

# Applying social norms to dissuade environmental theft and deterioration



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## Applying Social Norms to Dissuade Environmental Theft and Deterioration

### Issue and Theory

“ The swiftest erosion here is theft,” describes Keith Ekiss (2018, p. 1), advocate for the preservation of desert-heritage at Arizona National Park, despondent by the accumulated effects from the public’s thieving of petrified-tree specimens. Scattered naturally within the park’s grounds, these wood pieces are non-renewable sources of valuable archaeological information formed over 200-million years; alarmingly, an estimated 14 tonnes is stolen by visitors annually- an unsustainable deterioration and loss of precious natural resources (Widner & Roggenbuck, 1998, p. 1). Efforts to deter theft have occurred for decades, with high-fences, fictitious curses, rangers armed with binoculars and signs denouncing numerous past plunderers ineffective in eradicating the large number of wood-robberies (Hillinger, 1990). This ‘ depreciative behaviour’ from thieves has led to a decline in the physical and esthetical environment of the park, reducing the quality of the recreational experience and preventing the collection and preservation of scientific-wealth (Clark, Hendee & Campbell, 1972, p. 2; Widner & Roggenbuck, 1998).

The application of specific social norms may have an alleviating effect on theft. Gergen and Gergen (1981) describe social norms as the widely accepted expectations people follow when evaluating the appropriateness of certain behaviours in certain situations. Kallgren, Reno and Cialdini (2000, p. 14) found that when norms are salient and “ focal in attention” they are more likely to influence behaviour- leading to the development of the Focus

Theory of Normative Conduct (FTNC). This theory proposes there are two types of norms with differing effects on behaviour: descriptive and injunctive. Descriptive norms are behaviours that are commonly pursued in certain situations, judged by one's belief about what others would do in similar instances; however injunctive norms carry an evaluative connotation, being the behaviours one pursues when they think they 'ought' to be doing them according to others (Cialdini et al., 2006). Therefore, descriptive norms influence behaviour through leading by example, whereas informal social-control is greater amongst injunctive norms with the potential to be called to account (Cialdini et al., 2006). As maintained by the FTNC to dissuade socially-condemned behaviours, one must solely induce injunctive norms that marginalise certain acts ("thieves of wood will be prosecuted") rather than normalise iniquities already committed ("many past visitors have taken wood")- the latter more likely to *increase* the censured behaviour (Cialdini et al., 2006, p. 8).

### Application

The administration of social norms and their theorised effects were applied to prevent ongoing theft at Arizona National Park. Employing a 2x2 factorial design, Cialdini et al. (2006) examined whether signposts illustrating normative messages either descriptive or injunctive in nature would produce differing levels of visitor wood-theft. Alluding to the FTNC and aware that negatively worded messages (i. e. "please *don't* remove wood from the park) tend to be more *focal* in consciousness than positive words (i. e. "please *leave* wood in the park"), Cialdini et al. (2006, p. 8) hypothesised that signs displaying injunctive negatively-worded phrases would be more

<https://assignbuster.com/applying-social-norms-to-dissuade-environmental-theft-and-deterioration/>

influential in dissuading wood-theft than other combinations of negative or positive wordings with injunctive or descriptive compositions (Gilbert, 1991). Therefore, signs instructing visitors what they *ought not* to do- not removing petrified wood from the park- should generate the least amount of wood-theft of all conditions.

The success of the normative-signposting was assessed through the number of marked wood stolen in each condition divided by the number of marked specimens that were initially placed and had the potential to be stolen, with larger numbers equating to increased theft and lower efficacy of the normative intervention (Cialdini et al., 2006). Over the five-week period of observation the implications of the FTNC were supported, as signs of an injunctive nature were more effective in reducing theftuous behaviour than descriptive norm types (Cialdini et al., 2006). Furthermore, the effect-size of anti-theft behaviours increased with the pairing of negative words (the strongest effect for injunctive norms), whilst positively worded signs bearing both types of norms were intermediate in their effect-size and had no difference in deterrence (Cialdini et al., 2006).

## Discussion

When applying the theory, the ethicality of *allowing* petrified tree samples to be stolen for the purpose of the experiment need not be questioned, as each condition's pieces were deemed "useless" by park officials (Cialdini et al., 2006, p. 6). Researchers were provided with wood that was stolen and returned by guilt-stricken visitors, the process of removal distorting the wood's naturally-occurring geographical distribution, rendering the

specimens contaminated and bereft of historic significance (Cialdini et al., 2006). Therefore, no ethical barriers were broken in permitting the wood to be stolen, especially when the objective was to prevent theft from occurring in the first place.

No institutional barriers arose regarding the study's approval. However, when findings were presented to rangers dismissing the relative effectiveness of descriptive normative messages in deterring socially-censured behaviours, park officials failed to alter their signage (Cialdini et al., 2006). This refusal was based on visitor responses when interviewed by rangers, affirming that being informed of the substantial amount of wood-theft would thereby decrease their theftuous behaviour, prompting officials to continually and exclusively display signs depicting "muddled" normative messages (Cialdini et al., 2006, p. 4). Cialdini et al. (2006) suggested that in general, laypeople are sceptical of social-scientific research and fail to understand the validity of results- this lack of intersubjectivity and confidence having negative implications for application. The prioritisation of the few "subjective responses" over the empirical research increases the likelihood that resource deterioration will continue, illustrating the challenge researchers encounter when applying theory to the real-world: application is not *solely* dependent on a theory's logic but also the public's willingness to put the ideas into practice (Cialdini et al., 2006, p. 11).

Future replication of this study producing comparable, reliable results may persuade park officials to actually apply the findings to their signage- a cost-effective phenomenon that has been tested to reduce this inadmissible environmental theft from occurring.

<https://assignbuster.com/applying-social-norms-to-dissuade-environmental-theft-and-deterioration/>

## References

- Cialdini, R. B., Demaine, L. J., Sagarin, B. J., Barret, D. W., Rhoads, K., & Winter, P. L. (2006). Managing Social Norms for Persuasive Impact. *Social Influence, 1*, 3-15.
- Clark, R., Hendee, J. C., & Campbell, F. L. (1972). Depreciative Behaviour in Forest Campgrounds: An Exploratory Study. *Travel Research Bulletin, 10* (4), 6-7.
- Ekiss, K. (2018). *The Petrified Forest*. Retrieved from <https://www.nps.gov/pefo/learn/news/keith-ekiss.htm>
- Gergen, K. J., & Gergen, M. M (1981) *Social Psychology* . New York: Harcourt.
- Gilbert, D. T. (1991). How mental systems believe. *American Psychologist, 46* , 107-119.
- Hillinger, K. (1990, August 5). Arizona's Petrified Forest is Stealing Away. *Los Angeles Times*, p. 12.
- Kallgren, C. A., Reno, R. R., & Cialdini, R. B. (2000). A focus theory of normative conduct: When norms do and do not affect behaviour. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 26*, 1002-1012.
- Widner, C., & Roggenbuck, J. W. (1998). *Reducing and Understanding Petrified Wood Theft at petrified Forest National Park* (Doctoral dissertation, Virginia University, Virginia, United States of America). Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/304452641/?pq-origsite=primo>