

GUEST COMMENT

Biologists as Policymakers?

Recently I served as an ecologist on a multidisciplinary team of consultants for an international development organization. The team included biologists, agronomists, foresters, watershed experts, sociologists, demographers, and economists, and we were concerned with tackling environmental problems in a developing country. At a final session the team was to draft recommendations for the government concerned, advising how it should rejig its policies and reassemble its capabilities in order to improve the prospects of conservation of a favourable environment.

We each submitted our findings and analyses. Then the economists, with the support of the team leader (himself an economist), said it was plain what the policy recommendations should be, and they would draft them forthwith. Wait a minute, responded the rest of us. What about our views on policy too? Well, said the economists, they were the ones with expertise on policy issues, they had stacks of experience in the political arena, they knew what would work. In any case, 'It's always the economists who handle such things.'

Our repeated protests notwithstanding, they were largely right. Economists receive formal training in policy matters and related areas of 'How to get things done'. Biologists and most others do not. Hence economists are familiar with the process of policy change — a field that remains beyond our purview. Many biologists are experts *inter alia* on the flow of energy through ecosystems, but know little about the flow of influence through the 'corridors of power'.

I have encountered a similar circumstance, *i.e.* biologists being denied an appropriate contribution to policymaking, on various other occasions. Is there not a case, then, that biologists should gain experience, as part of their professional education, in the fields of policy and politics? Is this not especially pertinent to those biologists who want, indeed feel a responsibility, to enter the public arena to help deal with problems of the environment? Is this not a professional imperative at a time when The Biosphere faces threats of unprecedented scope and scale?

Some biologists feel the time is overdue for an initiative along these lines. Others feel the time is not ripe for any such innovation — and never will be, or in fact should never be. Biologists are biologists, not public-affairs specialists. Let's stick with what we are good at, and not dissipate our energies with distractions.

During the past few years I have participated in planning sessions at a number of universities on both sides of the Atlantic, where biologist faculty-members have been grappling with the challenges of preparing students for careers in a fast-changing world. Many new programmes of study have been proposed, notably in such endeavours as conservation biology and global change. All too often, however, the expanded syllabus does not reach beyond additional courses in such subjects as biodiversity studies, population biology, or Biosphere ethics. There seems scant scope for economics and whatever else might pertain to 'environmental politics'. Meantime the initiative on the policy front remains with those who claim to be professionally trained in the field, namely the economists — even though their views on environmental issues are often at strong variance with those of biologists, not to mention the basic ecological imperatives that must ultimately constrain all human activity (whether economic or otherwise).

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