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How the unconference approach can increase stakeholder engagement

Cómo el enfoque de Desconferencia puede aumentar el compromiso de las partes interesadas

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ABSTRACT

Researchers in the fields of environmental science, conservation biology and sustainability studies recognize the importance of engaging stakeholders. Due to implicit or unconscious bias, it is highly likely that when researchers prepare their lists of people and groups who may be affected by, or interested in, their research, some stakeholders will be omitted. Use of Open Space Technology, part of the Unconference engagement framework, in the early stages of research, can diversify and increase stakeholder participation.

KEY WORDS

Stakeholder engagement, Open Space Technology, OST, unconference, science policy, invasive species.

RESUMEN

Investigadores en los campos de ciencias ambientales, biología de conservación, y sostenibilidad reconocen la importancia de involucrar a la comunidad beneficiaria. Debido a un sesgo implícito o inconsciente, es muy probable que cuando los investigadores preparan sus listas de personas y grupos que pueden ser afectados o interesados en su investigación, algunas partes interesadas pueden ser omitidas. El uso de la tecnología de espacio abierto en las primeras etapas de la investigación, dentro del marco de referencia de la desconferencia, puede diversificar y aumentar la participación de las partes interesadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Participación de los interesados, Conferencia de Espacio Abierto, desconferencia, Política científica, especies invasoras.

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INTRODUCTION

In the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, *The Sleeping Beauty*, seven (or 12) fairies are invited to the christening of a baby princess. The first six (or 11) fairies grant the baby gifts, including beauty, and goodness. Just before the seventh (or 12th) fairy gives her gift, an old fairy, that everyone thought was dead, gate-crashes the party. Angry at not having been invited, the forgotten fairy curses the baby princess with death, when she pricks her finger on a spinning wheel spindle. The seventh (or 12th) fairy cannot entirely reverse the curse. But she can transform it, saying that when the princess pricks her finger, she will not die. Instead, she will fall into a deep sleep, from which she can only be wakened by the kiss of a prince.

Imagine, for a moment, what would have happened if the baby's parents had known about the importance of stakeholder engagement, and known that there might be gaps in their invitation list? If the king and queen had invited everyone to the christening, perhaps the forgotten fairy would not have been so upset, and we would not have this fairy tale, and the Disney movie!

This technical note has three objectives:

1. To illustrate how engaging stakeholders in environmental management research can give insights that scientists would not, otherwise, gain.
2. To connect the goal of stakeholder engagement with equity, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) policy and research.
3. To describe how the *Unconference* (Budd et al., 2017), including *Open Space Technology* (Owen, 2008) can increase stakeholder inclusivity and participation.

Researchers want to engage stakeholders

A search of the Web of Science database for articles containing the phrase "stakeholder engagement" returned one article in 2000, 65 articles in 2010, and 322 articles in 2016. A similar search in SCOPUS returned 2 articles in 2000, 118 in 2010, and 462 in 2017.

Today, environmental scientists readily acknowledge that efforts to safeguard vulnerable habitats from a multitude of threats, must include the human dimension. Large-scale conservation efforts require the support of diverse public groups, including members of local communities, in order to successfully meet their objectives (Christie et al., 2017).

Knowledge about stakeholder perceptions of conservation, environmental and sustainability projects, and their social impacts, is key for researchers seeking local support for their plans (Bennett, 2016). Conversely, a lack of stakeholder engagement can result in critical knowledge gaps between scientists and non-scientists, leading to failures in policy, planning, and project implementation (Nanayakkara & Wissel, 2017).

How a stakeholder survey shaped a science-policy narrative

A study of prairie lakes in southern Saskatchewan, Canada, explicitly incorporated both human dimensions, and lake ecosystem dynamics (Nanayakkara & Wissel, 2017; Nanayakkara et al., 2017). A stakeholder survey assessed perceptions of lake use, climate change, invasive species, water quality (eutrophication), water extractions, and lake management. Themes emerging from this survey included sport fish and invasive species, which in turn, helped in organizing ecosystem data from limnological surveys. Data collected on the physical, chemical, and biological parameters of lakes, informed by the stakeholder survey, enabled the authors to study watershed dynamics directly related to the survey's emerging themes.

This interdisciplinary approach provided a more holistic picture of these heavily used prairie lakes, by giving insights into under-studied stakeholder perceptions. For example, some stakeholders were unaware that non-indigenous zebra and quagga mussels were not present in Saskatchewan. *Because* the lake-users surveyed thought that these invasive species were already present, they were less likely to clean their boats, leading to an increased likelihood of 'accidental' introductions of these mussels to un-invaded lakes.

Understanding stakeholder perceptions, and critical knowledge gaps, helped to identify more effective, cohesive narratives for scientific knowledge transfer and science communication. Stakeholders were primarily concerned about sport-fish, so the discussion of invasive species addressed how zebra mussels and other non-native species specifically impact these valuable species (Nanayakkara et al., 2017; Nanayakkara & Wissel, 2017).

Engagement as an equity, diversity and inclusivity issue

Finding ways of successfully incorporating human dimensions into large-scale biological conservation planning cannot be an afterthought. While local stakeholders are an integral part of the conservation equation, they are often left out of critical aspects of decision-making (Bennett, 2016).

Strategies for increasing stakeholder engagement include interdisciplinary collaborations, clear written and verbal communication, actionable advice, and identifying a salient narrative that frames scientific findings in a context that makes their policy-relevance clearer (Burgman, 2015; Leslie et al., 2013; Rose, 2015; Rose et al., 2016). However, these strategies all assume that researchers have identified and contacted all possible stakeholders. How do researchers know that this is the case? What if they have failed to identify a potentially disgruntled, forgotten fairy?

