

DECISION MAKING

Policy without science

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Political bodies charged with regulating and implementing policies for socio-ecological interactions generally couch their decisions in scientific understanding, but exactly how peer-reviewed research is utilized and brought to bear in these committees and boards has gone unexamined.

Tomas Koontz and Craig Thomas at the University of Washington expected that the Puget Sound Partnership, a government agency established by the state of Washington to monitor and manage the second largest estuary in the United States, would be discussing scientific research in their meetings at all levels. The PSP is itself the umbrella for multiple local organizations, each composed of stakeholders from local governments, industry and indigenous tribes, whose executive and technical committees are responsible for creating and implementing ecosystem recovery plans. The authors compiled and content coded the minutes of meetings by both types of committee, and discovered that executive committees devoted only a very small portion of their meetings to discussing scientific studies and reports from peer-reviewed journals. Technical committees spent more time on scientific discussions, typically on cause–effect analyses and understanding obstacles to the health of the watershed; even then they were more likely, as with the executive committees, to refer to ‘grey literature’, that is the plans and assessments created by other government agencies, rather than peer-reviewed research. The divergence between academic and ‘professional’ knowledge in the management of ecosystems raises questions about how science policy is being formulated without seemingly direct input from academic studies.

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