

2 INFORMATION PRIORITIES

Amongst all the potential uses of information in addressing environment concerns, it may be argued that policy-development is the most important, since so many human activities are influenced by the policies of governments, corporations and, increasingly, non-governmental organisations. Environmental information, therefore, needs to be relevant to policy-makers in these sectors who are charged with identifying environmental concerns and finding solutions in complex and diverse situations, such as industries and communities.

Not surprisingly, many environmental concerns which affect the lives of ordinary people are not officially acknowledged in government policies, which may lag behind other sectors in society, such as lobbying groups, or be provided with too few resources to address the issues effectively. In the present context, the wider set of environmental concerns (which may or may not be acknowledged by governments and other groups) will be referred to as **policy issues**. In any particular location, factors such as culture, history, trade, politics, climate, geographic and biological composition affect which policy issues will be most relevant. Box 1 lists a few common issues to illustrate something of their breadth. A key step forward is to establish which issues are highest priority.

Box 1 Common policy issues

- Conversion of natural landscapes (e.g. forest to agriculture or housing).
- Decline in commercially valuable species (e.g. timber trees, wild foods and medicines).
- Degradation of ecosystems (e.g. loss of species diversity or ecosystem services).
- Loss of genetic variability (e.g. wild ancestors of crops).
- Release of exotic or genetically modified organisms (e.g. weeds and pests).
- Loss of indigenous knowledge (e.g. traditional forest-related knowledge).

Stakeholders may attribute widely differing priorities to policy issues according to their own individual perspectives. For instance, global warming could be one of the major driving forces of environmental change in the next century, but it is likely to receive scant attention in a low-income community challenged with day-to-day survival. Priorities also change over time: they arise, come to the attention of specific groups, and disappear, often to resurface later in a different guise.

The key challenge for information professionals is to understand not only **what** information is relevant at a specific time, but also **when, how and to whom** it should be delivered, in order to address important issues effectively.

Recognising that financial resources for information management are limited, it is vital for information professionals to work alongside other stakeholders in identifying priority areas for information development. To ensure that the interests of an appropriate range of stakeholders are represented — whether these are information specialists, policy-makers, resource users or other groups — a high degree of consultation is desirable during this process. Indeed, the very act of discussing priorities can build important ties between stakeholders as well as sensitising them to the role and value of environmental information in their daily work.

One challenge is the **scope of the issues** under consideration. For example, it would be difficult to prepare comprehensive information on complex topics such as ‘poverty’, ‘population growth’ or ‘deforestation’, since the range of perspectives on these issues (and consequently solutions) is enormous. Faster progress can be achieved by generating information on more focused issues such as ‘loss of breeding habitat for species X due to drainage of wetland Y’ or ‘effect of river pollution on species Z’. The challenge is to be realistic about what can be achieved with the resources available, and prioritise accordingly.

Another factor is the **lifetime of the issues** under consideration. At one extreme, it is difficult to generate information on so-called ‘burning issues’, such as the effects of an imminent road-building project, since they remain topical only for unpredictable, and usually short, periods of time. At the other extreme, research on ‘fundamental issues’, for example the effect of climate change on wild bird populations, may arrive too late to save many of the species under study.

It is desirable to forecast issues well before they develop into problems, so that cost-effective remedial action can be organised. The best way of achieving this is to manage (or have access to) data on topics which yield information on immediate priorities, but are also relevant to the study of longer-range phenomena. The capacity to 'scan the horizon' for future issues, using a combination of historical experience and up-to-date intelligence, is a hallmark of effective information management.