LINKING KNOWLEDGE WITH ACTION: A DIFFERENT WAY OF DOING SCIENCE

In traditional science, researchers decide what to study, present their results in journals, and wait for society to use their findings. This "loading dock" approach, however, has largely failed because the new knowledge is rarely used to help solve real world problems.

Linking knowledge with action (K→A) is an approach that seeks to align science with the needs of communities, policy makers, and others to support decision-making and ensure that research outcomes can contribute to a more sustainable future. In this approach, researchers study K→A processes to understand how to create a balance between the supply of and demand for science.

In practice, K→A means that research teams from diverse disciplines work with stakeholders including citizens, nonprofit organizations, business and industry, and all levels of government to create knowledge together and produce relevant and useful solutions. Stakeholders collaborate in all aspects of research, from helping to identifying the initial problems that need solving to providing feedback on the most effective way to communicate results to those who will use them. K→A emphasizes public participation, mutual learning, shared knowledge and power, and a continual, two-way flow of information between researchers and stakeholders.

Through Maine’s Sustainability Solutions Initiative (SSI), nearly two-dozen research teams are using a K→A approach to help communities throughout the state solve problems with intersecting economic, social and environmental challenges. They are working on issues including renewable energy production, invasive species, forestry practices, restoring and protecting lake water quality, and addressing the challenges of urbanization.

SSI’s Knowledge to Action Collaborative, a team of social scientists in communication, economics, psychology, anthropology, law, human ecology and other fields, is studying ways to advance the understanding and practice of K→A. Their findings will shed light on issues including better aligning university research with community needs and improving collaboration between researchers and stakeholders.

The Collaborative’s findings, along with all SSI research, also will contribute to advances in sustainability science, an emerging field that seeks to meet the needs of current and future generations without compromising the planet’s life support systems.

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Connecting knowledge with action to strengthen our economic, social and environmental future