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"Advocacy" and "Activism" Are Not Dirty Words–How Activists Can Better Help Conservation Scientists

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INTRODUCTION

Whether scientists should be advocates for conservation has been a matter of debate in the scientific community and literature (Brussard and Tull, 2007; Lackey, 2007; Noss, 2007; Chan, 2008; Nelson and Vucetich, 2009; Scott and Rachlow, 2010; Parsons, 2013; Rose and Parsons, 2015). Some are set against it, such as Lackey (2007), who considers that while scientists should be involved in the policy process, they should not show any preferences for conservation policies, nor even use value-laden terms in their work, such as *good*, *healthy,* or *degradation*. On the other side of the spectrum, Noss (2007) argues that everyone has opinions and values and, when it comes to making policy recommendations, who better to do so than scientists, who are closest to the facts?

However, Noss (2007) also highlights that there is a style of advocacy appropriate for scientists and another for environmental activists. Hixon (2000) adds that scientists are citizens, like everyone else, and as such have an obligation to engage in political debate and policy, because if they do not (as Noss, 2007 alluded to), decisions are made by those who are less familiar with the scientific method, and do not have as good a grasp of the facts as scientists do. In some sectors of the marine conservation field, advocacy is being seen as increasingly important. For example, Shiffman and Hammerschlag (2016a) found that 75% of shark biologists they surveyed said that shark scientists should advocate, and 53% said that policy statements should be included in their papers.

However, for many scientists, advocacy is still almost a "dirty word" and they are staunch in their belief that scientists should remain in the ivory tower and remain "pure" (Rose and Parsons, 2015), and that scientists who engage in advocacy are not being objective and/or are no longer a "real" scientists (Parsons, 2013). But what exactly is advocacy? Also, what is the difference between advocacy and activist, and why in particular is activism often viewed so negatively? This paper discusses some of these issues.

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

Crawford et al. (2016) found significant differences between students, faculty, government and NGO natural resource professionals regarding their opinions on what advocacy entails. For example, undergraduate students often considered that accepting Government funds for research was a form of advocacy. Undergraduates and NGO professionals were more likely to agree on what advocacy entailed, including a wider range of activities under the term "advocacy"—including presenting science at public events and being in an advisory role for a scientific society, and even presenting at conferences or publishing peer-reviewed papers (Crawford et al., 2016). Government officials and faculty, on the other hand, had a similar mindset, with a more restricted view of what advocacy entailed, highlighting activities, such as writing to Congress about a policy, or advising a special interest group (Crawford et al., 2016). Scott and Rachlow (2010) likewise found that leaders of conservation societies had opinions on advocacy that more closely resembled the responses given

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by Government officials and faculty in the Crawford et al. (2016) study. Nevertheless, all of those surveyed by Crawford et al. (2016) generally agreed that scientists should engage in advocacy and work closely with policy-makers.

A dictionary definition of an advocate is defined as a person who speaks, writes or argues in support or defense of a person or cause. In the study noted above (Crawford et al., 2016), the NGO community and students were arguably more accurate as to what advocacy entails than were faculty and Government officials. This is perhaps because many, use the term "advocate" and "activist" interchangeably. In practice, most environmental or conservation scientists advocate regularly, ranging from presenting their opinions in a class about the threats to biodiversity caused by a particular situation, to writing a scientific paper where the aim is to investigate conservation or environmental threats (i.e., an issue that has societal as well as environmental value), as well as giving recommendations for policy or management actions in the discussion section of said paper. This is what Meyer et al. (2010) would call "science-based advocacy."

Moreover, most papers conservation scientists write could be considered to be advocacy, as they typically make recommendations for a conservation action (i.e., support a cause); for example, the conservation of species, habitats and/or biodiversity at large. If a paper simply states facts and does not make recommendations or put the situation in the context of conservation needs, it is arguably not a "conservation biology" paper but just a "biology" paper (Parsons and MacPherson, 2016). This can be validated by the fact that the large majority of papers in the journal *Conservation Biology* specifically use advocacy oriented verbiage (Scott et al., 2007).

Additionally, it could be argued that being an effective scientific advocate simply entails ensuring scientific results get into the hands of relevant people, and that these people are able to understand these results (Scott and Rachlow, 2010; Parsons, 2013). This does not mean the scientist's integrity and objectivity are at risk, but rather that they are being communicators of science to a wide and appropriate audience (Parsons, 2013). To put it more simply, science-based advocacy can be done by "*ensuring that the best science is in the right hands, at the right time and in the right format*" (Parsons et al., 2015). However, it could be argued that simply providing relevant, but neutral, information might not be "advocacy" unless an argument is made for a specific action, such as a management or policy change. However, as noted above the public, and also the science community (Crawford et al., 2016), often mistake advocacy for activism. In particular, in the conservation community, the terms are used interchangeably and, in particular, the term "activist" can almost be used as an insult (pers. obs.)—but why is this?

