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Why Join an Environmental NGO? A Case Study of the Malaysian Nature Society

RUSLI MOHD & SHEIKH ABU BAKAR AHMAD
Faculty of Foresry, Universiti Putra Malaysia
43400 UPM Serdang
Serdang, Selangor

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ABSTRAK

Kekuatan politik sesuatu pertubuhan bukan kerajaan alam sekitar (NGO) bergantung pada banyak faktor termasuklah dana, kepimpinan, kepakaran, sokongan politik dan bilangan keahlian. Jumlah keahlian boleh mempengaruhi kejayaan atau kegagalan pertubuhan tersebut. Lazimnya, keahlian yang banyak bermakna lebih banyak tenaga boleh digunakan untuk aktiviti akar umbi dan juga lebih banyak pendapatan melalui bayaran yuran. Objektif utama kajian ini ialah untuk memahami profil sosioekonomi ahli sesuatu NGO alam sekitar dan mengenal pasti sebab mereka menjadi ahli. Satu borang soal selidik telah dibentuk dan dimuatkan dalam laman web pertubuhan berkenaan selama sebulan. Selain dari itu, ia juga diedarkan semasa Mesyuarat Agong Tahunan pertubuhan berkenaan. Pada akhirnya, sebanyak seratus borang soal selidik yang lengkap diisi telah dipulangkan dan dianalisis. Keputusan menunjukkan sebahagian besar keahlian NGO tersebut terdiri daripada ahli profesional golongan berpendapatan pertengahan yang bekerja di sektor swasta. Mereka mendapat tahu tentang NGO berkenaan daripada rakan yang telah menjadi ahli. Sebahagian besar mereka menjadi ahli kerana ingin memberi sokongan kepada matlamat murni persatuan melindungi alam sekitar melalui aktiviti sukarela. Keputusan ini mencadangkan semasa melancarkan kempen keahlian, NGO berkenaan hendaklah menonjolkan imej yang ia adalah juara dalam perlindungan alam sekitar dan pusat sukarelawan alam sekitar. Keputusan ini menyokong teori yang mengatakan minat bersama ialah satu dari pendorong utama keahlian kumpulan sukarelawan.

ABSTRACT

The political strength of an environmental NGO depends on many factors including funds, leadership, expertise, political support and the size of membership. Membership size can influence the success or failure of the group. Usually, large membership means more labour can be deployed for grass roots activities and also more income through payment of fees. Two main objectives of the study were to understand the socio-economic profiles of members of an environmental NGO and identify their reasons for membership. A questionnaire was developed and made available on-line to all members of the NGO for a period of one month. In addition, it was circulated during the NGO's Annual General Meeting. In the end, one hundred completed questionnaires were returned and analysed. The results revealed that membership of the NGO comprise mainly of young professionals of the middle income group working in the private sector. They learn about the NGO mainly through friends who are members. The majority of them indicated that they joined the NGO because they wanted to support the noble goal of protecting nature through voluntary activities. The results suggest that, in its campaign for membership, the NGO should project an image of a group that champions nature protection as well as a hub for voluntary work. The findings of the study support the theory that common interest is one of the prime motivators of voluntary group membership.

INTRODUCTION

The destruction of the environment has caused alarm and concern among many policy actors be it governmental or non-governmental. In response to this phenomenon, new environmental groups have been formed while the existing ones have widened their focus and scope of activities to include specific aspects of the environment, like the tropical rainforest (Mohd. 1993).

Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can perform many functions in their quest to influence, directly or otherwise, public policies on the environment. Some of these groups work in conducting research and disseminate the results to the policy-makers and the public. Others organize and conduct seminars, education programmes and expeditions to natural areas in order to create awareness on the importance of the environment and its conservation. For some other groups, they prefer to lobby policy-makers to create policies that promote the enhancement of environmental protection. The more militant groups, on the other hand, are very aggressive in their tactics and they often resort to protests and demonstrations. The activities of these groups, more often than not, compliment the programmes and work of their governmental counterparts.

