

The secret of scholars who impact policy

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A new study in the Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences shows that "in-person, hands-on outreach and engagement can make the policy impacts of environmental research stronger," says Stephen Posner, a researcher at the University of Vermont who led the research. In this photo, Brad Eichelberger (second from left), a scientist with the Natural Capital Project, engages a group of stakeholders with the InVEST tool. Credit: Natural Capital Project

Why does some research lead to changes in public policy, while other studies of equal quality do not?

That crucial question—how science impacts policy—is the focus of a new study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS).

The paper suggests the most effective way environmental scholars can boost their policy influence—from protecting wildlife to curbing pollution—is to consult widely with stakeholders during the research process.

Outreach trumps findings

Surprisingly, the study finds that stakeholder engagement is a better predictor of future policy impacts than perceived scientific credibility.

The study is the first quantitative analysis of how environmental knowledge impacts the attitudes and decisions of conservation policymakers. Researchers from the University of Vermont, World Wildlife Fund and Natural Capital Project analyzed 15 policy decisions worldwide, with outcomes ranging from new coastal preservation laws to improved species protections.

One hand clapping, academic style

Lead author Stephen Posner of the University of Vermont characterizes policy-related research without outreach as the academic equivalent of the sound of one hand clapping.

"Scholars may have the best policy intentions and important research, but our results suggest that decision-makers are unlikely to listen without

meaningful engagement of them and various stakeholders," he says.

When scholars meet with constituent groups—for example, individual landowners, conservation organizations, or private businesses—it improves policymakers' perception of scientific knowledge as unbiased and representative of multiple perspectives, the study finds. "For decision-makers, that made research more legitimate and worthy of policy consideration," Posner adds.

Ways to improve consultation

The research team suggests research institutions offer scholars more time and incentives to improve engagement. They also encourage researchers to seek greater understanding of policy decision-making in their fields, and include stakeholder outreach plans in research projects.

"For scholars or groups working on policy questions, we hope these findings offer a reminder of the value of engaging directly with the public," Posner says.

Previous research on science-policy decision-making used qualitative approaches, or focused on a small number of case studies.

Background

The study is called "Policy impacts of ecosystem services knowledge" by Stephen Posner, Emily McKenzie, and Taylor H. Ricketts.

Posner and Ricketts are from UVM's Gund Institute for Ecological Economics and Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources. Emily McKenzie hails from WWF and the Natural Capital Project.

The study used a global sample of regional case studies from the Natural Capital Project, in which researchers used the standardized scientific tool InVEST to explore environmental planning and policy outcomes.

Data included surveys of decision-makers and expert review of 15 cases with different levels of [policy](#) impact. The forms of engagement studied included emails, phone conversations, individual and group meetings, as well as decision-maker perceptions of the [scientific knowledge](#).

More information: Policy impacts of ecosystem services knowledge, *PNAS*, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1502452113

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