

THE USE OF RESEARCH IN THE UK PARLIAMENT

Lessons for
conservation
scientists



FEATURE

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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 Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 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. For 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 the conservation science community to useful literatures in the political sciences, and recently established mechanisms, such as EKLIPSE and IPBES, seek to bridge the divide between scientists and policy-makers. Many lessons have been learned about how to improve the policy impact of scientific research, but one significant type of policy venue has, thus far, been widely ignored. Research into conservation science-policy interfaces has tended to define 'policy' in vague terms, offering general advice about how to increase policy impact; or, research has looked at the use of evidence by government (executive).

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. Heeding this advice is particularly important at the present time since Parliament is debating 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. Parliamentary staff (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, two areas in which evidence submitted by academics did not perform strongly. Research from universities was widely 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 timetables (indeed lack of time was 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. High

level messages may be relevant to legislative settings around the world, but policy settings are rarely easily comparable in different contexts.

1 Recognise the difference between parliament (legislatures) 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 external not-for-profit organisations tend 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-informed policy.

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 big 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 recommendation. 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. Universities, journals, and funders could work together to ensure that open access is available and affordable to all researchers, whilst researchers could disseminate their evidence in a variety of accessible ways (e.g. blogs).

6 Present research in a user-friendly, relevant way – academic sources of evidence were criticised for being written in an overly complicated fashion. Sometimes academic 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. POSTnotes). Respondents also said that they liked summaries of 'what works', which reminds 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 parliamentarians, because of pressures of their own! Knowledge brokers, such as POST, were praised for bridging the gap between evidence and policy.

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, POST is developing a web hub for academic researchers, which will provide guidance and information for researchers on many of the points above, as well as case studies of academics who have worked with Parliament and videoed 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 POST's mailing list or following POST 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 for environmental decision-making in the UK Parliament and beyond; for example, looking in detail at the work of the Environmental Audit Committee, as well as other parliamentary processes with an environmental remit.