In Malaysia, a number of environmental NGOs have taken active roles in promoting and safeguarding the healthy condition of the environment. Certain attentive members of the public would have noticed that environmental NGOs, such as the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), have made great strides in their research, education and conservation efforts aimed at promoting a healthy state of the environment, including the natural resources. Through their activities that include organizing international seminars, leading scientific expeditions into the forest, conducting natural resource policy research, and managing natural areas, these groups have proved that they are worthy actors in handling the environmental predicament.

Like any other voluntary organizations, environmental NGOs face many challenges in their quest to promote environmental protection and management in this country. These challenges could be internal as well as external to the organization. Potential internal challenges include lack of financial resources, expertise, leadership, and membership. While challenges that are outside the organizations may include lack of support and cooperation from the public, the government and politicians, insufficient data and information for decision-making; lack of cooperation and synergy are the challenges among the NGOs themselves. The NGOs need to formulate and implement appropriate steps and measures in order to overcome the various challenges so that they can continue to be recognized as a strong force in the battle to safeguard the environment.

NGOs must have adequate resources not only to support themselves but also to influence public policy. Membership and funds are two important organizational and political resources. The availability of funds and large membership determine the strength and authority of the NGOs and imposes constraints on the scope and nature of their activities. Also, in order to effectively influence public policies, NGOs must have skilled leadership, substantive expertise, political expertise, and favourable reputation (Ornstein and Elder 1978).

Members are important assets to NGOs for several reasons. First, members are a source of income to the organizations. The fees that members pay for joining and maintaining membership form a significant portion of the total funds of the organizations. Second, membership of NGOs can provide voluntary assistance for field activities. Third, members can serve as local watchdogs, and fourth, they can act as sources of authority in dealing with government. Finally, members help to disseminate information and messages at the grass-roots (Lowe and Goyder 1983).

WHY DO INDIVIDUALS JOIN ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS?

Several theories have been put forward to explain the reasons individuals join environmental groups. Among these include the Disturbance Theory (Truman 1971), Collective Action Theory (Olson 1965), and Illogic of Collective Action (Mitchell 1979).

According to Truman (1971), environmental NGOs are formed in response to a 'disturbance' in a society which is otherwise in an equilibrium condition. The destruction of the environment disturbs the equilibrium; the main objective of the newly formed group is to restore the

equilibrium. The shared interest of the members, which in this context is environmental protection, is the main force driving individuals to join the groups.

The Disturbance Theory postulates that individuals join environmental groups simply because they share the same aspirations or attitudes of other members of the groups. Society, according to Truman, is made up of naturally occurring neighbourhood, work, ethnic, religious and other groups. Individuals who share the attitudes or skills of these groups would join to become their members. According to this pluralist theory of interest groups, individuals concerned with the rapid disappearance of tropical forests, for example, are more likely to join a group that works on programmes to conserve and protect the rainforests than any other type of groups.

Olson (1965), however, argues that collective or shared interest is not the main factor that attracts individuals to join environmental groups. Individuals are not willing to pay for the benefits which non-payers can also enjoy. Therefore, individuals are more likely to free ride and expect other individuals to pay for environmental protection.

The main premise of Olson's argument is that individuals are autonomous and seek to maximize their own material well-being. Accordingly, individuals would join environmental groups only if they can gain benefits through their association. Benefits that they can enjoy through membership can be private or collective in nature. Private benefits are those benefits that are enjoyed by members only (eg. discount hotel rates, glossy magazines, etc), while the collective ones include benefits that can be enjoyed by members and non-members as well (eg. clean air, unpolluted rivers, etc).

Since members as well as non-members can enjoy collective goods, Olson argues that it is the private benefits that attract individuals to join an environmental groups. Due to the fact that collective goods are available to everybody, the rational utility-maximising individual, it is argued, will not be inclined to help achieve a group benefit which will then be enjoyed equally by all those who do not contribute. He or she will be inclined to take a free ride. This theory further says that an individual will only decide to join environmental group if the private benefits outweigh the costs of joining.

Mitchell (1979) suggested another theory that can explain why individuals join environmental groups. Essentially, Mitchell disagrees with Olson in saying that it is the private goods that motivate individuals to join environmental groups. Based on his analysis of several groups, Mitchell concludes that individuals become members of such groups for fear that the costs of not joining are high. The primary cost of not joining is the continued existence of a bad environment bad in the future. Individuals fear polluted air and rivers, extinction of biological diversity, the potential of nuclear catastrophe and the like.

