Balancing Science and Activism

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Outline of Presentation

• Briefly describe my background
• University policy on activism
• SCB “policy” on activism
• Some general experiences
• Summarize
• Questions
What is activism (or activist)?

• Activism
  – a) philosophical – a theory that the essence of reality is pure activity, especially spiritual activity or process,
  – b) the doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political goals

• Activist – name for an individual who favors, incites, or demands intensified activities
Natural Resources Research Institute (U of Minnesota) Mission Statement:

• To foster economic development of Minnesota’s natural resources in an environmentally sound manner to promote private sector employment.
Center for Water and the Environment (NRRI, U of Minnesota) Mission Statement:

• The economic growth of MN depends on sustained yield and protection of its natural resources.

• CWE is committed to understanding problems that impede the environmentally sound development of the economy.
My background

• Director – 18 years (1988 to 2006)
• Supervise – 50-80 staff (including 10-16 Ph.D.’s)
  – note each with very different perspectives
• Two tenured faculty in the Institute
• Vice-president of Minnesota Society for Conservation Biology
• Member of Chamber of Commerce, former Rotarian, but also Audubon, Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club (also AAAS, AOU, ESA, SCB, etc.)
WE'RE HIRING ANOTHER VISIONARY.
How do we truly achieve sustainability?

Economy

Public Policy Decisions

Environment

Poor Information On Consequences

Few Integrating Mechanisms
Economic Models

Leading Economic Indicators

Data to Causally Link Economic Activity with Environmental Health

Leading Environmental Indicators

Environmental Models

Condition of the Economy (Economic Surveys)

Condition of the Environment (Environmental Surveys)

Note DATA!
University of Minnesota – Board of Regents Policy

“Academic responsibility implies the faithful performance of academic duties and obligations, the recognition of the demands of the scholarly enterprise, and the candor to make it clear that the individual is not speaking for the institution in matters of public interest.”
MN Chapter of SCB – review of primary functions in 2003 – (as determined by poll of chapter members)

1. Resource for local/regional researchers in conservation-related fields (by far)
2. Information center on regional environmental events, projects, etc.
3. Environmental Advocacy and Public Education
Quotes of published dialogue on ‘Advocacy’

• “The line is thin between judgment informed by sound scientific data and speculative judgment based on little data and much personal interest” (Fenn and Milton, Fisheries 22:2, 1997)

• “I suggest we should be calling for professional responsibility rather than debating advocacy ….until we consider use of our scientific knowledge as a responsibility, society will view us as advocates.” (Karr 1993, Cons. Biol. 7:8, 1993)
SCB Code of Ethics

2. **Advocate** the use of reliable information, rigorous scientific methodology ...... in management decisions

5. Avoid actions or omissions that may compromise their responsibility to conservation and science.

7. Perform professional services ..... only in areas of competence.....

8. Refuse to allow personal interests, compensation or personal relationships to interfere with professional judgment

12. Treat colleagues and professional contacts respectfully...
“Resolution of most conservation issues will benefit from the application of scientific expertise ……Our mission and values require that the SCB engage actively in policy to ensure that the highest quality scientific information is applied to conservation/biodiversity issues.”
Society for Conservation Biology
Strategic Plan – 2006-2010 - continued

• P. 8 – V. Impact and Reputation – Rationale and Strategic Impact

“At the most basic level, powerful constituencies, interest groups, and institutions should look to us as a source of sound information that will help them solve problems”
Brief Examples

• Climate change
• Forest management and fire
Conclusions – as SCB Chapter Representatives

• Be responsible scientists – it is your responsibility!
• Contribute in your area of expertise
• “Advocate the use of reliable information”
• Be cautious about highly emotional or personal issues
• Let good science be your guide – seek the truth
• There are many alternatives for advocacy
To conclude, our goal is to have a strong economy and a healthy environment. Good science must always prevail for society to make good decisions about its future. Hence, speak out but intelligently.