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## Backstage and frontstage environmentalism

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In a recent interview on *The World*, a global daily news programme, academic Diogo Veríssimo, from the University of Montpellier, told host Marco Werman that species of reef fishes which are considered to be least beautiful by humans tend not to be given priority for conservation support in [open](#) / making.



gracefully, but we may have phobias or death-wishes for others. Some animals, for better or for worse, do not even make it on the policy agenda. Some may be lucky to be ignored by humans who may otherwise exploit them, others may be fading into extinction whilst we barely notice.

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Such social constructions are also evident in the world of environmental activism. WWF, one of the largest Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) in the world, has consistently been campaigning for the protection of various flora and fauna around the world. The organisation's emblem is a Panda, erstwhile considered to be cute by many people around the world.

The point I wish to make here is not that it is wrong to show sympathy for whales whilst detesting jellyfish. Like everyone else, I too categorize species. For example, after I watched 'My Octopus Teacher', which I wrote about in my last article in The Malta Independent (9 June), I decided to stop eating this animal altogether.

What I wish to emphasize in this article is that, as various environmental sociologists such as John Hannigan put it, successful environmental campaigns are often characterised by successful claims making. This would require strategic tools such as resources, PR, networking, communication skills, support by significant social actors and so forth.

As the logic goes, an environmental issue does not become politically significant on its own: It does so once it is interpreted as being important and makes it to the policy agenda. Paradoxically, this can mean that sometimes, some environmental issues make more news headlines than others which are deemed as being more critical by natural and social scientists.

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to borrow terminology from sociologist Ervin Goffmann, we can speak of a front stage

invisible when it comes to various environmental infringements. But the action was also a textbook example of successful claimsmaking.

At the same time, there is also an environmental backstage, which is often less visible in the mediasphere, but is also involved in important environmental work, including vital protection of species and habitats and the setting of evidence-based policy making. For example, some ENGOs such as Nature Trust, Din I-Art Helwa and Birdlife are very much involved in the management of nature reserves. The recent interview with Vince Attard from Nature Trust (The Malta Independent on Sunday, 19 June) was very informative in this regard.

Similarly, within universities and other research institutions, natural and social scientists are involved in research which, for example, helps us understand the interaction between nature and society. Not to mention the environmental work done by 'invisible' people within political institutions.

Am I trying to say that one type of environmentalism is more important than the other? Absolutely not. At times, the two intersect: For example, Birdlife often makes the news headlines (especially on matters related to illegal hunting) but is also involved in endless behind-the-scenes work in its nature reserves, through education and so forth. Besides, ENGOs which are more prominent either on the front stage or the backstage often form coalitions on specific environmental campaigns. We have had quite a lot in the recent years.

It is quite clear that lobbying, protest, legal action and other strategies are important tools to influence policymakers. But let us also ensure that policy making takes note of less visible evidence during the policy process, not all of which reaches the eyes and ears of the networks of power. Indeed, we often ignore certain environmental realities at our own peril.

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