

Publications

The Oxford Handbook of The Science of Science Communication edited by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dan Kahan and Dietram A. Scheufele (2017) 512 pp., Oxford Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK. ISBN 978-0190497620 (hbk) GBP 105.00/USD 160.00, e-book GBP 99.75/USD 130.44.

In a 2017 article C. Drummond & B. Fischhoff conclude ‘... scientific knowledge may facilitate defending positions motivated by nonscientific concerns’ (*Proceedings of the National Academy Sciences of the United States of America*, 114, 9587–9592).

How did we get ourselves into such a situation? I, for one, spent decades of my professional life working from the simple conviction that better information would produce better outcomes. It turns out I, and apparently most people who trained me and who I trained, were wrong. Better information may, but often doesn’t, bring about better decisions and many of us in the practice of conservation seem to be unaware of why we have been having such limited impact.

The first sentence of the first chapter of this book suggests what we, or at least I, have been guilty of: ‘ironically, those communicating about science often rely on intuition rather than scientific inquiry not only to ascertain what effective messaging looks like but also to determine how to engage different audiences ... and get science’s voice heard.’

This book sets out to change our intuition into an active use of the science of science communication. There is (who knew) a science of science communication and we need to learn everything they know. Though not an instruction guide, the authors provide a cornucopia of ideas based on a phenomenal review of the literature. I learned

- The overwhelming importance of group identity when deciding what information to believe and what to reject and how people aggressively misinform themselves to strengthen their group identity
- About the concept of a ‘polluted science communication environment’ in which social practices degrade the ability of citizens to recognize valid science
- How much we can learn from the work done on public responses to nanotechnology
- The numerous ways entertainment’s portrayal of science influences public perception and consumption of science
- How the use of frames is a critical part of science communication and miscommunication
- How poor humans are at interpreting time series data

- The role that the unnatural plays in public consideration of GM food

The volume is huge: 47 essays by 57 authors from six countries. It is organized into six sections: the science of communicating science, challenges to science featured in attacks on science, failures and successes in science communication, role of elite intermediaries, role of the media, and communicating science in a polarizing environment.

For those of you who have been following the writing on behavioral economics some of this will be familiar but the volume is a treasure trove of insights and suggestion for both introspection as well as action. And by the way, all of the things the numerous authors demonstrate are not qualities belonging only to the oft-discussed public—they apply to us as well!

This book should be essential reading for everyone interested in improving their conservation practice and the editors say it is targeted at scholars and students. Unfortunately, the book may remain out of reach of many because of its high price. It is available as an e-book but at only a slightly lower price. There should be a set of tutorials for conservationists extracted from the rich veins of this book; perhaps the editors would consider such a thing.

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Wildlife at War in Angola: The Rise and Fall of an African Eden by Brian J. Huntley (2017) 416 pp., Protea Book House, South Africa. ISBN 978-485306115 (pbk) GBP 19.12/USD 25.00/ZAR 350.00.

Angola and Brian Huntley go back a long time: over 45 years. Their relationship has been a tumultuous one: through early infatuation with the richness of Angolan nature during what he terms Angola’s belle époque of the 1960s and 1970s, the subsequent internecine wars of independence, the death and destruction of civil war, and disillusionment at the currently reigning kleptocracy. With his wife Merle, who was clearly an important contributor to this effort, Huntley lived and worked in Angola, starting in 1970 when he was hired to the post of ecologist for the country’s national park system. To this very year he has continued to visit, consult, conduct research, and work with a global network of Angolans and Angola-fans on a variety of issues connected with Angolan conservation.

Using what must be a masterful filing system Huntley draws on extensive correspondence, minutes of meetings and a remarkable memory to quote communications, conversations and e-mails that all illustrate his long and rich history with Angolan conservation. Whether it was the ongoing struggle for conservation of the endemic giant sable, attempts to address poaching (including by the South African military), efforts to bring the national park system to a level of national representation of ecosystems, or a bitter fight for reasonable budgets for the national parks, the Huntley attention to detail and the proudly personal recounting of battles fought—and mostly lost—are recounted. Sometimes the detail threatens to overwhelm the reader, who occasionally might have liked a bit more succinctness. But each reader may choose different details; I enjoyed Huntley’s constant recounting of the menus at the numerous social events that were such an important part of getting work done in Angola.

This is an important book for several reasons, perhaps the most important of which is the relative absence of Angola from the global conservation scene. A country rich in biodiversity, Angola has not assumed its rightful position on the international stage. Huntley helps to explain why this is, and perhaps to give added impetus to Angolans and those outside Angola to lend a hand for conservation there. Brian Huntley is a global treasure as a Southern African conservationist with international credentials and decades of experience in many countries and settings. What he has to say deserves a wide reading.

In a world of conservation books written based on 2, 3 or even 10 years of experience, the decades of Huntley’s experience provide an important, albeit deeply personal, perspective on Angola. In its final paragraph the author writes: ‘The writing of this book had a simple objective: to record the past in the hope that a new generation of Angolans will seek a better future for their natural environment. But evidence-based criticism is not popular in Angola. I have been warned not to return to Angola in the wake of this book’s publication’. This is not an easy book to read because the author is pessimistic about Angola, but hope was the last thing left in Pandora’s box and we must hope that with a new generation of Angolans and strong support from outside that the situation will change and conservation will assume its rightful place there.

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