



With a Little Help from Facilitators

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With a little help from facilitators

ESA's Annual Meeting, Madison, Wisconsin, 2001 – all these ecologists, and scant discussion of the environment. This happens meeting after meeting, in spite of earnest efforts to encourage and plan interdisciplinary environmental research. While there are interesting and potentially fruitful thrusts here and there (eg urban ecology, biocomplexity, ecological economics), they only scratch the surface. In Madison I saw a glaring disconnect between ecology as scientists do it and Ecology as a potential management scheme for the human population, economic growth, climate change, politics, and equity – all governed by feedbacks, dynamics with momentum, and the complexity of human wants and drives. And why shouldn't I feel this way; I was presenting on trophic cascades in idealized food chains, while the air conditioner ran and the car was waiting.

There are two fundamental barriers to interdisciplinary cooperation on serious environmental issues: divisions between disciplines and the discipline vs discipline problem. The latter, although difficult enough, is the easier one. The far tougher nut is the presence of barriers internal to each of us, separating what we know, what we want, what we fear, what we obsess about at 3am, and what we think we can do. Most of us know that environmental problems are extremely serious and have far-reaching connections to everything from health to war. We sense that responsive solutions require measures that we find extremely threatening – consider “overconsumption”, a term that buzzed about at the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development. Hence we opt for denial or detachment, and as a result, interdisciplinary environmental activity represents a much longer leap than reconciling an entomologist's and a chemist's definition of good science.

What to do about it, other than wait for a real crisis? I propose that

meetings (preferably small) to chart interdisciplinary ecological work be professionally facilitated to break down both kinds of barriers, with an emphasis on the second type, and that the form of such meetings be expanded to be consistent with the broader implications of interdisciplinary work. The outcome of such meetings should not be a grand, touchy-feely consensus which maximizes short-term bliss. Serious, professional facilitation would encourage a comprehensive, honest statement of the issues. While I propose this as an experiment worth trying, I am not certain of success, and am even suspicious of professional facilitators. I have been in two facilitated meetings – one worked, one did not. But we need a jolt to get us off the dime. The process may well take participants further in the direction of “community” than where they will end up, but that stretch is beneficial and consistent with what interdisciplinary research in ecology implies. I think we should all take that kind of chance.

Robert A Herendeen

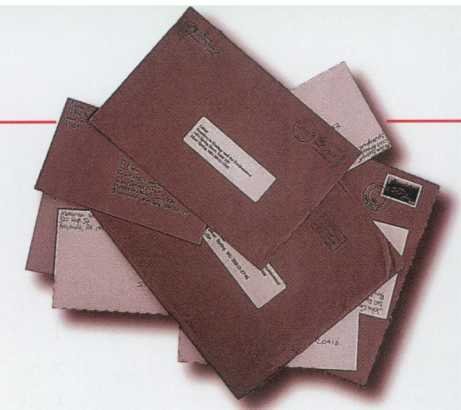
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Improving the ecology–policy interface

Thank you for “The Ecology–Policy Interface” forum (*Frontiers* 2003; 1: 45–50). Academic ecologists are showing a growing interest in environmental policy, so it is an appropriate time to examine their potential roles, and for those of us who have worked on this interface to offer advice. Here I share my perspective as someone who has published scholarly ecological research and also had active and extensive involvement in shaping ocean policy over the past decade.

Just as ecology is a complex, highly nuanced discipline, so too is environmental policy. Academic ecologists fear losing their credibility through advocacy, yet the real risk is in poor and naive communication that makes



their input irrelevant. To be more effective, academic ecologists need to better convey their ideas to the policy audience, and provide advice that reflects the complexities and nuances of good environmental policy.

The policy process consists of many steps, including the identification of problems, the development of solutions, the analysis of alternatives, and the choice of regulations. So far, academic ecologists have played an important role by bringing problems to the attention of policymakers and society. They will need to invest more time and energy in the day-to-day policy process, however, if they wish to influence the subsequent steps as well.

The policy process can be designed to facilitate the participation of ecologists, particularly in the analysis of alternatives and in providing relevant advice. The process would serve managers and the public better if managers specified clear, measurable objectives, and if scientists analyzed and presented quantitative performance indices on the ability of alternatives to meet those objectives. This sort of analysis would inform policy-makers' decisions and make the decision-making process more transparent.

The greatest challenge lies in developing potential policy solutions, a process which would benefit from greater input by academic ecologists. However, effective involvement will require greater commitment from individual scientists and their universities and departments. For example, I played an instrumental role in the creation of the Red Hind Bank Marine Conservation District in the US Virgin Islands. Through relationships and trust built over several years with the local fishing community, I helped them devise a scientifically credible proposal in response to strong govern-