HUNTing for sustainability
-research on the wider meaning of hunting

SEVENTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

http://fp7hunt.net

Best practice recommendation:

Engaging with stakeholders – Managing expectations

Context

An increasingly important part of the research process involves engaging with the actors and stakeholders relevant to the research topic. This trend is driven by pressure to ensure the research is relevant to end-users (both policy makers and practitioners). Early engagement is also likely to generate greater understanding and willingness to engage with research findings. At its most inclusive, practitioners are involved in co-constructing the research questions, protocols and carrying out the research activities in real world situations (often referred to as "action research"). However, most projects have not reached this stage but do attempt to work with key stakeholders once the project is underway. Often this involves setting up a panel of people referred to as a 'steering group' or a 'consultative group'. Here we discuss the role of these groups, what we have learnt about managing expectations and illustrate this with some of the issues we have come up against.

Challenge

Hunting is a usually a contentious issue with polarised views held, on the one hand, by those who represent hunting and shooting interests and, on the other hand those who represent other interests such as recreation or the protection of biodiversity. Thus it is obvious that research into hunting for sustainability should engage with representatives from across these perspectives. Bringing different stakeholder groups together around common data, generated by researchers from outside these groups, can facilitate constructive dialogue to help overcome conflicts, particularly where communication has deteriorated due to a history of tension or poor relations. In HUNT, each country case study set up a consultative group (CG) with representative membership of hunting, conservation and land management interests. Most representatives were keen to engage in a topic that was central to, or directly influenced, their organisation's interests, although others preferred to be involved only once results became available. The challenge for researchers in this situation was to carry out the intended research whilst ensuring that the consultative group were engaged in a meaningful way. Whilst this worked reasonably well most of the time there were a few situations where there was dissatisfaction from some sectors because their level of impact on the research process did not match their expectations.

Best Practice – illustrating our experience

Hunting and shooting can be contentious. For example, we wanted to investigate shooters' preferences for the style of game-bird shooting. Although shooters are interested in the number of birds they can shoot, our hypothesis was that they are also paying for other aspects of the experience, including the social, economic and ecological consequences of managing areas for game-bird populations and therefore these other attributes should be valued. To explore this we devised a choice experiment (CE) (Hanley et al., submitted) aimed at those involved in hunting. Although we discussed the text of the CE with three consultative group members, the shooting sector as a whole felt that they had not been sufficiently consulted and questioned both the method and our level of understanding of the system. Consequently, it was difficult to get shooters to respond to the choice experiment, limiting the results. In addition, we secured partial funding from one of the organisations on the consultative group, which jeopardised our apparent impartiality, although we were open about this from the start. For this to have been more successful we should have communicated our aims more clearly and consulted earlier and more widely.

Best Practice approaches – recommendations

Purpose: It is important to be clear about what the role of a consultative group (CG) is in the research process from the outset, recognising that different stakeholders may have differing expectations. Is the CG purely a mechanism to communicate results? Will they be used to focus research questions? Or will they actively be involved in setting the research agenda?

Terms of reference: It is good practice to set out the terms of reference for the stakeholder group. This should make it clear what their role is (see Purpose above) and therefore what level of influence they will have and what level of commitment they are making.

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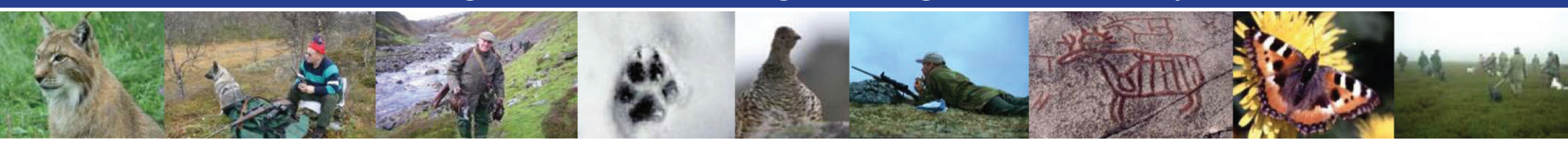

Stage of engagement: Ideally, key stakeholders should be engaged from the inception of the project, i.e. as the project is being designed. However, in many cases this may not be possible because of timescales and funding deadlines. Therefore, stakeholders are often presented with the opportunity to engage with research that is already largely prescribed. It is thus important to be clear about the purpose and Terms of reference.

Communication: In many cases, the same stakeholders are facing increasing demands to get involved in research and policy consultations. So although they will often recognise the relevance of the research, they may not necessarily have much time to invest in the details. However, if the relationship with the researchers is to be constructive, they need to be made aware of what is being planned with enough time to allow a dialogue so that their comments and concerns are addressed. Do not wait for the timetabled face to face meetings but make use of other channels of communication to keep the group informed as ideas and activities develop.

Transparency: Researchers aim to provide unbiased insights into particular issues. Research into environmental conflicts needs to maintain an objective and impartial approach. Thus, although it must be recognised that the consultative group members have significant knowledge (and this knowledge should be utilised where possible), the outputs of the research need to be independent of organisational agendas. Developing a relationship of trust and respect is based on transparency and this is helped by communicating results and their interpretation at an early stage, allowing comment and being clear that comments are accepted or rejected on scientific, not political, grounds.

Bridging the science-practice divide: Research methods are often novel and complex. Stakeholders are usually not familiar with them and the process of analysis can be a black-box to non-scientists. It is important to take the time to explain why a particular method is being used. Although the method may be complex, it is usually trying to simplify what is usually a complex real-world problem. Worries about oversimplification need to be addressed or at least recognised and reported in any outputs.

Bridging the science-policy divide: EU-funded research aims to inform policy, but policy-relevant outputs generally emerge towards the end of a project. This creates tension between an expectation from EU policy-makers for results during the project, versus a focus by research projects on engaging with local stakeholders in case study areas and achieving stated goals. Future projects and policy-makers must recognise that research impact beyond the funding period is likely and devise mechanisms to retain active project-policy links.

Reference

Hanley, N., Moro, M., Brennan, D., Redpath, S. and Irvine, J. A Choice Experiment Analysis of Preferences for Red Grouse Shooting in the Scottish Uplands. Submitted to Biological Conservation.

For more information contact:
Justin Irvine (Justin.Irvine@hutton.ac.uk)

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