

6 SUPPORTING GOOD DECISIONS

The fact that information is available does not guarantee that it will be used. In fact, no benefit may be obtained unless there is an effective dialogue between those involved in the process of generating the information (e.g. scientists, researchers and other information professionals) and those who are expected to use it (e.g. policy-makers and planners). For a variety of reasons this dialogue is often absent or under-developed. The existence of long-standing barriers between scientists and policy-makers, reinforced by arcane scientific literature and ill-informed policies, is one of the contributing factors.

Clearly, information may fail to achieve a significant impact on decision-making when it is developed **outside** of mainstream decision-making processes, rather than **emerging from within**. For example, a local wildlife society may record the decline in breeding turtles on an increasingly polluted stretch of beach year after year. To raise awareness of the crisis they may hold meetings, write stories in the press, publish newsletters and alert other societies, scientists and concerned groups to the issue. However, until the government commissions its own enquiry into the problem, appropriate and decisive action may not be taken.

Disclosing information to the general public can succeed in provoking government (or other elements of society) into action,¹ but the way in which the government reacts depends on the internal information it has at its disposal. An understanding of the political climate and cultural values of the country is necessary before deciding which is the most effective means of conveying information to decision-makers. In the above example, a better strategy for the wildlife society may be to seek a working partnership with the government, rather than embarrassing it, with the aim of adjusting policy well ahead of impending crises (this assumes that the government in question is willing to listen and seek advice from wider elements of society).

Organisations of all kinds, whether governmental, commercial or community-based, are driven by their own priorities and needs. Thus, in the midst of a complex privatisation process, under external pressure to fulfil key targets within a structural adjustment programme, it may be difficult, even impossible, to interest senior

1 This is known as 'decision-making by disclosure' — influencing policy-makers via the public domain, rather than by more bureaucratic channels.

governmental decision-makers in important environmental information. At best they may see such information as a distraction and, more probably, as a waste of precious time. This helps to explain why information generated outside of decision-making circles is often ignored, misunderstood or viewed as a threat, and this does not only apply to governments!

For information on environmental issues to be appreciated, those who are expected to use it need to be aware of how and why it has been produced and, preferably, **have been involved** in some way in its production. Thus, it is important to emphasise the role of environmental information within the day-to-day management contexts of those organisations which have the most impact on living resources. These include stakeholders in government, the private sector and civic society, which have a direct role in managing or using living resources. They also include financial institutions, the media and other sectors which, due to their power, are capable of great influence over attitudes and policy in other areas.

An important justification for increased attention to information management is that the contexts in which policies on living resources are formulated are usually complex, and **do not respond well to simple solutions**. Many viewpoints may have to be reconciled to find the most appropriate way forward, a process which depends on building consensus between stakeholders on the basis of mutual respect and objectively produced information. Information management is also central to performance monitoring, whereby the success (or otherwise) of policy solutions is fed back to enable more effective policies to be designed in future. Review mechanisms of this kind are a standard feature of many economic policies but, in the case of conservation, the expertise and resources needed to collect, analyse and review environmental data are often underestimated.

Properly organised information brings transparency and objectivity into the process of decision-making, throwing light on complex issues and providing a means of comparing potential solutions. Specifically, good information empowers its audience by:

- providing a range of options on which to base a decision;
- discouraging options with predictably adverse consequences; and
- adding to a common set of agreed facts on which to base discussion.

Information rarely achieves these goals unless it is relevant to the needs of its users, is timely (i.e. available when and where it is needed), and can be easily absorbed without the need for special training or technology. For example, information published in a scientific journal serves academics and researchers well, but its presentation and timing may be unsuitable for policy-makers who are focused on operational goals. Similarly, raw data on the status of endangered species may not be usable by busy managers without significant interpretation or integration with other data.

In short, decision-making is most effective when it is based on **insight**, not simply additional sources of information or data. The distinction between information and insight is difficult to draw but, in general, the latter is characterised by a more rounded product, tailored to the needs of the decisions being taken, and very concise (see Volumes 2 and 3). In the case of decisions on living resources, a package of information describing the state of a particular resource, the pressures it faces from human activities, and the effectiveness of current policy and regulatory measures designed to conserve it, could claim to offer a degree of insight beyond what would be provided by information on any of these topics individually.