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Emotions and Engagement

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Organisms from Molecules to the Environment

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Emotions and Engagement

Does the rapid pace of extinctions put a moral obligation on conservation scientists not just to analyze and write papers but to get involved in real-world conservation projects?

The question underlies a challenging article by Raphaël Arlettaz and his colleagues that starts on page 835 of this issue of *BioScience*. Arlettaz, a professor of conservation biology at the University of Bern, Switzerland, led an apparently successful project to rescue a critical population of endangered hoopoes in the canton of Valais. But Arlettaz is not resting on his laurels: He calls for the academic community "to adopt new rules that at least tolerate (and at most promote) the commitment of conservation scientists to practice." Conservation scientists, Arlettaz and his coauthors complain, are evaluated solely on the basis of their publication records; practical contributions are not adequately weighed. Changing that, the authors maintain—as well as personal commitment to action on the part of conservation scientists—will improve the chances of survival for both species and ecosystems, by improving conservation as it is practiced. It should also make academic studies more practically relevant.

The plea for promotion and tenure decisions to better reflect social needs and not merely a tally of publications is a familiar one; it is often heard, and less often respected, in connection with promoting interdisciplinary research. Arlettaz's suggestion that conservation scientists should be expected to involve themselves directly in conservation practicalities—and be evaluated in part for these efforts—is bolder, because it would decrease the amount of time scientists devote to pure research.

To Arlettaz's list of reasons for encouraging practical engagement can perhaps be added another, argued recently in *BioScience* by Ronald R. Swaisgood and James K. Sheppard (*BioScience* 60: 626–631). Time spent in nature, and involvement with students and citizens, can improve the spirits of researchers who may be inclined to pessimism about the prospects for the biota they study. Positive affect generally spurs people onward; the boost from seeing even partial success in a conservation project may constructively direct researchers' focus and inspire them to greater efforts.

Arlettaz acknowledges that all people are different (he suggests that researchers should position themselves along a theoretical-practical spectrum). With good reason: It is not sensible to make rocket scientists bend metal. Yet there is another personal cost to the involvement that Arlettaz recommends. Practical, long-term engagement in a specific project almost necessarily entails emotional commitment and thus some loss of objectivity. Scientists aspire to be impartial. Nonetheless, scientific institutions recognize human frailties in their review procedures. This is one reason researchers are not asked to sit on panels weighing their own grant applications against competing ones. And a political leader deciding whether to support a development project will not weigh advice from a scientist who has devoted years to nurturing an affected species the same way that she will advice from an apparently less interested party.

There is value in hands-on engagement, but there is also value in disinterested objectivity. Scientists wanting to influence their field over the course of a career will be wise to reflect on where they can most effectively focus their emotional commitments before they hoist their colors.

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