

BOOK REVIEW

William J. Sutherland (ed.), 2022. Transforming Conservation: A Practical Guide to Evidence and Decision Making. Open Book Publishers, Cambridge, UK. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0321>

In this practical guide we find a step-by-step approach on how to use evidence in managing conservation projects. Evidence is defined as “relevant information used to assess one or more assumptions related to a question of interest” (p. 11). The book makes a strong and valid argument that we require the wider adoption of an evidence-based culture to improve the effectiveness of conservation initiatives. The consequences of not doing so (p. ix) include “wasting money, eroding public and political support, under-delivering the protection of species or habitats for a given budget, and deterring potential investments in conservation.” Therefore, the book outlines a range of practical solutions that can improve the use of evidence while at the same time convincing policy makers and practitioners to take the issue seriously.

The editor, William Sutherland, has assembled contributions from 76 environmental scientists and conservation practitioners. They explain the problem—what they term an “evidence crisis”—and then provide guidance on key steps to acquiring and using evidence. The steps include gathering, assessing and using evidence, identifying and engaging stakeholders, making and applying decisions, and how conservation practice can generate evidence. The book concludes with a rallying cry for a change of culture.

The book discusses many issues critical to effective conservation project planning and management, sometimes linking them to tools practitioners will know, such as the Conservation Standards. Many conservationists will therefore find it a very useful resource to dip into when looking for help on specific issues, from how best to engage stakeholders to understanding systematic reviews or choosing a type of impact evaluation. There are lots of helpful tables summarizing definitions and presenting checklists of things to consider or do, and useful links to other material and online resources. I found section 9 onwards the most practical part of the book; chapter 11 includes seven case studies of how evidence has been used by different sorts of organizations in different sorts of conservation projects (several examples involving restoration).

The main criticism I have of the book is that it is rather too academic in tone and places too much emphasis on the role of academics in using evidence, perhaps reflecting the authorship rather than the audience. Chapter 12 provides a summary of key roles different stakeholder groups can play to help deliver change, including organizations and their leaders, practitioners, donors, and the research and education community. The list of roles for the latter is the longest. Yet most conservation project managers worldwide do not work with academics. The book should frame evidence more in the context that most project staff would relate to and worry about, namely best practices in project cycle management. As well as taking decisions based on “personal experience, anecdotes and the advice of colleagues” (p. 5), many conservationists plan and adapt their work based on their own monitoring data and evaluations. What do they need to do differently to ensure standard M&E

processes lead to more effective evidence-based conservation? What consequences does that have for planning and adaptive management? I would have preferred a more integrated approach, demonstrating how practitioners can work together with different stakeholders, including scientists, to bridge the science-policy interface and enhance evidence-based management. The alternative is that stakeholders continue to work in what can sometimes become silos.

There are some other more minor improvements that might have made the book more useful. Each chapter includes a paragraph explaining its content but would have benefited from a summary of key principles discussed and take-home lessons to help users find what they need. Some sections could also have been more practical, with more worked examples, to make it easier to follow and relate to. For example, I’m not sure how easy readers will find it to grasp or use the sections on Bayesian networks (pp. 124–129), structured frameworks for making group judgments (pp. 154–159) or the multi-criteria analysis for making decisions (pp. 248–259).

Overall, however, this is a timely and useful guide tackling an important and complex topic. The book is open access, with a digital version available to download for free, which is highly commendable. I hope that will allow a wide audience of conservationists to learn more about tools and processes that can help them adopt an evidence-based culture.

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