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How Might Ecologists Make the World Safe for Biodiversity Without Getting Fired?

Bulletin of the British Ecological Society 2012, 43:4



David Johns

"Science without politics has no impact, politics without science can be dangerous..." Peter Piot, MD, co-discover of Ebola, WHO administrator and UN Under-Secretary General. (2012. *No Time to Lose*. Norton. NY. p374)

"(S)ince survival is nothing if not biological, ... perpetuating economic or political institutions at the expense of biological well-being of man, societies, and ecosystems may be considered maladaptive." Roy Rappaport, anthropologist. (1976. *Adaptations and Maladaptations in Social Systems*. P 39-79 in I. Hill (ed). *The Ethical Basis of Economic Freedom*. American Viewpoint. Chapel Hill NC. p65)

Don't expect me to do the right thing; make me do the right thing. Former US Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt.

For those who care about the life and ecosystems they study, the news is not good. The Millennium Ecosystem goals were not met by a wide margin and there has been much handwringing about what to do. Some have advised giving up and concentrating on what human societies, led by those with endless growth on the brain, are content to leave alone. That's not the sort of approach that ended apartheid.

Some Difficult Questions

For those who are not going to give up, the path forward presents hard questions. What if begging policy makers to do the right thing means barren oceans, the end of many species, and the end of wild places (not to mention a more dreary human existence)? What if halting the loss of biodiversity and healing the wounds to species and ecosystems depends on altering the human trajectory of conquest and instead adapting human societies to them?

For scientists there are additional tough questions. What if, outside scientific jousting in journals and at meetings (and, perhaps, the courts), it is not the quality of the argument that

prevails, but the quality of the clout the arguer possesses—the ability to reward or punish decision makers? What if conservation success depends less on speaking truth to power than on organizing a political force that can bring more pressure to bear on decision makers than their opponents? Many scientists *do* try to influence decision makers, of course. They provide information and advice, write for broad audiences, and encourage NGOs to lobby for conservation goals based on good science. But many scientists leave it to others to act. But what if (the last *what if!*) natural scientists, by virtue of their knowledge, passion, commitment, are pretty much the only group that can be trusted with the fate of biodiversity and leading humankind out of their destructive ways?

This essay cannot answer these grand questions but raising them provides important context for discussing ways scientists can increase their effectiveness.

Thinking and Acting Strategically

Acting more effectively on behalf of biodiversity depends first and foremost on thinking and acting strategically. Whatever role a scientist chooses to play—researcher, teacher, government/business advisor, activist—it is incumbent on them to decide how their role fits into an overarching plan for getting biodiversity protection from *here* (decline) to *there* (recovery). The political landscape must be understood in addition to the ecological one.

Grasping the political landscape begins with a clear goal, because that determines which aspects of the landscape are relevant. Goals may be nested hierarchically and range from protection of an area or species to a prohibition on human activities which are more global such as habitat conversion or release of toxic chemicals or greenhouse gases. Some goals are more important than others because of their direct benefits, or because the leverage achieving them provides in achieving other goals.

With goals in mind other strategic questions can then be addressed:

- Who has the power to make the decisions needed to reach the goal? Which legislature, chief executive, agency, business, landowner or combination of these?
- Do the decisions sought require structural change in a social system or run contrary to powerful interests or societal inertia?

How Might Ecologists Make the World Safe for Biodiversity Without Getting Fired?

Bulletin of the British Ecological Society 2012 43:4

- ☉ What groups in society have the necessary influence on decision makers to obtain the desired decision? Will quiet lobbying by insiders achieve the goal [politics as the art of the possible] or is mass mobilization and taking to the streets required [politics as the art of changing what's possible]? Are decision makers divided? Are opponents united or not?
- ☉ What, exactly, is wanted from these groups, and when?
- ☉ How can the groups whose support is needed be enlisted to bring about the right decision from decision makers? This requires answering several subsidiary questions: What are their interests and how do they see them? Which messages will emotionally resonate with the group and motivate action? How can the message be tied to the group's most fundamental assumptions about the world and therefore be cognitively satisfying? Which story is the most effective vehicle for carrying the message? Who is (are) the best messenger(s)? Which channels are the most effective for reaching the group? What can conservationists offer in return to groups whose support is solicited (quid pro quos, not shared values or goals, are the basis of much politics)?
- ☉ What is the plan for enlisting or mobilizing the groups identified? What resources exist or must be obtained to carry out the plan? How will their mobilization be sustained over the required period, including after decision-making and through implementation and enforcement?
- ☉ Who are the likely opponents of the desired decision and how can their opposition be minimized so that the relative power of the coalition in favor of the desired solution outweighs the power of opponents? How can this balance of power be sustained to ensure the decision isn't reversed or is a paper decision only?
- ☉ How will progress toward success be monitored and evaluated, especially given the very long time it can take to achieve ecological goals?
- ☉ A final consideration is best posed as admonition rather than question: avoid over-investment in a strategy or expectations and remain observant, open to suddenly appearing opportunities such as a crisis that weakens opponents or causes decision-makers to be more receptive. Strategies should not be lightly abandoned, but rigid adherence to plans or to a particular understanding of the political landscape will cause missed opportunities. (synthesized from Johns 2009)

Scientists' predisposition to think in terms of imparting information is best seen as an intermediate goal. If they care about what happens biodiversity scientists are really in the business of imparting motivation for changes in individual behavior and more importantly, motivation for taking collective action (mobilization) in pursuit of goals that alter the behavior of institutions such as governments and businesses.



