



# TOP TIPS for the Effective Use of Social Science in Your Work

Emily Jane Davis and Katherine Wollstein

**S**cience is a guiding light for people in many professions — including natural resource managers and policy makers. Most often, people turn to biophysical science to guide their work. But social science also has an important role to play.

Social science is the systematic study of people or groups of people, such as families, organizations or businesses. Social science can help natural resource practitioners:

- Understand how natural resources are connected to human values and needs.
- Identify potential outcomes and tradeoffs of management actions.
- Make more informed decisions.

Some practitioners are familiar with using social science, but others may be wondering where to begin. This guide provides quick tips for understanding social science and avoiding common pitfalls when integrating it into your work.

## INSTEAD OF ...

**1** *Social science is “soft science” composed of opinions or anecdotes.*

## CONSIDER THIS!

**Social science is like other science:** It requires specialized training for designing studies, selecting appropriate methods for gathering and organizing information, interpreting results, and explaining relationships among phenomena of interest. Some approaches involve numerical or quantitative data, while others use qualitative data from interviews, focus groups or participant observation. But all approaches have scientific standards for validity, rigor and explanatory power.

**2** *I know a social scientist who can help us.*

**It is a great idea** to engage a social scientist when you have a complex question or want more information about a social aspect of an issue. Social science includes disciplines from political science to geography to economics. Because of this, social scientists differ widely in their expertise, methodological approaches and the types of research they perform. In other words, if you know one, you don’t know them all! You may want to ask questions to determine if your interests align with their skills, or if they might recommend someone else.

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**INSTEAD OF ...**

**3** *My question has not been studied, and I need a new study to answer it.*

**CONSIDER THIS!**

**The social science literature is vast.** You may find it helpful to begin with a science synthesis, literature review or inventory of Extension publications to assess what is already known on your topic of interest. Search topic-specific journals or consult organizations that help share scientific knowledge with managers, such as fire science consortia. Evaluate how well those prior studies may apply. They may have been conducted under different conditions, or they may be more applicable to specific communities. Some findings may be transferable to your setting; others may not.

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**4** *Let's do a survey.*

**Surveys are typically intended** to capture quantitative data from a clearly defined population using close-ended questions with set response options. But they are only one approach in the social science toolbox. You want to ensure that you choose the best tool to match your questions. Other approaches may be more appropriate if you are seeking to ask complex questions; understand why a phenomenon occurs; obtain rich contextual detail; ensure participation; build relationships; or if you are not sure of your population of interest.

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**5** *Understanding individuals' motivations or values will solve our natural resource management problems.*

**What people value** or what motivates them is not the only important human aspect of natural resource management. For example, understanding values doesn't translate directly to management changes. It may also be important to learn about potential constraints, opportunities or enabling factors. Look at the roles of social groups, communities, organizations, agencies or networks, and the social and policy context within which they all operate.

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**6** *Social science will help us achieve social license.*

**Like other science,** social science does not automatically point to management solutions that will be accepted by all. It is more appropriate to view social science as something that can help you better understand areas of conflict or controversy and why those exist. Social science can help identify potential approaches for addressing these conflicts. Use social science as one source of information, alongside others, in making decisions.

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**7** *Social science will help us fix a people problem that we're having in our organization or group.*

**Scientists typically conduct** social science to build theories and concepts, and publish peer-reviewed results. This is research, which differs from other interactional activities such as mediation or outreach. Research takes time that you may not have. Your situation may not match the lens or scale of insight that a scientific approach provides. Other approaches such as facilitation or listening sessions may offer more immediate value than pursuing a research project.

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