WHAT IS ACTIVISM?

An "activist" is someone who tries to draw public attention and concern to an issue *they* consider to be important (i.e., a concern not necessarily science-based or valued by society). This typically involves trying to convert an unaware or "uncaring" public (or sector of the public) into a public that is aware of and likewise concerned about the issue, i.e., drawing attention to an issue rather than speaking on behalf of an issue. Activism can play a vital role in society, raising awareness of important issues, such as environmental or conservation threats or civil rights issues.

Some advocates may also be activists, additionally trying to draw public attention to their issue. Some activists may be trained scientists, but this is less common. Professional activists probably have training in media and communications, which scientists often lack. Increasingly, environmental and conservation NGOs have a high proportion of employees who are essentially working on activism. Amateur (unpaid) activists may have scientific or communications training (especially those that do so as volunteers for NGOs), but the majority of amateur activists are concerned members of the general public. It's important to emphasize this as this as marine conservation scientists interacting with activists often underestimate the knowledge, training, expertise and experience of professional activists, whereas the opposite is often true for amateur activists (pers. obs.).

However, activism is an activity that many scientists may have unknowingly engaged in, as whenever a scientist says that they are "raising awareness" of an issue, they are effectively being an activist.

WHY IS ACTIVISM A DIRTY WORD?

The term "activist," however, makes many scientists (and the lay public, for that matter) immediately think of more extreme activists. Bashir et al. (2013) found that the members of the public they surveyed had a negative opinion of environmental activists, labeling than as "tree-huggers" and "hippies" and describing them in terms, such as "militant," "eccentric," "over-reactive" and "self-righteous."

This is exacerbated by a growing sub-category of activist, the so-called "whacktivist:"

"someone who tries to convert the public into caring about an issue using inappropriate means, such as insulting those who do not agree with them and using arguments that are illogical or factually incorrect. Whacktivists often do not respect the rights of those who are opposed to them—they use bullying, harassing, and threatening violence and other criminal acts. Whacktivists often see issues in black and white and are resistant to opinions and facts that do not fit their world view" (Parsons, 2015).

This type of activist, in particular, gives environmental activism a bad name leading to the public seeing such activists as "aggressive militants and unconventional eccentrics rather than as pleasant and personable individuals" (Bashir et al., 2013, p. 616). They are, unfortunately, growing in visibility thanks to the internet. There is also an increasing and worrying trend in high profile aggressive and violent action by some "extremist" animal and environmental activism groups (see Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2001, pp 26–29) that garner much media attention and add fuel to the fire.

Ironically this approach is counter-productive, as Bashir et al. (2013) found that information presented by someone that is

portrayed as a stereotypical environmental activist, i.e., being militant and over righteous, is actually less likely to persuade the public to adopt pro-environmental behaviors. In fact, generally conveyors of environmental information are less convincing, and are assumed to be more biased, if they fit in with the audience's stereotypic preconceptions (Eagly et al., 1978).

Moreover, the stereotypical image of activists as angry, emotional and illogical often leads to those opposed to conservation, portraying their opponents in this light (Parsons, 2013), perhaps partly to make use of preconceived biases against environmental activists (as outlined by Bashir et al., 2013), or as an *ad hominem* attack to undermine their opponent's credibility.

In addition to the "extremist" activists (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2001) and the "whacktivists" noted above, there is another category of activist that is helping to tarnish the image of activism.

THE UNINFORMED ACTIVIST

Those that engage in activism often do because they feel passionately about an issue, but this does not necessarily mean that they have a deep knowledge of the issue. For example, while anti-vaccine activists are motivated by real concerns about children's health, they often lack a deeper scientific understanding of the minor risks that vaccines currently pose—especially in contrast to the major risks to children's health associated with not being vaccinated—and are largely unaware that concerns about potential threats were quickly and resoundingly rebutted and proven to be false (Taylor et al., 1999; Farrington et al., 2001; Offit and Coffin, 2003) and are thus effectively demanding a solution to a non-existent problem. The situation in this case is also exacerbated by online misinformation, an inability for activists to discern between this information and valid data, and a distrust of experts and scientists (who in turn think that merely providing more accurate information will address the problem) (Kata, 2010).

