

Conservation Biology
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Letters

Brussard et al. (1994) make a strong point that the September issue of the journal takes SCB close to being "too strident in advocating specific political prescriptions," and that "political advocacy from scientists ... does nothing to advance the debate." I believe these authors are dead wrong about the relationship of advocacy and science and that their argument is rife with self-contradiction.

Between the lines of their editorial, Brussard et al. seem to imply that Reed Noss has been wavering in his responsibilities as Editor. I must emphasize that in my experience as an author, Noss held to the highest scientific and editorial standards. He scrutinized and challenged my interpretations of published data, regardless of its "political" bent. I saw absolutely no reason to question the excellent editorial policy of this professional journal or its Editor; both seek truth, not any predetermined political agenda.

The article by Noss (1994) that these authors find so offensive is clearly labeled as an editorial. The function of an editorial is to editorialize, and to do so responsibly. Noss provided context by previewing themes of the major articles, made an insightful observation on statistical and experimental design as it relates to defense of the range status quo, and shared his carefully considered opinion on the proper balance between advocacy, bias, and the scientific process. By what logic do Brussard et al. find Noss' editorial inappropriate and their own appropriate? Is a contrasting view of the status quo really the issue here? Because their field studies have found some instances where certain species of concern were benefited by grazing, they accuse Noss of a "flaw of deductive reasoning" for stating

"that range management must be dramatically reformed." Is it not a logical error to assert that all range management is satisfactory (i.e., not in need of reform) simply because it occasionally benefits some wildlife species? Furthermore, their example of a species that may be helped by grazing, the Lahontan cutthroat trout, contradicts their own point. Federal and state management agencies concur that livestock grazing is the primary reason this subspecies is threatened in the first place (summarized in Horning 1994)!

Brussard et al. state that their motivation in writing is a "deep concern about the issue of scientific objectivity" and go on to say that scientists will not be listened to if they are seen as being too politically involved. They then assert that because livestock grazing is deeply embedded in the culture of the American West, biologists should ignore the question of appropriateness of grazing, but instead should simply seek ways to minimize the impacts of grazing. In other words, we should avoid studying the effects of grazing because ranchers wield political power. This assertion directly contradicts their later statement that the goal of conservation biologists should be "unbiased experimental design and analysis." Isn't the selection of questions one of the most important pieces of the scientific process? Doesn't the choice to ignore an entire category of questions represent bias? What if all scientists (and other scholars) avoided inquiry that made the political status quo uncomfortable? If Copernicus had so yielded to sixteenth century political forces we might still think the sun revolved around the earth.

It is a myth that values and scientific objectivity necessarily work at cross purposes. We can be passionate about life while being objective toward facts. The righteous course is to be clear about what one's biases are, not to pretend they don't exist. David Orr (1994, p. 136) has asked,

"...is it possible for us to be neutral or 'objective' toward life and nature? ...On closer examination, what often passes for neutrality is nothing of the sort but rather the thinly disguised self-interest of those with much to gain financially or professionally." As strongly as Brussard et al. insist on "scientific objectivity," is it possible that their reluctance to be truly objective in asking questions about the appropriateness of grazing is, in fact, directly related to politics? I cannot answer this question, but believe it must be asked. Grazing interests have enormous political influence in the West, expressed through actions of federal and state governments, the very forces that provide research grants and fund state universities.

It is an acceptable personal choice for scientists to selectively avoid politically touchy issues. But it is highly irresponsible for those same scientists to present such a choice as the necessary path for the entire conservation science community. Our job as scientists is to seek the truth. Our job as global citizens is to seek to do what is right. Both these efforts are seriously hampered by choosing to avoid difficult issues. A cataloging of the biodiversity of any site, whether it be Nevada or the Amazon, is merely an epitaph if that science is not inserted into the arena of policy. Only the gullible would believe that policy makers will make this insertion of their own accord—politicians avoid difficult issues even more vigorously than do scientists. To assume that grazing practices, after a century and a half, will somehow change themselves on behalf of biodiversity is naive.

"Advocacy" is not, as these authors seem to imply, a dirty word to conservation biologists. To again quote David Orr (1994) "Life in jeopardy ought to cause us to take a stand, not retreat into a spurious neutrality....When the chips are down, we do not go to physicians who admit to being neutral about the life and death of their patients."

In the by-laws of our Society, the first purpose is to "promote the scientific study of the phenomena that affect the maintenance, loss, and restoration of biological diversity" (emphasis added). My article in the September issue (as well as others) makes abundantly clear that the issue of livestock grazing is worthy of our attention, whatever course of action different parties choose to follow.

Good science does not avoid asking difficult questions because it is afraid of what it will discover. Bad politics does that.

Literature Cited

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