Very few studies, however, have been conducted to empirically test the various theories of group membership. The results of these studies are mixed. One study found that Olson's theory works for certain groups but does not work for others (Sabatier 1992). A survey done on the membership of the Sierra Club in the USA, on the other hand, seems to support Mitchell's theory. Milbrath's (1984) study concluded that perception of environmental threat and a desire to be out with nature with others with similar interests lead to membership. A study done on environmental groups in the United Kingdom found that the most important motivation for membership is "to register support for the group's aims" while "to get special benefits and privileges" was ranked second (Lowe and Goyder 1983).

METHOD

Selection of the NGO

The Malaysian Nature Society was selected for the study for several reasons. First, the group is one of the oldest environmental NGOs in the country and is well known for its diverse programmes and activities on environmental awareness and conservation. Second, besides being one of the oldest, it has been reported to be the biggest environmental group in the country. The group has more than 5000 members.

The Malaysian Nature Society is dedicated to the promotion of nature appreciation, conservation and protection of Malaysia's natural heritage, focusing on biological diversity and sustainable development. Established in 1940 by a small group of keen naturalists, MNS is the oldest scientific and non-governmental organization in the country (Saleh 2002).

The philosophy of the MNS is to get Malaysians and other residents involved in, exposed to and informed about nature and healthy outdoor pursuits through various activities. These activities include field trips, field courses, outdoor experiences, education programmes, exhibitions, talks, lectures, seminars and symposiums.

The society hopes to instill appreciation and care for Malaysia's splendid natural heritage, promote a sustainable management and conservation of nature and natural resources for future generations. MNS encourages the public to be members and also tries to create a clean image as an NGO that works closely with the government.

From a humble beginning, the society has bloomed into a mature organization. It has now been active in scientific research and one of its major achievements was organizing a scientific expedition to the Endau-Rompin Forest Reserve from 1986 to 1989. This expedition led to many new and exciting scientific discoveries and at the same time created awareness on the importance of conserving these areas. A similar expedition was organized to Belum Forest Reserve in Perak in 1998-1999. The Society is directly involved in the management of Kuala Selangor Nature Park and is responsible for the establishment of MNS-Boh Field Studies Centre in Pahang (Saleh 2002). In recognition of its various achievements, MNS was presented the Global 500 award for its contribution towards the protection of the environment.

The MNS offers its members a number of benefits and privileges including free copies of the Society's publications, namely, the Malayan Nature Journal and the Malayan Naturalist, discounted prices on T-shirts, cassettes of birds and animal calls, regular newsletters from the local branch containing activities and programmes, the use of a library maintained at the head office, and the retrieval of information from the society's data base maintained at the head office.

Trends in Membership of the MNS

Table 1 shows the trends in the size of membership of the MNS for the 1991-1999 period.

Looking at the table, one can see that the size of membership of the biggest environmental group in Malaysia is still very small when one considers the total population of the country which is more than 20 million people. Membership of the MNS represents less than 0.25% of the total population of the country. The table also shows that membership fluctuated in the first half of the 1990's, peaked in 1995, and then went down, though quite stable, in the second half of the period.

TABLE 1
Membership of the MNS, 1991-1999

Year	Size of Membership
1991	2527
1992	3186
1993	3221
1994	2363
1995	5500
1996	4500
1997	4179
1998	4054
1999	4016

Source: Registrar of Societies (2001)

Data Collection and Analysis

The list of current membership of the MNS was not made available to the researcher at the time of data collection. Therefore, it was not possible to select a specific group of respondents for the study. However, through several survey techniques, responses from a total of 100 respondents were solicited at the end of the survey period.

A survey questionnaire was prepared to gather socio-economic data of the respondents as well as their reasons for membership. The questionnaire was put online on the MNS web site for a period of one month in 2001. It was also distributed to members who attended the MNS Annual General Meeting in September 2001. These two strategies managed to gather responses from 100 members which represents only about two percent of total membership. Of the two strategies, the later gathered more responses.

