THE USE OF RESEARCH IN THE UK PARLIAMENT

Lessons for conservation scientists
This article relates to the following project report: Kenny, C., Rose, D. C., Hobbs, A., Tyler, C., and Blackstock, J. 2017. The Role of Research in the UK Parliament, supported by the Houses of Parliament, the Economic and Social Research Council, and the Department of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Public Policy at University College London.

Within the scientific community it is generally accepted that policies are most effective when they are supported by evidence. As policy-makers, the use of evidence is a good way to ensure that they don’t get costly decisions wrong.

Over the course of the last decade in conservation, many studies have sought to identify barriers to the use of evidence in policy, and suggested solutions to overcome them. Major projects such as SPIRAL have introduced mechanisms such as ELLIPS and IPBES, seek to bridge the divide between scientists and policy-makers. Over time, it has been learned about how to improve the policy impact of scientific research, but little attention has been paid to the type of evidence that policies are actually using.

Legislatures, on the other hand, have tended to be overlooked. These policy venues are distinct from executives, and host a variety of processes through which key decisions are made. Studies have illustrated that parliamentary debate and scrutiny can play an important role in shaping legislation, including in the environmental sphere.

An ESRC-funded collaboration between University College London and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology sought to start the necessary work to understand how evidence is used in legislatures. Using the UK Parliament as a case study, the research investigated how evidence was sourced, defined, and used in this setting, including in Select Committees and Public Bill Committees. A mixed methods approach was used, involving interviews and surveys of key actors, as well as participant observation of committee processes, and documentary analysis of submitted written and oral evidence. Overall, 157 people in Parliament contributed to this research, including MPs, Peers, and parliamentary staff. The project report can now be found online (launched November 30th), after the print deadline for this Bulletin issue, but here we summarise key messages for the conservation science community about how to engage with the UK Parliament effectively to improve the chances of evidence-informed policy. Helping this advice is particularly important at the present time, since Parliament is changing and scrutinising a plethora of post-Brexit legislation and policy which has implications for the environment.

Overall, we found that evidence is defined broadly in Parliament. MPs, Peers, and to a lesser extent staff, rarely distinguish between different types of evidence (e.g. peer reviewed science versus public opinion). Sources of evidence were diverse, but the documentary analysis of written and oral evidence submitted to Select Committees and Public Bill Committees was interesting. Proportionally, evidence submissions tended to be dominated by not-for-profit external organisations, such as charities. The proportion of evidence from the Higher Education sector, however, was much lower, suggesting that universities engage less well in parliamentary processes. There were certain types of evidence that people in Parliament found most useful and credible – statistical evidence, for example, was selected most frequently as an option by MPs and MPs’ staff, and was widely considered to be credible and robust. Parliamentarians (e.g. Library staff) said that they used expert opinion most often.

Evidence was also used for a variety of different purposes, not just to inform policies within a linear, rational model of policy-making. Prominent purposes did include ‘to enable effective scrutiny’, ‘to provide credibility’, ‘to provide background knowledge’, ‘to inform opinions’, and ‘to provide balance’, but evidence was also used ‘to substantiate pre-existing views’, and ‘to score political points’.

Several factors determined whether evidence would be used to support parliamentary work. Survey respondents ranked credibility as the most important factor, but data from interviews suggested that evidence appraisal was limited. Other important factors included relevance and clear presentation. Research from universities was considered to be complicated, hard to access, and irrelevant for much parliamentary decision-making. Other factors included constraints placed on the use of evidence by the tight parliamentary timetable, lack of time to work with, a prominent theme, particularly for MPs, the extent to which an evidence source had been recommended by colleagues, and personal traits such as attitude, background experience, and alignment with own views.

Although the research investigated the use of evidence across Parliament, and did not actively consider environmental decision-making, important lessons can nevertheless be learned by the conservation science community. We present a list of the top-ten lessons below, which should improve the way in which the conservation science community engages with the UK Parliament.

1 Recognise the difference between parliament (legislature) and government (executive) – these are two different things. Many important decisions are made in legislatures and so it should be seen as an important site of engagement.

2 Understand how Parliament works and engage with it – the research found that extending-for-profit organisational structures to engage with parliamentary processes better than the Higher Education sector. Universities were criticised for not always engaging effectively in calls for written and oral evidence submissions to committees, and one respondent suggested that universities were ‘closed shops’. Our report outlines the different parliamentary processes of debate and scrutiny, including the mechanisms through which evidence can feed into Parliament. A better understanding of these, including what makes research timely and relevant, may improve the prospects for evidence use.

3 Be able to respond to evidence calls at short timescales – more flexible modes of scientific reporting are needed. It is not always appropriate to wait until the end of a long project to communicate; rather the ability to engage frequently is vital.

4 Build personal relationships – there was much evidence that people in Parliament used known and trusted sources and sometimes relied on peer recommendations. Key members of Select Committees, such as special advisors, also played an important role in determining evidence use. Conservation scientists (and universities) could build networks with MPs, Peers, researchers, Library staff, and committee staff, in order to establish trust and enhance awareness of their work.

5 Open access publishing – lack of open access publishing was one of the main reasons why scientific evidence was not used in Parliament.

6 Present research in a user-friendly, relevant way – academic sources of evidence were criticised for being written in an overly complicated fashion. Sometimes academia witnesses to committees were challenged for being difficult to understand. Respondents suggested that scientific evidence should be communicated in a simple manner, with accessible, short abstracts, and user-friendly presentation of data (e.g. visualisation).

7 More proactive evidence synthesis, particularly of ‘what works’ – since Parliament is a time-pressurised environment, respondents needed to understand quickly what the evidence was saying. Evidence syntheses were generally praised, particularly if they had been proactively compiled ahead of time (e.g. POST notes). Respondents also said that they liked summaries of ‘what works’, which reminded us of the need for innovations like the Conservation Evidence project.

8 Work with knowledge brokers – it is difficult for scientists to engage fully with Parliament, and parliamentary staff. It is expected that the pages will go live this month. You can stay up-to-date on the development of the web hub by signing up to FOST’s mailing list or following FOST on Twitter @POST_UK

9 Maintain scientific credibility – despite the finding that little evidence appraisal was carried out, credibility of evidence was important. In many cases, credibility of the source was considered to be most important, but people in Parliament were aware that some evidence submissions could be biased. Scientists should continue to work hard to establish credibility, and perhaps not risk compromising it by advocating too strongly.

10 Stand for Parliament – as the old saying goes, if you can’t beat them, join them!

FIND OUT MORE
As a result of our project’s findings, FOST is developing a web hub for academic researchers, which will provide guidance and information for researchers on many of the pages above, as well as case studies of academics who have worked with Parliament and evidenced interviews with parliamentary staff. It is expected that the pages will go live this month. You can stay up-to-date on the development of the web hub by signing up to FOST’s mailing list or following FOST on Twitter @POST_UK

GET INVOLVED
We hope that the conservation science community adopts a renewed interest in legislatures, and considers the ten messages above to improve the chances of evidence-informed policy. I plan to expand this research model by investigating the use of evidence in different decision-making in the UK Parliament and beyond, for example in the European and US legislative contexts with accessible, short abstracts, and user-friendly presentation of data (e.g. visualisation).