

10 Ways scientists can better engage with decision makers

The figure of the decision maker is often invoked as a key conduit for academic research to be transformed into social impact. Drawing on work undertaken for their recently published book chapter (with Dr Megan Evans), David Rose and Rebecca Jarvis distill findings from a review of how academics have engaged with decision makers in the field of [conservation science](#) to present 10 practical points of advice for researchers seeking to engage with decision makers.

To improve the chances of evidence-informed policy-making, the science community (broadly defined to include the social sciences, humanities, and arts) knows that decision-makers must be engaged effectively. Key decision-makers, including politicians, civil servants, practitioners, and other stakeholders, rarely have the [time or the required access](#) to go searching for scientific evidence, even though they often desire it. While effective engagement is, of course, [two-way](#), there are a number of ways scientists can engage better with decision-makers. Here, we provide ten tips specifically to scientists on how to practise good engagement with decision-makers based on a [review of the literature in conservation science](#). We define engagement as the process by which decision-makers and other stakeholders (including scientists) influence how and what decisions are made.

1. Know who you need to talk to

All relevant decision-makers need to be considered when communicating evidence or else vital knowledge may be missed, or unnecessary conflicts caused. Before starting a project, be clear about who the key stakeholders are – for example, which key decision-makers do you need on board and who is going to be affected by your scientific recommendations and therefore who needs to play a role in their development? A good [stakeholder mapping exercise](#) is a crucial starting point.

2. Engage early, with clearly defined aims

Decision-maker engagement must have a clear purpose in order for all participants to work together towards a clear goal and outcome. Involving decision-makers [at an early stage](#) can provide ownership of a project to local communities. It may build social awareness of an issue and allow decision-makers to be involved in setting questions and methodologies so that results are relevant. It is much harder to engage decision-makers effectively at a later stage when the research has already been carried out.

3. Decision-makers should find it easy to engage

When setting up engagement exercises, such as policy workshops or community events, it is important to make sure that it is easy for non-academics to attend. Not all decision-makers can devote a whole day to meeting attendance, travel long distances into busy city centres, or may not be used to academic workshop formats with sticky-notes and presentations. Financial or other incentives for decision-makers to engage may not always be appropriate, but researchers could at least consider what the relative advantage of engagement is for decision-makers and cover costs at the very least? Letting decision-makers see how their involvement has shaped the scientific project is also useful and this could be done by regular short communications to show how you've acted on their input.

4. Embrace and include multiple knowledge(s), perspectives, and worldviews

Engagement with decision-makers must not be tokenistic. Instead, you should be reflexive, take on board the views of others with different knowledge types and worldviews, understand constraints on their decision-making (e.g. politics, time), and show participants that you value them. If these steps are followed, then it is more likely that a collaborative spirit will be achieved, which will help to build common understanding of an issue.

5. Think hard about power

As researchers, we must do [more](#) than simply speak truth to the most obvious powers-that-be. This links closely to the stakeholder mapping in point one. Key decision-makers might not always be the most obvious people, or indeed involving only the seemingly obvious might stop you from working with other people who have more influence on decisions. Delivering “impact” through evidence-informed policy may also result in, or require, a redistribution of power.

6. Build mutual trust

This theme is just about universally accepted in the literature and needs little explanation. Without [mutual trust](#), transparency, and respect, then engagement exercises with decision-makers are doomed to failure. Good practices for building trust include respecting participant confidentiality, following through on promises, and committing to long-term engagement if it has been offered.

7. Good facilitation is key

Engagement processes need to have good facilitators. If running a policy workshop or similar exercise, a trusted facilitator will know how to speak the right language to audience members, as well as how to encourage stakeholder input, and build trust. They may also be good at managing potential conflict, especially if they are a neutral party with not stake in the decision. Decision-makers, including civil servants, are rarely scientific experts in specific areas and thus clear communication without unnecessary jargon is key.

8. Learn new skills for good engagement

Good engagement and facilitation processes require excellent communication skills. For the science community, it will become increasingly important to be trained in a range of different skills and be able to communicate differently with different people, though we acknowledge the institutional constraints of finding time to do this. Furthermore, individual scientists may not always be the best people to communicate with decision-makers, and other knowledge brokers (or ‘boundary spanners’) might be better placed to do this.

9. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel – consider making use of existing spaces and opportunities.

In conservation, there are [several good schemes](#) which encourage scientists to engage better with decision-makers, across research, policy and practice. These schemes include [policy placements](#) for scientists, [job shadowing](#) exercises, and similar activities to enhance collaborative working. Such schemes exist in other scientific areas too and scientists should consider ways to get involved with them.

10. Don’t give up!

One important aspect to take from our recommendations is that they will not always yield immediate, tangible rewards, but this should not be the sole aim of practising good engagement. Rather, ongoing, long term engagement can lead to a change in the overall policy framing of problems and solutions, something which can occur diffusely over long timescales. Evidence can thus be influential on policy, but not as quickly as we may have hoped for. Giving up, however, and failing to re-establish relationships with new decision-makers (who replace old ones) is a sure-fire way of not achieving lasting impact.

This blog draws on the authors' recently published book chapter, '[Effective engagement of conservation scientists with decision-makers](#)' in an edited volume '[Conservation Research, Policy and Practice](#)'. The book is available under a Creative Commons Open Access license ([CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0](#)) DOI [10.1017/9781108638210](#).

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