

21st century. Yet this reality has also brought opportunities to re-think how academia supports conservation research. Despite significant conservation efforts, biodiversity loss continues at an alarming rate. We argue that a key reason for this disconnect lies in established university reward systems.

Currently, most universities evaluate researchers with metrics that count articles published in academic journals, with almost no emphasis on the practical application of that research. Our recent journal article in *Biological Conservation* proposes that academic evaluations include ‘engaged scholarship’, a collaborative process where researchers and practitioners produce knowledge that directly addresses conservation challenges in the field.

This is not a new idea. Conservation science has always been a mission-oriented discipline that aims to solve real-world problems. Early conservation biology emphasised science focused on slowing biodiversity loss and protecting natural resources. However, the current rate of extinction suggests that these efforts haven’t been enough. Researchers now recognise the need to bridge the gap between academia and conservation work on the ground. Engaged scholarship supports the development of this bridge.

Engaged scholarship can be highly effective. It involves researchers working alongside conservation practitioners—NGOs, policymakers and others on the ground—to co-produce more effective conservation knowledge. This knowledge is more likely to generate positive conservation outcomes because (1) it considers multiple perspectives, and (2) directly addresses the challenges faced by those working in the field. Research co-produced with academics, citizens and policymakers is also more likely to translate into effective conserva-

tion policies.

Universities can play a crucial role in fostering engaged scholarship by implementing our paper's three key recommendations.

The first recommendation is to actively support and invest in 'boundary-spanning work'. This means facilitating collaboration between researchers and practitioners from different disciplines. Universities can act as hubs, bringing together scientists, policy-makers and NGOs to address complex conservation issues. By creating spaces that foster knowledge exchange, universities can bridge the gap between research and real-world application.

Second, universities need to incentivise and reward engaged scholarship. Traditionally, faculty promotions and tenure are based on a researcher's number of publications in prestigious journals. This system often discourages researchers from dedicating time and effort to collaborative projects with practitioners, even though these projects may have a more significant impact on conservation outcomes. Universities can increase the number of engaged researchers at their institutions by including practitioners in tenure positions and as members of review committees. These committees can then consider the impact of a researcher's work beyond traditional academic metrics.

Finally, universities need to develop new metrics for valuing engaged scholarship. Currently, research impact is often measured solely by citations in academic journals. This approach fails to reward valuable research that improves conservation outcomes. Universities can create alternative metrics that consider factors such as the number of practitioners a researcher has collaborated

with, the tangible results of their research on conservation efforts and media coverage of their work.

By following these recommendations, universities can transform into 'engaged universities'. These universities would become centres of knowledge production and catalysts for positive societal and environmental change. They would also be better positioned to attract talented researchers who are passionate about solving real-world problems. Furthermore, a shift towards engaged scholarship would likely lead to increased public support and funding for universities, as their research would be demonstrably relevant to the public good.

In conclusion, universities have a unique opportunity to play a more significant role in improving conservation outcomes. By embracing engaged scholarship, universities can bridge the gap between research and practice, ultimately leading to more effective solutions for our world's most pressing biodiversity challenges. This transformative change in academia has the potential to foster both a healthier planet and a more engaged scientific community.

Further reading

Lhoest, S., C. Carr Kelman, C. J. Barton, J. Beaudette and L. R. Gerber. 2024. The impact factor of engaged research: Metrics for conservation outcomes. *Biological Conservation* 292: 110534. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2024.110534>,

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engaged scholarship

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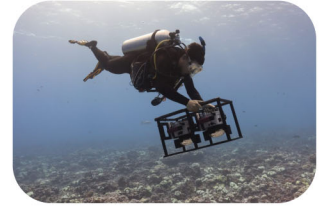
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