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Letter to the editor: Turning science into policy

Dear MEAM,

I'm writing with regard to your article "Turning science into policy: What scientists should (and should not) do when talking to policy-makers" ([MEAM 8: 3](#)).

Career scientists may have a pretty high comfort level with placing some theoretical constructs between the data and their functional interpretation. It's one of the best ways to make a career, in fact. However, in the policy-making world, the comfort level with such practices is much lower. There are several reasons, although "policy-makers are just not smart enough to understand ecological theory" is not one of them. Part of the reason is just the opposite: policy-makers feel that may be just as good as scientists at filtering data through theoretical constructs.

The Venn diagrams of "relevant theoretical constructs" that each community uses overlap, but each includes constructs with which the other community may not have a lot of interest [or sympathy]. The policy-makers are happier with their own set than with the set dictated by science. Now, the Science defense against that is to have a mature theory, so the full range of experts interpret a body of ecological data the same way. In that case the scientist's interpretation of the data is pretty powerful in a policy dialogue - because the science community is speaking with pretty much one voice.

Even there, though, the policy community can be pretty gun-shy from past unpleasant experiences. Take the case of maximum sustainable yield (MSY). MSY was not some brainchild of policy-makers. The fisheries science community developed it, particularly in the '60s and '70s. When policy discussions started on what eventually became the fish stocks agreement, we sold to the policy world that the concept of a maximum sustainable yield was valid. Even better, we said it could be calculated. So they bought the concept and put it in high-level policy documents. Ever since then, we - the science community - have been beating on them for following our earlier advice.

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