

INTEGRATING SOCIAL SCIENCE CONSIDERATIONS INTO CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

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Social, political, and economic considerations lie at the heart of most conservation problems. Yet, most conservationists receive training in the biological sciences and therefore they try to impose primarily biological solutions on these problems, often with discouraging results. Conservationists face continuing biodiversity loss and discouraging success rates. As they continue to confront the erosion of biodiversity worldwide, conservationists increasingly search for more innovative approaches. Arguably, one of the main reasons for our inability to stem biodiversity loss rests in traditional, narrow approaches to conservation problems that inadequately address the ultimate socio-political and economic causes. A more explicit policy approach to conservation problems that initially focuses on comprehensive problem definition promises to improve success rates by encouraging practitioners to develop broader, more truly interdisciplinary conservation programs that explicitly include social scientists and work to address the full array of underlying factors causing biodiversity loss. More comprehensive assessment of conservation problems examine biological variables, but simultaneously explore organizational considerations, issues of power and authority, the values and attitudes of key stakeholders, economic factors, and more in an integrated program.

Given time constraints, in this talk I will illustrate the importance of incorporating social science considerations by focusing on one of these crucial areas of exploration: the values and attitudes of key stakeholders. Using examples from black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) and gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) conservation efforts in the United States and protected areas management in Mongolia, I will demonstrate how inadequate or simplistic attention to values and attitudes of people involved in and affected by these programs reduced effectiveness and delayed progress, often at considerable expense to the program. Conducting social science assessment in isolation from other programmatic components (i.e., multi-disciplinary approaches) similarly impeded a more complete and nuanced understanding of the conservation problems and therefore precluded a more effective, interdisciplinary response. I end with a call for conservationists gain more training in the social sciences and to work more closely with social scientists to develop more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approaches to addressing conservation challenges.