

Making sure geoscience reaches the relevant policy makers - are we doing enough?

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Recent years, have seen a growing number of environmental crises, both in the UK and overseas. Near to home, the most extreme and obvious example was the summer floods of 2007. Such events, coupled with the impact of the Stern Review in 2006[sdgc2], have placed the geosciences at the forefront of policy making. It is up to us, as geoscientists, to ensure, therefore, that policy is effectively underpinned by our information and knowledge. Therefore, with the cost of peer review in the UK put at around £165million per annum (Times Higher Education Supplement, 29th May 2008), we must make sure that geoscience research relevant to policy is readily accessible to policy makers. This is surely a moral obligation to ensure that our research, funded largely by Government, actually influences Government policy. So, are we as a community actively engaging with policy makers and getting our message across as well as we should?

Peer-reviewed publications are a key metric of scientific performance, and will continue to be an important measure of the quality of our work - but they are tailored to highly specialised audiences, and use a language and jargon of their own. It's hard enough for us to understand one another within the geosciences, without expecting policy makers to identify, unaided, the relevance of our work. They also have to contend with the vastness of our literature. Therefore, we need to understand how and where policy makers get their information. We can then channel our information and knowledge more effectively.

When speaking and listening to policy makers as to how they get their information, the recent ISSUES series of seminars* has provided an ideal opportunity to do just this, it becomes immediately clear that it is not by reading a copy of 'Nature' or any one of a number of peer-reviewed journals. They, like many of us, use search engines such as 'Google' to look for relevant information on the Web. Along with this source of information are relevant trade journals and magazines such as 'Planning', 'Geoscience' and 'Surveyor' etc.

If search engines such as 'Google' are the research tool of choice for policy makers and if more journals are now available electronically on the Web, we must pay much more attention to the titles and abstracts of our papers. Policy makers need to be made aware of and to be able to identify, the potential relevance in our work. If it is not clear from the title or the abstract, then the paper is never going to be picked out from the scores of others published every week. Since many policy makers read relevant trade journals and magazines in their specialist area, it makes sense that we rewrite potentially relevant papers specifically for these outlets or even release a summary version on their website. This is not a 'dumbing-down' exercise - more a recognition of reality. It will take just a few hours to do, and if done by us all, will greatly increase the impact of geoscience in policy making in the UK and possibly beyond. It may even result in better policy making in the future.

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