

Alex Gold
19 April 2010

Science meets Parliament 2010: Reflections

After taking the time to review my notes from my time at Science meets Parliament in Canberra last month, I am reminded of how valuable the experience was and how grateful I am for the opportunity to represent ESA. As I am also keenly interested in how science research is used (or not used) in the decision-making process, the conference was particularly relevant to my current research.

The first day was spent being briefed on how to be effective when delivering our message to the politicians we were scheduled to meet with on the subsequent day. An interesting segment of that day was the discussion hosted by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, who were concerned about how to best encourage young scientists to pursue a research career. As a young scientist myself, I discussed with them that a research career is not enticing to someone wanting their work to have an impact when it is often unclear whether policymakers even base their decisions on such research. We discussed the problem of publications as the sole incentive for academics when decision-makers rarely if ever access such publications. In addition, a blurred link between science and practice is not unique to the ecological sciences, as medical scientists were quite open with me when discussing their frustrations with the apparent lack of evidence-based decision-making in medicine.

The second day featured a panel on open-access publishing, where I posed the question as to how to best engage the public regarding scientific publications. While open-access is great for those who understand the research, simply making it free to anyone does not help a non-scientist with a general interest understand the implications of the research. When I asked whose responsibility it was to disseminate the implications to the public (i.e. the researcher, the publisher, a third party, etc.), the panel reiterated the importance of educating the public yet failed to nominate a responsible party. This suggests a vacuum that needs to be filled for research to convey its use, effectiveness, and importance. Later in the day I was lucky enough to meet with Sophie Mirabella MP, the Shadow Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. I discussed my concern about the uptake of science research in environmental decision-making and she hinted at the likelihood of budget cuts to the portfolio in the future. Budget cuts would spell problems for science research unable to determine its effectiveness and relevance to the public, who are ultimately the funders of the research. So the time is ripe for ecologists to ensure their message is getting across.

Unfortunately, while nearly all ecological research is relevant, decision-makers will only see it that way when it is immediately pertinent to their problem *du jour*. However, one thing I learned was to not underestimate the potential to be influential. So while continuing to drill your message home to a politician may seem fruitless at first, once you have established contact with a clear message, they are more likely to see you as the expert worth consulting when the time comes.