Should scientists be in the business of motivating changes in the behavior of institutions such as governments and businesses? (The photograph is of the statue of Richard the Lionheart outside the Palace of Westminster, home of the UK Houses of Parliament).

Getting Things Done

There are several routes to mobilization scientists may take: directly organizing targeted groups or their leaders; advising those who do this; or more typically communicating scientific findings to activists, decision makers and others in ways that make them easy to incorporate in goal setting and action. Success in all of these depends on a good grasp of the answers to the questions posed in the fifth bullet—understanding how to make influential people feel an issue is urgent and personal so they act on it.

All three paths to action require communicating on three levels: emotion, needs and understanding. Messages mobilize when they evoke strong emotion: anger at nature's destruction and those doing it, love for wild places and other creatures, or pride in protecting the natural world. They must also enlist needs—the need to belong to a group, to be part of a cause, to have recognition for doing good, for a healthy world in which to live. Unfortunately human needs lend themselves easily to deformation and compensatory behavior. We can be socialized to eat food which is bad for us; or to go shopping or seek power when satisfying relationships are unavailable. Mobilization depends on breaking through these deformations of personality and touching genuine needs.

How Might Ecologists Make the World Safe for Biodiversity Without Getting Fired?

Bulletin of the British Ecological Society 2012 43:4

Mobilization also hinges on the cognitive aspects of appeals. This is more familiar territory for scientists who are in the business of explaining things. Culture—the guidance mechanism we rely in the absence of genetically determined behavior—is not just about how the world works but about its meaning and purpose. Messages are most effective when they are anchored in people's most deeply held notions of purpose (which are usually unquestioned and not easily tested). For example most people, religious and secular, have a deeply held belief in progress and any appeal challenging that faith is likely to be ignored. Mobilization is not about conversion, which is very difficult, but reaching people where they are at. (Conversion can occur in the face of personal or social crises and we need to be ready with alternatives when crises emerge.) So messages that seek to redefine progress rather than challenge it head on are likely to be more effective: progress is restoring the Earth to health, working less and spending more time outdoors connecting with nature, taking responsibility for caring for our real home and not converting more and more of the natural world into toys.

Mobilization also depends on reinforcing and nurturing a sense of efficacy. People must believe they can make a difference before they will act.

We are storytelling animals. We don't just enjoy stories, but explain and navigate the world through stories. Successful communication depends heavily on stories which are compelling—which are vivid, genuine, familiar, and have characters, problems or plots that target groups can identify with or find themselves in.

Ritual is also central to mobilization. When people act in unison in support of a cause, when they sing, dance and march together, when they publically proclaim their support for a goal and take action to achieve it, they are much more likely to follow through and persevere than when these are absent.

Organization is critical to generating and sustaining collective action. When people ask what can they do to help too often ecologists reply (if at all) with "send money" or "send a postcard to the President, write to your MP." This low level of mobilization has proved insufficient to reach conservation goals; it does not create or sustain the sort of mass political force that can effectively reward and punish decision makers over the long haul. People must be *involved* in groups to develop a strong and active commitment to sustained action. Group involvement need not (and should not) be focused only on political activities, but include all those activities that constitute a community and deepen bonds among people.



Outdoor activities such as wildlife viewing enhances empathy with nature

There is no substitute for re-immersing people in the world that gave us birth. Strip malls and electronic gadgets are not only biologically sterile (at best) but they insulate us, as does most technology, from the consequences of our actions. Hiking, camping, even an afternoon in the woods, grassland or park can reconnect people with the life-giving. Restoring habitat, such as Trees for Life's work on Scotland's Caledonian Forest, creates and nurtures bonds of empathy and lends itself to regarding places and other creatures as the subjects of justice.

The written word will never be sufficient. The history of every effort to reorder societal priorities has relied on music, theater, and—in the 20th Century—film to tell its story, to give people solace and courage and joy.

There are other attributes of groups that bring about successful change in addition. They include access to decision makers (or taking power and becoming decision makers), making allies among sectors of the elite (both are insider approaches to politics), mass action in the streets or withdrawal of cooperation (outsider approaches), recognition of opportunities, an unwillingness to compromise on goals and flexibility about means for realizing them, willingness to use the carrots and sticks available without timidity, and a record that convinces opponents and decision makers that we will never tire or go away.

The wheel has been invented. It is up to scientists and others who hold the great symphony of life on earth to be of the highest value to use the wheel effectively, intelligently, and forcefully.

David Johns teaches politics and law at Portland State University. A Board member and Treasurer of the Society for Conservation Biology, David lectures and writes extensively on politics and the environment and is author of *A New Conservation Politics: Power, Organization Building and Effectiveness* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).