

Position Statement

Communities and Civic/Participatory Science

The Communities Committee is a coalition of government, academic, and non-profit organizations with the mission to focus attention on the interdependence of the health of America's forests and the vitality of rural and urban communities. We specifically seek to promote improvements in political and economic structures to enhance local community well-being and the long-term sustainability of forested ecosystems. The Committee recognizes the importance of science in achieving these goals, especially science that recognizes the role that communities can play in developing and implementing research programs and projects and in utilizing research results.

Science has always been an integral component of natural resource management in the United States. Indeed, early conservationists deliberately sought to shield resource management from the vagaries of the political system, based on the assumption that resource decisions could best be made by professionals and scientists. However, over the years this created aloof scientific cultures that fail to recognize the inherent role values play in decision making or to adequately respond to changing social values, and particularly to the increased emphasis that law and society place upon citizen involvement in all aspects of decision making. Furthermore, citizen trust in science and scientists has significantly declined as the adverse environmental consequences of many technologies have become apparent. Communities often feel that scientists ignore the problems they want to focus upon in order to pursue their own agendas, or come into communities, study them, and then leave, never to be heard from again.

To remedy these problems, better bridges between science and citizens and their communities are required. Improving the way we manage natural resources requires a more civic/participatory science that takes a practice-based approach to learning and applies corrective mechanisms based on lessons learned.

Science that informs the decision-making process should not simply treat communities as subjects of research or clients for research results defined by scientific experts. Rather, communities should become active participants and partners in identifying research needs, framing research questions, conducting research, interpreting results, and making recommendations for applications of results. Opportunities for involving citizens directly in scientific research exist across the board, not only in studies focusing on the socioeconomic impacts of proposed management alternatives, but also in studies that address the biophysical requirements and impacts of proposed actions. By involving communities as partners in scientific assessments, field applications, and monitoring activities, civic/participatory science provides an important avenue for assuring that communities have ownership in the scientific process, and that they share in the benefits and not just the costs of the scientific endeavor. Civic/participatory science is collaborative in nature, and emphasizes learning among all participants so that management practices can be adapted based on lessons learned. It is not simply about using volunteer labor in scientific experiments. When citizens with diverse interests work hand in glove with professional scientists, trust is built.

To promote civic/participatory science the Communities Committee advocates the following:

- When research programs are being developed by research sponsors and researchers, consideration should be given to the questions communities and citizens, not just “experts,” want answered. In the development of research agendas, citizens and community-based organizations should be consulted for their input. Researchers should fully inform local governments and research subjects before initiating research activities.
- When conducting research that focuses on communities, researchers have an obligation to be sensitive to the burdens that the conduct of their research may place upon a community. When community participants are involved in the research enterprise and do not sufficiently benefit directly from a research project in their community, they and/or their organizations should be offered compensation for their time, e.g., honoraria, hourly wages, expenses, or other mutually-agreed upon arrangements.
- When the research is completed, researchers have a special obligation to share results with interested stakeholders and the public in easily understood and useable formats, and to recognize that their research serves the purpose of “science informing,” not “science deciding,” policy and management decisions.

Community-based research will more adequately respond to changing social values, and build citizen trust in science and technology. The broader scientific community needs to recognize the role that communities can play in developing and implementing research programs and projects and in utilizing research results. This involvement will serve to improve political and economic structures that enhance both local community well-being and the long-term sustainability of forested ecosystems.