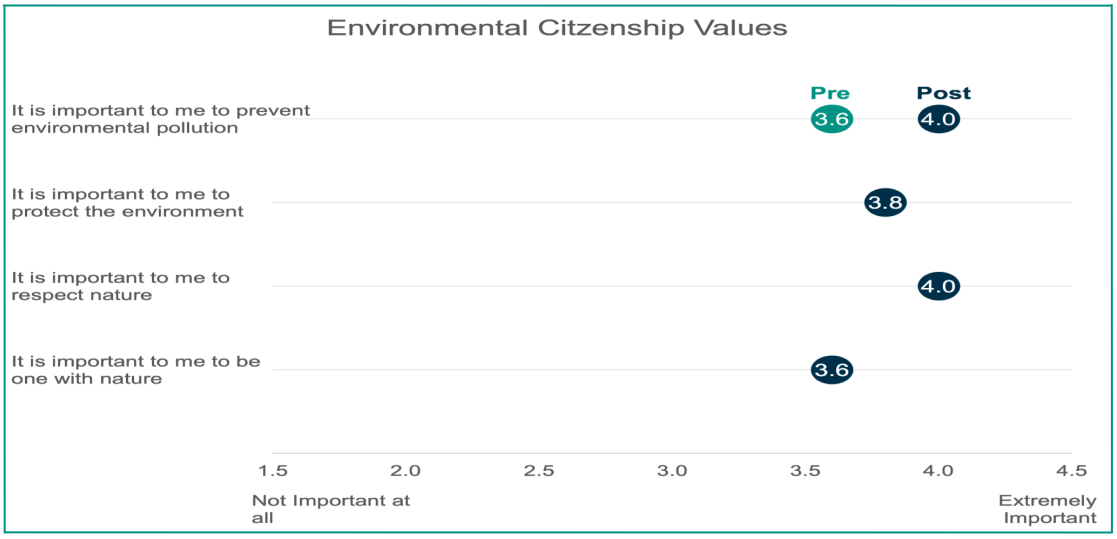

Figure 1. Participants' pre and post responses regarding their Environmental Citizenship Values and their responsibility towards the environment

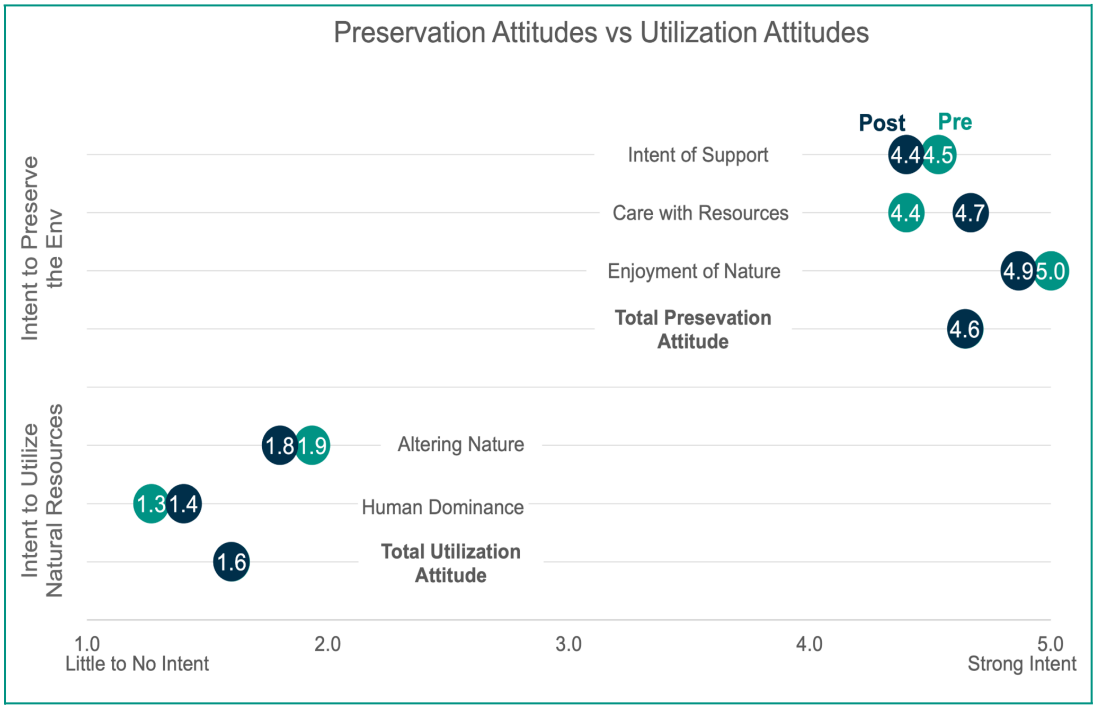

Figure 2: Participants' pre and post responses regarding their attitudes towards preservation and utilization of the environment

The evaluation data demonstrated that students not only gained knowledge and skills in the fields of marine and conservation science, but that they also had positive shifts towards more pro-environmental values, attitudes, and behaviors (Figure 1) . Participants displayed increases in their motivations to persist within the field, and stronger science identities – all indicating a higher commitment to maintaining an interest in and pursuing marine conservation careers. All participants indicated an interest in furthering their knowledge and education in marine conservation through tertiary education as well as internships.

These findings displayed a future opportunity of in-country marine conservation capacity building. Participants indicated an increase of respecting and properly utilizing the environment while preserving it (Figure 2). Findings from this project suggest the importance of a multi-pronged approach to youth-focused capacity building programs that incorporate local knowledge and awareness building in parallel with skill building, promoting attitude and behavioral changes, and creating systems of support. It is expected that this approach will ensure that participants can traverse the field of marine conservation with confidence and sufficient introductory experience.

KEYWORDS: Pilot Program, Marine Conservation, Youth, Bahama

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