

Environmental Science, Advocacy, and Public Policy – Readings Reflection

The issue of negotiating the professional limitations of and the line between environmental research and advocacy is one that I've been pushed to routinely contemplate for probably over a year now. It's also one that, up until reading these pieces, I thought I had essentially figured out. Of course, I was soon reminded that these distinctions and negotiations are easier said than done, as Wagner points out in his piece. As someone who has recently spent an ample amount of time on both sides of the coin—leading an environmental advocacy group and conducting publicly funded research—and someone who wants to fall somewhere in between in my career, the relationship between science and advocacy already doesn't seem nearly as clear-cut to me as it likely does to most people.

The only general consensus that you'll find in these readings is that this is an issue because typically—or so we hope—people choose careers in subjects that they're passionate about. We come into our careers with bias, which I don't find issue with at all. With that said, it seems like these days, scientists who work in environmental research are being unfairly expected to muster their passion to a point where they solely become research-generating robots. Perhaps, as the readings mention, this is just due to the nature of the source of environmental threats, but I think that environmental scientists are one of very, very few groups who actually become delegitimized due to their passion. Though we might question or doubt doctors who make the correlation between lifestyle choices and disease, we still acknowledge that they are doctors, whereas environmental scientists are being reduced to environmentalists and non-scientists, as Wagner mentions.

With that in mind, I don't think I can agree with one author's perspective of how environmental scientists should handle their involvement in public policy. I don't think there's one answer among the few offered. Where I think Lackey and Wagner may have been underestimating the ability of scientists to detach themselves from their work for the sake of impartiality, I think Noss may have overestimated it. Personally, I also don't think completely removing environmental scientists from advocacy will automatically solve their image problem; people have had this view of anyone who cares about the environment since the 1970s, and to separate scientists and advocates completely will only drive a wedge between them in terms of communication. If scientists don't want to even be associated with advocates because of their image, that's a problem. Sure, there are the unrealistic, wild “hippies” who sort of ruin the message of sustainability for everyone by pushing people too hard, but scientists should be able to recognize that not everyone is like that, especially if they are passionate about the environment as well.

Finally, in a semi-unimportant and off topic story, both doing research and advocacy has shown me just how important it is that these groups communicate. For the past year or so, I've been a leader in an environmental club on campus, and I've dealt with those people who expect

everyone else to make drastic lifestyle changes in the name of preserving nature. I've met people who care a lot more about native plants in Clifton than they do about other global issues or about scientific research. But some of the scientists I've met are similarly out-of-touch with regular people. For ten months in one of UC's biology labs, I did research on cockroach reproductive physiology, something I knew little to nothing about beforehand, which quickly showed me how hard it is for some academics to explain their work accurately in such simple terms. Neither group is perfect, and they both face issues with communicating their work. This is why I think people who work in environmental communication are so important. It's not much of a real solution to this dilemma, but I think we need more people with one foot in both of these realms, who can decipher the research done and strategically communicate that to advocates, businesses, politicians, and the general public. That way, scientists don't have to just step back and hope their work gets to people who can use it, and we (I'm vaguely referring to people who care about the environment, I guess) don't just have to cross our fingers and hope that advocates and politicians will understand the science on their own. Though I personally believe that scientists have every right to advocate for causes, I think this takes out a layer of concern with how they use their research in advocacy.

(So sorry for how long this is and the last paragraph is sort of off topic; it became a semi-cathartic thing to write...)