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Centers of Excellence or Academic Enigmas? A Discussion of the Pros and Cons of Establishing Applied Social Science Departments in Natural Resource Colleges

Steve Hollenhorst¹, Wayne Freimund² and Terry Sharik³

Variously called Departments of Environment and Society, Environmental Social Science, Society and Conservation, and Conservation Social Sciences, several Natural Resource Colleges around the country have recently created departments focusing on the social sciences. Several more are in the process of creating such units. The goal of these departments is to promote scholarship and creativity, educational curricula, and outreach programs relating to the social dimensions of conservation and environmental protection. Ultimately it is hoped such departments will advance our understanding and management of complex ecological social systems and enhance human-environment interactions.

But what is lost when we sequester the social science faculty in these colleges in social science units? Are they really empowered as is hoped or are they in actuality marginalized? While gaining collegiality and solidarity with our social science colleagues, have we also created unhealthy separations from our colleagues in the bio-physical sciences at a time when inter- and trans-disciplinary research and collaboration are needed?

In this session, short presentations will be made by three department chairs in various stages of creating and administering such departments. The rest of the time will be devoted to an open discussion of the issue.

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