Seeds of popular culture in amateur naturalism

My PhD research concerns amateur naturalists as participants in biodiversity governance. We are losing biological diversity, a condition of human survival, increasingly fast despite international agreements and policies to halt the loss. People are concerned, but how to turn concern into practical change? I believe popular culture plays here a central role.

Major part of the biodiversity data needed in the governance comes from dedicated amateur naturalists, as environmental administration does not have the resources for the fieldwork. The dedicated amateur naturalists are few in numbers, mostly men, and getting old. What happens when they no longer can provide data on biodiversity? Then again there are differences between the different specializations within the amateur naturalist scene; for example birdwatching is increasing in popularity. Why is that?

Amateur naturalism has the air of being high culture. It started as a pastime of educated men, such as teachers and pharmacists. In a century the amateur naturalist activities have become accessible to all, but what seems to remain is the air of high culture. Knowing nature may be read as a sign of education, but among the educated there are few with detailed knowledge on biodiversity.

My starting point is that amateur naturalist activities need mainstreaming as part of popular culture to ensure the continuity of the practices. This is my first entry into the field of popular culture research, as in the PhD I am looking at the topic from the perspectives of knowledge practices and environmental governance. In the paper I will sketch some elements of amateur naturalism that I imagine could appeal to larger publics. These include aesthetics, corporality, social belonging, humor, romance and experiences of meaning. I will also identify some possible risks or sources of controversy in popularizing amateur naturalism. For example, many the amateur naturalists seem to have a peculiar self-ironic sense of humor, which may not be easily accessible for an outsider, and might lead to ridiculing the amateur naturalist practices. A larger question is, whether the expertise of the amateur naturalists would be watered down by expanding the notion of who is an amateur naturalist.

Does quantity become quality – would popular amateur naturalism functions as a seeding ground for active “biodiversity citizens”? 