

Summary

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### **Good Science is Hard to Find (So are Good Policies)**

- Brooke Wilkerson

The talk looked at the science-policy interface using an example of snowmobiles in Maine, eastern United States. The presentation talked about the rising number of snowmobiles in Maine and its visible, perceived and possible impacts on biodiversity and landscape management. Snowmobiling is popular in “wilderness” areas. Due to the infrastructure, the number of snowmobiles and the people as well as the very nature of the activity, snowmobiling affects wildlife and ecosystems.

The talk centered on the potential impacts of snowmobiling, the common public perceptions related to the activity and the how these affect policy decisions in the region. The areas under snowmobile use are protected and host a number of wildlife, some of them endangered species like the Lynx. This has raised concern about the health of wildlife and the mountains themselves.

Introduced 40 years ago, snowmobiling has become extremely popular in Maine. It is seen as a “family” outdoor recreational activity. The direct impacts of snowmobiling come from the vast network of trails that are used for the activity as well as the large number of snowmobiles entering the protected areas. The snowmobile can cover upto 200 km a day, entering habitats that were previously inaccessible. This has direct nuisance value for animals. The trails for snowmobiles in Maine are as extensive as the road network in Norway. Studies have shown a change in animal behaviour in response to the snowmobiles. The white tailed deer has seen a change in its home range and daily movement as the deer herds follow the snowmobile trails to vegetation now. Burrowing animals suffer more. As a result of digging compressed snow the metabolic demands for these animals goes up threatening their survival in harsh, food scarce winter conditions.

Concern over the impacts of the activity on Lynx is rising. The lynx inhabit heavy snow areas, surviving solely on hares during winters. With the snowmobiles compressing snow, many wildlife researchers believe that the Coyotes are now able to access Lynx habitat competing with them over food (hare) and threatening their numbers. Here, policy needs to step in and work out what is best for people as well as the animals. Policy decisions on this matter were influenced by two studies conducted in Western US – Montana and Utah.

One study by Kolbe was commissioned by the US Fish and Wildlife service and another by Bunnell et al was an independent research. Kolbe’s study was a part of a master’s thesis and concluded that snowmobile trails have no impact on Lynx as Coyote do not extend their range to deep snow areas or forage close to these tracks. The Bunnell study comprised a team of scientists and relied on tracking Coyote movement, their food habits and corresponding snow depth

analysis. They concluded that snowmobile trails are bad for Lynx as 90% of these trails had Coyote tracks meaning that Coyotes were ingressing on Lynx territories.

The US Fish and Wildlife service used the Kolbe study and relaxed restrictions on snowmobile trailing across the US. The fact that snowmobiling is seen as an integral part of culture across the US highlands might have also influenced the policy decision. The way the policy decision was framed raises a lot of pertinent questions. How can one amateurish study affect the use of millions of acres of public land in the US? Can the results of a study in one location be generalized to all areas? Are Policy makers being selective here? Further, how an impact is defined often influences the results of the study. Maybe one needs to take in multiple impacts on multiple stakeholders before issuing blanket policy directives.

The talk gave rise to a considerable discussion on public participation in protecting areas/habitats. Points raised were conflicting, some ecologists at the summer school felt that wilderness areas should not be open-access and preserved in their original state. Others argued to the contrary stating that people need visual and aesthetic experience to assign value to and protect wilderness. Recreation was the prime motivation behind the creation of national parks in the US and a host of other countries like Australia. The discussion also raised important questions on right to use of these areas- conflict of interest between indigenous communities using these reserves for survival vs. urban populations using them for recreation. Tradeoffs between human well-being and nature conservation, ecosystem services from the region and role of culture were thought to be important points to keep in mind for the policy makers as well as scientists. (A tight rope walk)

The discussions and debates raged on even after the session was over and saw full participation in the room. The only point of consensus was that partnerships are important. Conservation needs popular support and policy needs to find the least conflicting common ground between people and conservation. The talk concluded on a debate - whether or not people really care for nature and conservation.