In the field of marine conservation, there are activists who make statements that are scientifically and/or factually inaccurate. This might be unintentional (as they are not using reliable source of information) or perhaps deliberate—maybe to draw more attention and/or elicit a greater reaction to their cause. For whatever reason, these inaccurate activists give the majority of activists—who try to elicit positive outcomes and use verified facts from expert sources—a tarnished image. Shiffman (2016) used the term "informed activist" to distinguish those use accurate, verifiable sources of information for their activism campaigns, from those that did not. The information in question could be based on natural science, but might also be based on social science or even historical or other sources of *bona fide,* verifiable evidence.

To address the problem of uninformed activists weighing in shark conservation matters, such as producing petitions or letter writing campaigns for policy actions that were irrelevant (or other well-intentioned but ultimately misguided campaigns), Shiffman and Hammerschlag (2016b) produced a primer of shark policy facts that could be used by activists to better hone their campaigning. This primer could be used as a model by other conservation scientists to help better inform the activism community.

SLACKTIVISM

A final class of activist is the so-called "slacktivist" or "armchair activist." Slacktivism has been defined as "the willingness to perform a relatively costless, token display of support for a social cause, with an accompanying lack of willingness to devote significant effort to enact meaningful change" (Kristofferson et al., 2014, p. 1149). Slacktivism has often been derided, as simply sharing and "liking" information on social media, or signing and sharing an online petition. These acts might make the slacktivist feel that they are contributing to a cause, but their actions may have negligible real-world impact. On the other hand, these minor actions may lead to the person later engaging in a more significant action (Kristofferson et al., 2014). It has also been suggested that encouraging slacktivism may pay off for NGOs, as it may attract more donations (Sardelis-Tararussell, 2016). Moreover, a substantive show of support on social media may be extrapolated to indicate broad public support and approval when NGOs are engaging in discussions with policy-makers (Sardelis-Tararussell, 2016). Therefore, slacktivism could have a role to play in promoting positive change, and shouldn't be thought of negatively, but instead as a potential gateway to more to more substantive activism and advocacy.

MAKING CONSERVATION HAPPEN

In conservation, there are two major ways to prevent or reduce an environmental threat. One is to regulate potentially threatening activities (assuming that the regulation is adhered to and enforced). This requires a policy-maker to enact the appropriate regulation, which in turn needs someone to argue that the regulation is in society's, and policy-makers', best interests. This often requires advocacy, i.e., making a convincing argument on behalf of that case, bearing in mind that policy-makers' decisions are likely not only science-based, but also based on their constituents' needs (e.g., jobs creation, economic benefits), values, and political expediency (Rose and Parsons, 2015).

A second, longer-term way is to make a significant proportion of society aware that such a threat is a societal problem and encourage them to change their behavior to reduce said threat, or to express their concern about it such that policy-makers take action on behalf of their constituents. Ideally, society's views change and the "cultural norm" shifts so that the threat becomes culturally unacceptable.

Many scientists think that education or outreach will lead, on its own, to societal changes. This is the so-called "deficit model" (Wynne, 1991; Ziman, 1991; Brown, 2009), i.e., the lack of public action/concern is simply due to lack of facts. As noted in the vaccine example above (Kata, 2010), simply providing providing facts typically does not lead to changes in opinion or behavior, because numerous other factors determine whether the public will engage in an activity or change their opinion (Olson and

Zanna, 1993; Sturgis and Allum, 2004; Kitts, 2009; Kata, 2010), especially when it comes to scientific matters. Getting the public to change their opinions and values is much harder than simply providing information. A connection is needed to engage the public in order for a change to happen.

This connection might arise, for example, via a convincing argument given by an advocate who speaks to the values held by the individual (i.e., an argument framed in terms that the individual considers to be important). Emotive material can play an important role in changing public attitudes and eliciting public concern (Olson and Zanna, 1993; Sitar, 2012). Activists can play an important role in highlighting an issue of which the public may be unaware and in disseminating materials.

This is where "whacktivists" fail, and they do so in at least two ways: expecting the public to react to material they found to be emotive and compelling, and becoming aggressive when it does not happen; and reacting with aggression and anger toward those engaged in a behavior of which they do not approve. Trying to convince someone to change their behavior through anger and threats hardly ever works (e.g., Fink et al., 2003). In fact, it is far more likely that aggression and anger will convince someone that a particular point of view is wrong, and may make them "batten down the hatches," becoming entrenched in their opinions, and leading to intractable polarization over the issue (Anderson et al., 2014; Singleton, 2016).