The questionnaire reported by Lowe and Goyder (1983) was adopted for the purpose of determining the reasons why members join the MNS. Essentially, the question listed five reasons for membership and the respondents were asked to rank these reasons according to their importance. The five choices, more or less, present some the arguments made by the various theories on group membership. In other words, the ultimate aim of the question is to find out which

of the theories explains best why members of MNS join the society.

The five choices are as follows:

i. to register support for the Society's aim
ii. to get the special benefits and privileges of membership
iii. to get actively involved in doing and organizing voluntary work
iv. to seek social contact and companionship
v. to further their own point of view and influence the direction of the Society

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Socio-economic Profile of Respondents

Some data on membership of the MNS are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2 shows that membership of the Society comprises slightly more male than female while in terms of race, the Chinese make up the biggest proportion compared with other races with a ratio of nearly 2:1. The Malays only form about ten percent of the membership. Data in the table also show that the majority (almost 60 %) of the membership come from the private sector.

Table 3 provides data and information on other aspects of membership of the Society. It can be seen that membership of the MNS comprises mainly individuals between 30 to 40 years old having Bachelors degree and earning between RM2000 to RM3000 per month. Having such a youthful membership, it is not surprising that the median length of membership is between one to five years.

Data and information obtained from the survey portray a picture that membership of the MNS comprises relatively young individuals mainly from one ethnic group who work in the private sector. Another attribute of membership (not shown in the table) is that about 55% are scientists and professionals.

This information taken together seems to suggest that membership of the MNS, and probably of other environmental groups, is quite different from the general population of the country, particularly in terms of race, age and employment. An obvious question to ask is "why does an environmental group attract members having such profiles?" Some answers to this question may be forthcoming when data on reasons for membership are presented.

Sources of Information About the Society

Before asking the question on the reasons for becoming members, the respondents were asked on the method of obtaining information on the MNS and its roles prior to joining the Society. Responses to this question would tell the management of the Society on the potential of the various sources as channels of information in the process of attracting membership. The responses to the question are shown in Table 3.

Data in the table show that word of mouth is an important means through which information about the Society is conveyed to potential members and help influence them to become members. More than 60% of the respondents indicated that they learnt about MNS through

TABLE 2
Distribution of respondents by age, race and employment sector (n=100)

Gender (%)		Race (%)				Employment* (%)	
Male	Female	Malays	Chinese	Indians	Others	Public	Private
58	42	10	65	17	8	37	59

* Four respondents did not respond

TABLE 3
Median values of members' characteristics (n = 100)

	Age (years)	Education	Monthly Income (RM)	Length of Membership (years)
Median	30 – 40	Bachelor Degree	2000 - 3000	1 – 5
% of Respondents	24	37	23	83

TABLE 4
Sources of information on MNS

Sources of information	Percent of Respondents
Through friends who are members	62
Briefing by the Society	16
Newspapers	11
MNS Brochures	9
Radio/Television	2
TOTAL	100

friends who are members of the Society. The Society's direct efforts to attract membership, mainly through briefing and brochures, only managed to influence about 25 percent of membership. The media, in particular radio and television, have not been important sources of information for potential members.

The above results suggest that membership of the Society could play an important role in attracting potential members. Consequently, the Society should formulate and implement strategies to harness the potential of its members as membership recruiting agents. Efforts should be made to regularly inform the members about the philosophy and objectives of the Society as well as its detail programmes and activities. In so doing, the members would be well informed about the Society and be in a better position to convince potential members to join the Society. The MNS could also run a "Member get Member" campaign and provide rewards to those who manage to recruita large number of members.

The MNS may not have resorted to using the media to inform the public about the Society. Such being the case, it should be expected that the media has not been an important source of information for the members.

Table 5 shows the ranking of the reasons given by the respondents to the question for joining the MNS. As can be seen, more than half of the respondents indicated that they became members because they wanted to help in the attainment of the goals of the Society. On the other hand, one in five respondents joined the Society because they liked to participate in voluntary work, presumably in the area of environmental protection and conservation. Of the remaining respondents, a slight majority chose to join because they wanted to enjoy the tangible benefits by becoming members mainly in the forms of free journals and magazines and discounted souvenir items.

