

Embrace complexity to improve conservation decision making

To the Editor — In a recent issue of *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, Sutherland and Wordley argued that evidence is not routinely sought or used in conservation decision making¹. We share the authors' concern that management and policy decisions do not always result in good conservation outcomes, despite the availability of relevant evidence. However, the notion of 'evidence complacency' risks overlooking insights from decades of collective scholarship and practice on how evidence can most effectively be harnessed to inform decisions^{2–6}.

Policymakers draw on many sources of information to make decisions, with scientific evidence being just one⁶. Many conservation problems are highly complex, involving trade-offs between multiple objectives, values and interests⁷. Improving access to evidence and ensuring its relevance to policymakers and practitioners can and does influence the use of such information in decision making, but evidence is also most easily utilized in tractable, uncontroversial management situations⁵. As highlighted by Papworth in the same issue⁸, decision makers who have the time, experience and expertise are more likely to engage with additional sources of information. In cases where the political stakes are higher and conservation is just one of many competing priorities, scientific evidence alone is less likely to influence a decision.

Unfortunately, the term 'evidence complacency' overlooks these complexities and instead implies that evidence is not used or sought out in decision making due to wilful ignorance, laziness, or carelessness

(the term 'complacency' is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as 'self-satisfaction especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies'). This characterization is potentially harmful, as it seems to ascribe blame to policymakers and practitioners for situations that are often highly complex, political and beyond their direct control. As message framing is a key contributor to influencing action⁹, we suggest that the term 'evidence complacency' may undermine important efforts to increase the use of evidence in conservation policy and practice.

What may be perceived as complacency can alternatively be understood as the reality of conservation policy and practice: a series of spaces with multiple knowledge types, political interests and ongoing deliberation^{4,5}. In these spaces, researchers need to think strategically of impact pathways for evidence to inform the policy and political debates of the problem they are interested in. We need to rethink how we engage in framing conservation problems and solutions, and how we leverage multisectoral networks to ensure science forms part of decision making. We can build on the work of the Conservation Evidence project by supporting intermediary organizations and individuals who actively build relationships between science, policy and practice¹⁰, or initiatives that set research objectives and produce knowledge in collaboration with those who will use that knowledge³.

The influence of science in decision making is slow, non-linear, inherently political, and based on relationships and links between multiple societal actors with

a stake in a particular issue³. In a post-truth world, where science and facts are contested, there is an opportunity for the conservation community to break from traditional linear science-policy approaches to ones that embrace complexity, diversity of knowledge systems and contextual politics^{4,7}. □

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing financial interests.