Unfortunately, while there are many informed activists, there are also many whacktivists—especially ones who engage in issues that involve charismatic and high-profile species, such as big cats or cetaceans, as these species tend to engender passion and concern in members of the general public (Leader-Williams and Dublin, 2000). As noted, uncivil, online whacktivists make issues more polarized through their participation (Anderson et al., 2014). Their behavior can alienate potential allies and undermine outreach efforts. This is detrimental, both for informed activists and the cause for which they are fighting (Singleton, 2016). The behavior of extreme activists and whacktivists has been found to taint public opinion against activism in general, such that members of the public actually resist changing their behavior when the proposal to do so comes from activists (Bashir et al., 2013).

As mentioned above, who oppose conservation actions often try to portray their opponents, including conservation scientists, as extreme, emotional and irrational (Parsons, 2013). The actions of whacktivists can be used as evidence to justify this stance, and thus turn the public against valid conservation concerns. Therefore, dealing with the whacktivists on "your" side can be as critical as dealing with those on the other side of a conservation issue.

The seemingly large number of whacktivists may be the result of the widespread idea that everyone's opinion is equally valid and that everyone has a right to say whatever they want (even if threatening and/or nonfactual; Stokes, 2014), which in turn is exacerbated by the ease with which opinions can be disseminated to a wide audience through social media and broad internet access. This results in a situation where anyone can find an opinion online to back up virtually any personal beliefs or prejudices, coupled with a public that often has an inability (either from lack of training and understanding, or due to online obfuscation) to discern opinion from facts. Anyone who has taught a freshman science class will have experienced this, with students not understanding the difference between a peer-reviewed scientific source and a statement on a website.

Can we prevent activists from becoming whacktivists? Or better, can we engage and convert the whacktivists, turning them into useful, informed activist allies? Or, at least, stop them from undermining conservation efforts? Noss (2007) proposes to do this by highlighting the values of science: "commitment to truth, rationality, full consideration of evidence, self-correction, openness, and critical discourse," but is that enough?

SCIENTISTS ENGAGING WITH ACTIVISTS

I believe (and this view is the result of decades academic training and working in conservation) that marine conservation scientists could play a major role to play in shaping public opinion so that marine conservation becomes a major public (and political) priority. However, this potential is currently not being realized as the task is huge, and marine scientists have only so many hours in a day they can commit to outreach (whatever the medium). However, in order to be effective, scientists need their work to reach a wider public, with a clear message. Moreover, it makes perfect sense that scientists are involved with crafting this message as no one knows their work better than they do, but the majority simply don't have the capacity to launch a substantive outreach campaign by themselves. However, activists represent a large pool of potential allies who could assist scientists with disseminating important conservation science. Marine conservation scientists should seriously consider engaging with activists, for mutual benefit. For those that wish to do such activist engagement, here are some tips (Parsons, 2015):

- Develop a respectful and trusting dialogue with activists involved in your issue. Don't patronize or insult them. They may not be scientists, or have even taken science classes, but activists are by and large intelligent, passionate, enthusiastic and/or creative.
- In a spirit of mutual respect, be willing to listen to them and their concerns—do not dismiss concerns offhand if they are based on emotion rather than science.
- Be a source of factual information and expertise. Politely provide them with the correct information that they need. A good relationship will mean that they will trust your information and turn to you for scientific facts. If you are not a source they can turn to, they will turn to others who may be less qualified.
- Suggest materials that might be useful for them to build their skills and knowledge about the issue: including training, books, meetings, and documentaries. Ensure that this material is appropriate and tailored to those you are trying to engage. Giving a bunch of technical scientific reports to an enthusiastic activist, who has not studied science since high school, will be counter-productive.

- Help to channel the activist's passion and talents. Do not try to ram a square peg into a round hole. For example, if talking to an artist, suggest ways in which they could use artistic skills to interpret or highlight your cause.
- Make the most of their skills. Your activist colleague may lack scientific skills, but they may have valuable communication, computation, marketing, design or construction skills that you lack. Work with them to use these skills to produce innovative outreach materials, displays and other material, even if it is something as simple as Tweeting links to your papers to key audiences.
- Encourage them to be informed activists, and explain why whacktivists are counterproductive to the cause; that a civil and respectful, strategic "long game," based on good logical arguments, works better than a blitz of fire and brimstone.
- You may have different opinions on some issues. People do not agree 100% of the time, and they do not have to. Don't let those disagreements derail an otherwise useful and productive relationship. Sometimes you just have to agree to disagree.

Advocacy and activism are not dirty words. As noted above, most conservation scientists are probably already being advocates without realizing it, and perhaps even engaging in activism. Marine conservation scientists urgently need help to get their science and their message to the wider public, and activists can be a great help toward realizing this goal.

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The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and approved it for publication.

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