The results presented in Table 5 lend support to certain theories on environmental group membership more than the others. Specifically, the results tend to give more support to the arguments made by Truman and Mitchell and less to those made by Olson. Truman argued that the formation of groups in any society is a natural process and the primary motivation of individuals to join these groups is shared or

TABLE 5
Reasons for joining the MNS (n=100)

Reasons	% of Respondents ranking reason as number one
To register support for the Society's aims	51
To get actively involved in doing and organizing voluntary work	21
To get special benefits and privileges of membership	8
To seek social contact and companionship	6
To further own point of view and to influence the direction of the Society	4
TOTAL	90*

* Ten respondents did not answer

common interest. It is common or shared interests that bound members of these groups together. Accordingly, the groups act as formal channels through which members express their opinions on issues related to the shared interest.

The study reveals that, for the majority of the respondents, it is shared or common interest that motivates them to become members. These respondents have indicated that they joined the MNS because they share and support the aims of the Society in protecting and preserving nature and the environment.

About one-fifth of the respondents indicated that they liked to participate in voluntary work on nature conservation and the MNS provides the avenue for them to get involved in this noble venture. Even though their participation is voluntary, these respondents did not expect any tangible benefits from such involvement. However, their participation must be driven by other motives. One of these motives should be to contribute to the conservation and preservation of nature and the environment, thereby helping to prevent environmental catastrophes from occurring Such catastrophes or disasters would include species extinction, polluted rivers, polluted air, droughts, and so on. Such an argument on why individuals join environmental groups supports the theory of "apparent illogic of collective action" espoused by Mitchell (1970). The main argument underlying Mitchell's theory is that individuals fear the occurrence of environmental destruction and will expend their energy and time to prevent them from happening. Participation in the activities of environmental groups is one of the ways towards achieving that objective.

The findings lend little support to the theory of "the logic of collective action" which argues that individuals join environmental groups in order to gain economic benefits through membership (Olson 1971). Economic benefits are goods and services that only members would enjoy by being members. In the case of the MNS such benefits include free Society's publications, discounted t-shirts and other souvenir items. As revealed earlier, only eight percent of the respondents indicated that their motivation for joining the MNS is "to get special benefits and privileges of membership."

Further analysis reveals that those who ranked reason 1 as motivation for joining the MNS are quite different from the other members of the group in terms of race ($p=0.002$), professional background ($p=0.000$), employment ($p=0.047$) and monthly income ($p=0.002$) but not in terms of gender, age and level of education.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on membership of NGOs because members are an important resource to an environmental group. The success of the group's activities partly depends on its members for support, particularly for funds and labour. The bigger the size of membership, the greater will be the support, and hence, the strength of the group.

The study reveals that there can be many reasons which motivate individuals to join an environmental group and this means that the group, such as the MNS, needs to emphasise different reasons to appeal to different groups of potential members. In other words, the group needs to project itself differently to different groups of individuals. Depending on the individuals, the group could portray itself either as a savior of the environment, as a refuge for voluntary environmental activities, as a kind-hearted organization with lots of goodies and discounted items to pass around, or as the ONLY NGO with opportunities to socialize with like-minded environmental-caring individuals.

A rather disheartening conclusion that comes out of the study is that environmental NGOs are undersized. The Malaysian Nature Society is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, and the biggest of the environmental citizens NGOs in the country (Kenny Cheah 1999). Unfortunately, the size of membership of the biggest and the oldest environmental NGO in the country is relatively small compared with the total population of the country. Hence, it can safely be assumed that the combined membership of all environmental NGOs is still small. If membership of environmental NGOs is an indicator of environmental concerns among the citizens, then, the level of environmental concern is still quite low. Having said that, the battle for environmental safekeeping for the environmental NGOs is still far from being won. The NGOs need a lot of support from a bigger section of concerned citizens in their efforts to promote the conservation of the environment. The challenge ahead for the NGOs, like the MNS, is still very great.

The MNS may need to attract more members from the public sector, particularly those who have the capacity to influence decisions on environmental policies. This is especially true if the Society aspires to have a greater impact on public policy decision-making. Such members will provide the channel to access the centers of decision-making and this is an important political asset for the organization. In order to attract more members from the government sector, the Society may need to establish a strong rapport with government agencies through some smart partnership arrangements. This helps to build the image that the Society is "government friendly".

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