

Talk by Anthony Patt
Communicating to policy-makers.

Talk summary by Nicki Munro

There is substantial uncertainty when researching or communicating biodiversity issues. This uncertainty needs to be recognised and managed. Decision-making under uncertainty can be described by different models. For example, the psychological model outlines heuristics and biases in peoples' estimates of probability. People care more about losses than gains, and tend to reduce the middle range of an assessed probability to a 50:50 probability. Social and political models of decision-making under uncertainty suggest that uncertainty becomes a reason for action. People can be defined broadly as different actors, which is useful for determining who your audience is, and therefore what information you give them. Deterministic information, such as 'there will be a drought' can be given to psychological actors. This information is simple, but can be wrong. Probabilistic information, which includes statistics and probabilities is more trustworthy but hard to communicate. Economic actors are more likely to require this type of information. It is important to target the information to the audience.

Communication of information containing uncertainty can be enhanced by a number of other methods. People like to hear stories, so a personalised account of how a scientist obtained their information can increase understanding and uptake of the information. It is important to give people mental models they can use. It is also important to use appropriate analogies that people intuitively understand. People are more likely to adopt the advice given if they trust the person giving the advice, or if they have paid for the advice. There are common problems in disseminating information with uncertainty. For example, it must be remembered that other peoples' perceptions may not match your own, due to differences in understanding, values and knowledge. People can have a tendency to be overconfident – they can consistently underestimate the range of likely outcomes, and providing them with a little bit of information can make them experts.