

Attitudes Threaten DOI Biology

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In January, Jeffrey Cohn wrote about the divorce between Department of the Interior (DOI) resource agencies, such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and their research capabilities. Cohn concluded that there is still too much flux in the new relationships among the “users” and the “producers” of science within the DOI to predict outcomes. The article was well researched and informative but, in my opinion, did not go far enough.

Before taking early retirement, I worked as a research biologist for 23 years in the DOI and went through the FWS, National Biological Service, and US Geological Survey (USGS) transition. That experience leads me to believe that DOI biological research is threatened by administrative attitudes in the department, and especially in the USGS. I say this for several reasons.

Letters to the Editor

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The usual difficulties in communication between researchers and resource managers are sharply accentuated by separating them into agencies with different agendas and practices. A decade ago, research support meant either that the research side funded the study or that both resource managers and researchers contributed dollars, expertise, and personnel. Current USGS practices emphasize *de facto* a consultant attitude that requires the “customer” to completely pay for most studies. The USGS charges partners indirect costs that can amount to 43 percent or more of project costs, and USGS personnel are encouraged to seek salary reimbursement. Little biological research is funded internally. These extremely divisive practices encourage chasing the dollar rather than seeking critical solutions to problems.

In effect, USGS scientists compete with corporations and universities for research dollars but are constrained by rules from being truly competitive. As a university researcher, I have substantially more freedom in funding than I did while working for the USGS. I can accept grants that allow partial or even no indirect costs. I am free to apply to

agencies that bar federal scientists. I seldom include my salary in grant requests. And I am still able to address important natural resource needs.

Arguably, USGS administrators in biological science currently emphasize monitoring and survey activities over hypothesis-driven research. Monitoring is an important function, but allocation of extremely limited research dollars away from controlled studies diminishes the agency’s ability to conduct studies that can lead to solutions for current problems.

In conclusion, I believe that the USGS needs to substantially change its current practices to facilitate more cordial relationships with its partners in and outside of the DOI. Such renewal will be necessary to maintain biological research within the USGS. Any delay will further damage relationships among DOI sister agencies to the detriment of our nation’s biological resources.

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