

Understanding Stewardship Norms in Reef Catchments

Stewardship norms play a key role in guiding farming practices and influencing behaviour. With funding support from the Queensland Government's Reef Water Quality Program, the Social Practices and Diffusion of Environmental Stewardship (SPADES) project examined how stewardship-related messages are communicated across different industries and regions in Reef catchments, helping to improve future communication strategies.



Why study stewardship norms?

Norms shape what people see as 'normal' or acceptable practices. In agriculture, they influence how farmers adopt stewardship practices to protect the environment. In 2019, stewardship norms were identified as key indicators of agricultural practice adoption in Reef catchments [1], but little is known about how these norms are communicated and how they impact farmers' decisions. By understanding how stewardship norms appear in communication materials, this study can help improve messaging, ensuring that communications, programs and initiatives are more effective in encouraging sustainable practices.

What did we do?

This project reviewed and analysed a wide range of communication materials used in the agricultural sector, such as newsletters, podcasts, and social media.

A mix of AI tools and expert human review was used to:

- Identify normative messages in these materials to see how stewardship norms are communicated.
- Examine how these norms vary across industries like cane, grazing, bananas, and horticulture.
- Describe the key attributes of stewardship norms to better understand how they influence farming practices.
- Develop recommendations based on the findings and proven best practices from previous research.



What did we find?

Most stewardship messages come from media and industry sources, especially newspapers, eNewspapers, and eMagazines. Government sources produce fewer messages and mostly communicate through websites, which can limit reach and impact.

A range of practices were identified, with common themes including innovation, support, and advocacy. Industry variations were evident: bananas focused on biosecurity, grazing emphasised land management and climate actions, crop-growing sectors prioritised chemical and water management.

Industry sources effectively use injunctive norms (telling farmers what they should do) by aligning with farmers' motivations, while government messages rely more on descriptive norms (showing what others do), which are more accepted from perceived outgroups.

While the communicator of a norm is often the same as the producer of the material (i.e., government artefacts featuring government voices), some sources, such as NRMs and media, incorporate a broader range of voices, including farmers and experts.

Most normative statements lacked formal recognition, but when present, funding schemes were most common, often tied to general management practices. Regulations were the third most cited, usually in neutral or negative contexts like policy advocacy.

Stewardship messaging was mostly positive, but industry and media used negative tones more often, especially for biosecurity risks, advocacy, and policy. Industry may use negative framing to increase salience, particularly for advocating against policies or highlighting risks.

[1] Hobman, E., and Taylor, B. (2018). *Understanding the human dimensions of landholder innovation and stewardship: Identifying indicators of a culture of innovation and stewardship, and land management practice change (RP190 Stage 1 Milestone Report)*. CSIRO Land and Water.

What recommendations did we make?

The following recommendations specifically address the communication of norms in government-produced materials.

Expand Communication Beyond Websites

Increase exposure through regional media, agricultural programs, and industry-focused outlets to reach more farmers.

Use Farmers and Local Champions as Messengers

Messages from farmers and land managers are more credible and effective. Government and industry should share real stories from farmers to strengthen engagement.

Be Clear About Practices and Audiences

Use specific terms (e.g., "fencing riparian areas" instead of "improving water quality"). Target specific industries or regions rather than using broad messages for all

Use Language That Resonates with Farmers

Align messages with industry terms that are more familiar to the target audience.

Connect Farm and Environmental Benefits

Avoid framing environmental benefits as distant or separate. Use messaging like "Supporting the farm and supporting nature" to show how both are connected.

Increase Awareness of Funding and Support

When new government led funding initiatives are made available (such as grant programs) ensure that outputs include communication of positive norms for funding recipients.

Strengthen Collaboration Across Agencies

Encourage multi-agency partnerships to improve communication strategies. Share best practices and resources to build a consistent and effective approach to stewardship messaging.

General considerations when communicating for change

Effective messaging requires consistency, but with multiple voices in agricultural media, achieving this can be challenging. Before launching new communication initiatives, **reviewing the existing media landscape can help align messages with audience values and identify potential conflicts.** If significant divergence exists—such as resistance to regulations—additional support or framing adjustments may be needed.

Avoid top-down messaging in conflict situations.

Some stewardship norms—especially around regulations—are met with resistance. Simply telling people what to do is unlikely to resolve these conflicts. Instead, fostering collaboration between agencies and industry can help build shared understanding and encourage practical solutions.

Farmers face multiple pressures, and new stewardship messages may compete with other concerns.

Highlighting how other groups are also contributing to broader goals can help reduce resistance.

Changing farm practices is complex, as it involves multiple actions over time and is often tied to personal or cultural identity. **Effective communication should acknowledge these complexities and provide the necessary information to support or encourage change.**

Where can I get more information?

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