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Teaching Natural Resources Students About Responsible Conduct of Research: How are We Doing?

Mark W. Brunson¹ and True Rubal²

Universities increasingly are scrutinized for compliance with principles of responsible conduct of research (RCR). In natural resource management, RCR principles come into play in two aspects of research and education: wildlife projects involving live vertebrate animals, and economic and social science projects that use data from human subjects. Under the Animal Welfare Act research proposals involving trapping and/or handling of live wild vertebrates must be approved by an Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC). Federal regulations require review of all research involving human subjects, including on-site interviews and attitude surveys, by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). However, because the rules are often assumed to apply mainly to review biomedical studies that put humans or laboratory animals at potential risk, natural resource students and even researchers may know little about them.

This paper describes results of a survey of U.S. natural resources programs about teaching of RCR principles. Is the teaching focus mainly on general ethical principles, or are there specific units on IACUC and IRBs? Are topics taught to both undergraduates and graduate students, or only to graduate students pursuing thesis research? How often, and in what courses, are RCR principles taught? What is the relative frequency of education about animal welfare vs. human subjects in research? Do students engaged in research as part of classroom instruction have to go through some sort of IRB or IACUC review as they would if the research were intended for an eventual thesis and/or peer-reviewed publication?

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