

Assessing the Diffusion and Impact of Grey Literature Published by International Intergovernmental Scientific Groups: The Case of the Gulf of Maine Council on the Marine Environment

Bertrum H. MacDonald, Ruth E. Cordes, & Peter G. Wells

Dalhousie University, School of Information Management & School for Resource and Environmental Studies
Canada

Abstract

Although many governmental and intergovernmental organizations publish vast quantities of grey literature, the importance of the diffusion and impact of this literature are rarely studied. Evidence from an investigation of the grey literature output of GESAMP, the Joint Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection (sponsored by the UN and several of the UN-family of organizations), indicated that the literature reached scientific readers and was cited. To determine whether that evidence was representative of international intergovernmental bodies, another intergovernmental organization devoted to marine environmental issues, namely, the Gulf of Maine Council on the Marine Environment (GOMC) was studied. GOMC, an American-Canadian partnership, has been working since 1989 to maintain and enhance environmental quality in the Gulf of Maine. Through its own publications and others resulting from studies conducted under contract or in cooperation with other organizations, GOMC provides a complex publishing history for investigation. Over 300 publications were identified and over 500 citations were located after extensive searching using several citation tools. Citation patterns for GOMC publications mirror the findings of the study of GESAMP; grey literature is cited over lengthy periods, but grey literature tends to be cited primarily by other grey literature. Although digital alerting and access tools are increasing in number and coverage, a reliance on grey literature as the primary means of publication continues to pose hurdles for influencing scientific research, public policy, and public opinion. While grey literature is common to organizations such as GOMC and GESAMP, the impact of this literature can be muted because of the limitations of its dissemination and perceptions of its quality.

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Dedication: This paper is dedicated to the memory of Susan Snow-Cotter, who passed away December 2006. She was a long-term member of the Working Group of the GOMC, a member of Council, and a person devoted to wise environmental management of the Gulf of Maine.

Introduction

It is widely recognized today that environmental issues "have expanded from local and regional problems...to complex, interactive, and persistent problems that threaten the planet as we know it" (Doern & Conway, 1994, p. 4). Over the past quarter century governmental research units, university departments, and many other public and private sector organizations have devoted extensive resources to scientific and social science research on environmental subjects. These initiatives have prompted local, regional, national, and international governmental agencies to produce thousands of reports on environmental topics, most often published as grey literature. Major publications, such as the *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* (Stern, 2006), released in the UK in October 2006, have received broad international attention (BBC News 2006a & b; CBC News, 2006). The same occurred for the vitally important *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Reports*, the first of which was published in March 2005 (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). While those particular reports may in fact foster public policy debate and action (it is too early to tell, if that will be the case), what is the fate of many, many other documents that fall below the radar of national and international media? Even when the reports are of the stature of the *Stern Review*, do they reach readers when and where it matters or are they only noted for short periods of time?

It is clear that the production of grey literature is central to the publishing practices of many organizations (e.g., O'Dell, Dallman, Vesely & Vigen, 2003; MacDonald, Cordes & Wells, 2004). But is that literature found easily when needed and used to maximum efficiency? Are the extensive resources devoted to the production of such publications justified (in some instances upwards of \$1 million per title)? Are there better ways of ensuring the important scientific and technical assessments found in grey literature come to the attention of policy makers, stay in their view, and are used when appropriate to guide much needed environmental policies and other actions? Given the urgent nature of a number of environmental issues, such as climate change, these questions are not trivial, or easy to answer (Acreman, 2005; Francis, Whittaker, Shandas, Mills & Graybill, 2005; Schrecker, 2001; Roux, Rogers, Biggs, Ashton & Sergeant, 1999).