

APA's 2007 Annual Convention

Seating more clearly

Conservation psychologists seek to better understand people's relationships to oceans in order to design preservation programs that work.

BY ERIKA PACKARD
Monitor staff

Beaches, whether they're the pristinely white Pebble Beach in Monterrey or the sometimes gritty New Jersey shore, are more than just places to catch a few rays or indulge in sport fishing. They're often a reflection of how a particular coastal community uses and values its entire marine ecosystem, said Daniel Abugattas, an educational and conservation psychology graduate student at Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia in Lima, Peru.

During a session at APA's 2007 Annual Convention, Abugattas and conservation psychologists discussed how they work with biologists, ecologists and environmental scientists to preserve Earth's natural resources.

Although conservation programs are gaining momentum worldwide, until scientists understand how people perceive their ecosystems, it will be hard to create and implement effective programs, said Abugattas.

His home country of Peru is a prime example. Peru—the site of the richest marine ecosystem and the second largest fishing industry in the world—is experiencing an environmental crisis of overfishing and pollution, he said. Faced with trash-strewn beaches and the declining health of marine wildlife, the Peruvian government began a few campaigns to promote pro-environmental behavior. However, officials blindly applied their strategies with no regard



Miraflores Bay, a popular beach in Lima, Peru, is the testing ground for a new psychometric measure aimed at cleaning up the country's beaches.

for the behavioral and psychological relationships between marine ecosystems and people, said Abugattas.

"We tried to change people's habits, but we knew nothing about how they felt about the sea," he said. "Did they use it for food, was it a source of entertainment?"

To fully grasp how Lima's residents relate to the sea, Abugattas designed a new psychometric instrument with funding from the Rufford Small Grants Foundation. The measure asks participants to state how much they identify with statements such as "The sea is so big that human activities have minimum impact on it;" "If Lima's coastline was cleaner, this city would be much nicer;" and "We all have the responsibility of taking care of the sea."

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*Daniel Abugattas
Universidad Peruana
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Abugattas statistically validated the scale in the Miraflores Bay area of Lima, one of the most densely populated and socioeconomically representative beaches in the city, and his preliminary findings reflect the current state of Lima's marine ecosystem.

"Lima is a city that turns its back to the sea, psychologically, behaviorally and even architecturally," he said. "The fact that you can see [beachfront houses completely facing away from the sea] says much about the relationship that this community has built and maintains with their sea." Abugattas, who plans to make his instrument

available to conservation researchers worldwide, has already effected positive change in Peru. He played a role in the success of the country's recent campaign to encourage human consumption of the Peruvian anchovy (*Engraulis ringens*), which organizers hope will also raise awareness of biodiversity and ocean-resource management.

Peru exports 8 million to 10 million tons of anchovies each year, most of which are processed into fish meal for fertilizer or animal feed. Yet, half of Peruvians live in poverty. Though anchovies are plentiful, tasty, healthy

and cheap, Peruvians have stigmatized it as a poor person's food. Improper handling often spoils the fish on the way to market, adding to its unpopularity. Abugattas designed the instrument to assess Peruvians' consumption habits, attitudes and knowledge toward the anchovy as part of the "Primera Semana de la Anchoveta" (First Anchoveta Festival), a campaign to encourage Peruvians to eat the fish.

"We convinced 30 restaurants to invent anchovy dishes, and we even had the Peruvian president eating anchovies," said Abugattas. Ψ

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