

Deliberate Influence Is Advocacy

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Deliberate Influence Is Advocacy

In his Viewpoint article (*BioScience* 57: 6–7), Brian Czech argues in a very direct manner that professional societies should produce position statements on the “conflict” between economic growth and biological concerns. He clearly describes the advantages such position statements would give the traditional environmental advocacy groups as they go about the business of influencing public policy.

What Dr. Czech proposes is to essentially turn the professional societies into advocacy organizations. He posits that position statements of professional societies are simply “designed to clarify the scientific evidence about an issue relevant to public policy,” and such statements “are a far cry from advocacy.” I strongly disagree. If a professional society publishes an officially adopted position designed to directionally affect a public-policy debate, then that organization is acting as an advocate.

A serious consequence of professional societies acting as advocates in public-policy debates is that, by extension, all members of the professional society are considered advocates. While many members of professional societies may wel-

come such identification, members who are researchers have to be concerned.

Researchers, especially in the natural sciences, must be perceived by our society as unbiased if their research is to have credibility and impact. This is especially true in environmental fields because the scientific questions posed in public-policy debates are often complex and cannot be reduced to a single experiment. More often than not, conclusions are reached after qualitatively combining and interpreting many studies, often with large areas of uncertainty. Scientists associated with an advocacy group making these interpretations can look forward to having their credibility, if not their integrity, called into question.

In our society, it is useful to have distinct roles for professional societies

and advocacy groups. Professional societies (here limited to technically and scientifically oriented ones) disseminate technical and scientific information, and advocacy groups use the information to further their causes. Mixing the roles leads to confusion and may affect the reputations of researchers. If professional societies wish to be involved in public-policy debates, they can do so by offering venues in their conferences and journals for technical and scientific debates, publishing technical and scientific information on specific timely topics, and offering to organize expert panels to resolve technical and scientific questions. Information from these outlets will be quickly picked up by advocacy groups. However, taking formal positions on broad public-policy issues, such as economic growth, is not in the best interests of the members who are researchers.

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