

How to Bridge the Science-Policy Gap?

Recommendations from the international conference:

*“Bridging the gap – policies and science as tools in implementing sustainable forest management”,
summarized by Peter Mayer, IUFRO Executive Director, chair of the concluding panel discussion*

The meeting co-sponsored by IUFRO Division 8 was held from 17-19/21 October 2005 in Alnarp, Sweden, and highlighted various aspects of science-policy interaction on forest-related matters. In a concluding plenary debate mechanisms were identified for successfully bridging the gap between science and policy. At the same time, participants were also reminded that answering the question “why” the gap should be bridged was a crucial prerequisite for identifying the right mechanisms. A subsequent discussion revealed that the motives can range from altruistic to purely financial ones.

In the plenary discussion the participants identified the following mechanisms for bridging the science-policy gap:

Communication

The need to differentiate between various “publics” and the respective media was seen as crucial for the success of communication. In addition, narrative stories were suggested as a communication approach that helps making the subject easy to understand. In general, the well known communication concept of “keep it short and simple (KISS)” was identified as an important guiding principle for communication also of forest science-related issues. Furthermore, presenting forest researchers as “problem solvers” was seen as an effective means to communicate with policy makers. However, it was also underlined that scientists should be transparent with regard to scientific results and uncertainties.

Joint fora

The participants shared the understanding that science represents a stakeholder group in the debate about the conservation and sustainable management of forests. Therefore, it was considered important that scientists were given the possibility to participate in joint fora of policy makers and stakeholders. While these fora are often lacking at the national level, examples at the international level - such as the Collaborative Partnership on Forests - demonstrate their usefulness. Furthermore, national forest programmes and the model forest initiative, which are both characterized by the participation of stakeholders as key elements, were identified as promising means also for the participation of scientists.

“Listen” first

The meeting concluded that understanding the views, needs and values of various actors and the general public is very important for effectively bridging the gap between science and various actors. Hence, the importance of involving stakeholders at early stages of the research process was underlined.

Link forest issues to issues of common concern to people

Linking forest topics to broader topics was regarded as an important mechanism that helps to raise awareness about forest science issues and forest issues in general and to bridge the gap between science and policy. Examples include the discussion on climate change or the increasing importance given to the landscape level. Both examples would provide excellent opportunities to demonstrate the forest science knowledge, if the links to forest science were made clear.

Training and Education

Training and education were seen as being of special relevance in the light of co-operation among disciplines.