

The secret of scientists who impact policy

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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 central to the research of University of Vermont (UVM) Prof. Taylor Ricketts and recent alum Stephen Posner.

According to their findings, 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.

Speaking at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting talk, [The Effectiveness of Ecosystem Services Science in Decision-Making](#), on Feb 18., the team briefed scientists and policy experts on their 2016 study in [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences \(PNAS\)](#).

OUTREACH TRUMPS FINDINGS

Surprisingly, the study finds that stakeholder engagement is a better predictor of future policy impacts than perceived scientific credibility, says Ricketts, Director of UVM's [Gund Institute](#) and Gund Professor in the [Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources](#).

The study is the first quantitative analysis of how environmental knowledge impacts the attitudes and decisions of conservation policymakers. Researchers from the UVM, 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

Stephen Posner, a Gund researcher and [COMPASS](#) policy engagement associate, 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," Ricketts 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 those working on policy-related questions, we hope these findings offer a reminder of the value of engaging directly with policy makers and stakeholders," Posner says. "This will be crucial as we enter the new political reality of the Trump administration."

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.

Co-author 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.

Provided by University of Vermont

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