We all have implicit or unconscious biases (Project Implicit, 2011). Therefore, it is vital that researchers planning to include a stakeholder engagement dimension in their project, acknowledge this, and take conscious steps to discover and include unexpected stakeholders.

In the for-profit business sector, companies with strong equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) policies perform better than those without them (Hunt, Layton & Prince, 2015). Various techniques for increasing both EDI and stakeholder engagement have developed in the fields of organizational behaviour, and corporate social responsibility (Jeffery, 2009; Riordan, 2014).

Open Space Technology and unconferences at York University

The *Unconference* (Budd et al., 2017) approach aims to make stakeholder engagement more diverse and inclusive. *Unconferences* are participant-driven meetings. While the *Unconference* is a general category that includes many different "*emergent change*" practices, for many people, the *Open Space Technology* (OST) (Owen, 2008) meeting format has become synonymous with the *Unconference*. *Emergence* describes a "higher-order complexity arising out of chaos in which novel, coherent structures coalesce through interactions among the diverse entities of a system" (Holman, 2010).

In the *Open Space Technology* meeting format, participants co-create the agenda at the beginning of the meeting. The *agency* of participants is fostered by emphasizing that everyone who shows up is meant to be there. OST (Owen, 2008) operates by four guiding principles, and the *Law of Two Feet*:

1. "Whoever comes is the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
3. Whenever it starts is the right time.
4. When it is over, it is over."

The *Law of Two Feet* emphasizes that each participant should do what feels right for them during the meeting. If they are not learning or engaged in a session, they should leave, or feel free to sit out for a while. If a topic that the participant would like to discuss is not on the agenda, it is up to them to suggest it be added, and to take the lead in facilitating that small group. Regardless of the chosen *emergent facilitation technique*, it is essential to create safe spaces that allow participants to share their views in an authentic manner. Two brief videos by Collaborativeways1 (2013) and Camp Stomping Ground (2015) describe the *Open Space Technology* meeting format.

At IRIS, York University's Institute for Research and Innovation in Sustainability (2004-2015: http://iris.info.yorku.ca/projects/campus-

IncreaseStakeholderEngagement), we used the OST approach to shape campus sustainability work in climate justice, food security and water security in 2012-13. Results were used to develop future directions arising from campus sustainability surveys (IRISyorku, 2013; SCLD, 2013). These one-day events were advertised to all members of the campus community. Participants set the agenda in the morning, followed by three concurrent breakout sessions. The days closed with conclusions, and a summary.

The benefit, of using the OST method for facilitating stakeholder engagement, was that it did not presuppose which aspects of a problem would be of interest to the group, or who would attend. There is an implicit understanding that everyone has a unique understanding, and perspective, to bring to the problem, as well as a piece of the solution. By hearing these multiple, sometimes, contradictory views, a clearer picture can emerge, followed by the development of novel solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

When done early in research projects, stakeholder engagement activities, including stakeholder surveys, can identify knowledge gaps and policy-relevant narratives.

The use of inclusive, non-judgmental *Unconference* formats, can increase and diversify stakeholder participation. *The Open Space Technology* type of *Unconference* that we described, provides a welcoming environment in which every participant feels valued. Ultimately, gaining the input and participation of less obvious stakeholders provides a more holistic picture of the system of interest.

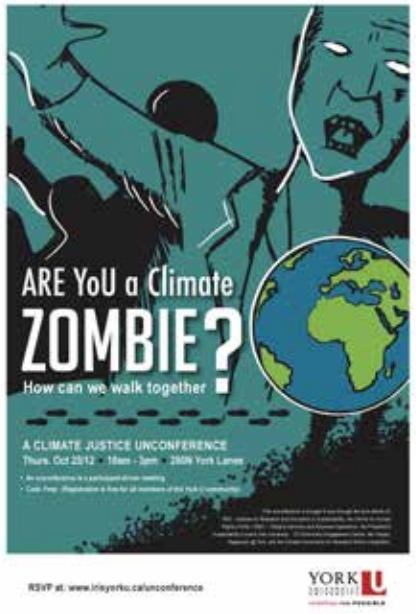

Figure 1. Poster from York University, Toronto's Institute for Research and Innovation in Sustainability, advertising a unconference about climate change and climate justice in 2012: "Are you a climate zombie? How can we walk together?"

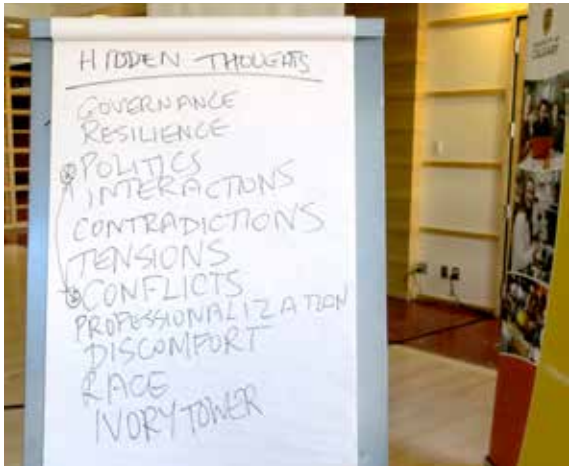

Figure 2. At the Professional Development Seminar on Transdisciplinary Approaches to Integrating Policy and Science for Sustainability workshop in October 2017, Dawn Bazely held a mini-uniconference during her presentation. This is a list of topics that participants said that they would like to discuss more during the meeting.

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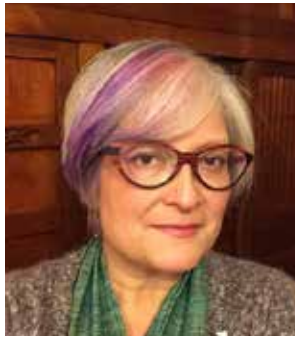

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