

# **Review of: *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Policy and Politics***

**Robert T. Lackey\***

*\*Department of Fisheries and Wildlife  
Oregon State University  
Corvallis, Oregon 97331*

**Citation:** Lackey, Robert T. 2008. *BioScience*. 58(4): 359-360. [Review of: *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics*. Roger A. Pielke, Jr., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2007].

**Email:** Robert.Lackey@oregonstate.edu  
**Phone:** (541) 737-0569

## SCIENTISTS AND DEMOCRACY

**The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics.** Roger A. Pielke Jr. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom, 2007. 188 pp., illus. \$29.99 (ISBN 9780521694810 paper).

*The Honest Broker* is a must-read for any scientist with even a modest interest in environmental policy or politics, and I recommend it especially to scientists unfamiliar with the continuing controversy over how scientists misuse science in environmental policy and politics. The book will also be of interest to political scientists and others well versed in the scholarly literature concerning science, scientists, and public policy, but Roger Pielke's core analysis and message will not be surprising to these readers.

Pielke begins by recognizing that scientists and science can and should play useful roles in environmental policy and democratic politics, but they can also confuse, muddle, or otherwise impede sound decisionmaking. In a healthy democracy, policymakers and citizens need accurate, relevant, and unbiased science to decide how best to proceed on environmental issues.

The book is an easy read and explores the subject systematically, starting with an in-depth description of the options available for how scientists can participate in policy and politics. On one end of the spectrum is the *pure scientist*, who plays a role that is as independent and isolated from policy and politics as possible. For a pure scientist, research is published in

academic journals and no effort is made to help resolve society's current policy challenges. At the other end of the spectrum is the *issue advocate*, a scientist who uses his or her science and scientific credentials to advocate for the policies he or she supports.

Pielke makes the case that another, more helpful role for scientists to play is that of the *honest broker*. He describes how honest brokers of science are essential to a well-functioning democracy and for the overall, long-term health of the scientific enterprise. In short, he recommends that scientists play the role of honest brokers of policy alternatives. A scientist playing this role seeks to expand the scope of policy choices available to decisionmakers and describes as accurately as possible the consequences of each possible choice. This scientist presents the relevant scientific information to the public and policymakers in a very policy-neutral manner.

I found his presentation of the different roles that scientists and science might play in policy and politics to be both fair and accurate. It is apparent that he is appalled by the behavior of some scientists (for example, couching policy advocacy in science), but he nevertheless offers the best arguments available that support such roles. His arguments are often nuanced, but he leaves little doubt where he stands regarding the proper role for scientists.

Case studies are offered to illustrate the proper (and improper) roles of science and scientists. The case studies (such as public controversy over *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, the political storms involving the science and politics of climate change, and the role of intelligence prior to the decision to go to war in Iraq) are very effective in illustrating how science is used and misused in informing decisionmakers and the public. For example, Pielke illustrates how much of the climate "science" debate can be characterized in terms of stealth policy advocacy, in which debates about values and policy preferences are thinly veiled by various competing claims about science. From Pielke's perspective, much of the policy advocacy is unfortunately offered

by scientists purportedly operating as policy-neutral scientists.

Pielke illustrates major inconsistencies in how many scientists treat "facts" versus "values." Using the decision to go to war in Iraq as an example (in part on the basis of the likelihood of weapons of mass destruction), everyone agrees that the facts—intelligence assessments—used by politicians ought to be free of policy preference or political spin. Scientists, and others, are appalled when they are not. Many scientists, however, feel no reluctance to argue in favor of their policy preferences regarding stem cell research, abortion, or climate change, even though the facts are only one element of the policy debate.

For many scientists, particularly those in environmental or ecological disciplines, Pielke's message may hit uncomfortably close to home. For political scientists and those who study the roles of science and scientists in public policy, the information and recommendations will be perceived as a summary of widely accepted assertions.

As for weaknesses in the book, sometimes the main themes or take-home messages are repeated excessively. Perhaps I reacted that way because I agree with his message, and I was convinced early in the book that his argument was compelling. Despite the repetition, the use of case studies helped me learn something new about a number of interesting and timely science and policy issues and how science was used and abused in each.

---

*Sometimes people who really offer  
nothing but political advocacy cloak  
themselves in scientific ideas and  
masquerade their policy as science.*

---

Pielke's message will not find a warm reception among those scientists who are also policy advocates. Fair or not, it is true that scientists, at least as perceived by many people, are just another political advocacy group, who, for example, argue for or against ratifying Kyoto, participating in the Biodiversity Convention, and pro-

tecting marine areas. Sometimes people who really offer nothing but political advocacy cloak themselves in scientific ideas and masquerade their policy as science.

In summary, *The Honest Broker* is an important book, and it should be read by everyone. Healthy democracies need science and scientists to provide what only they can provide: relevant, policy-neutral, understandable science—not stealth policy advocacy. Offering policy advocacy masquerading as science hurts, over the long-term, both democracy and the scientific enterprise.

ROBERT T. LACKEY

*Robert T. Lackey (e-mail: Robert.Lackey@oregonstate.edu) is a professor in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Oregon State University, and a senior fisheries biologist at the US Environmental Protection Agency's Research Laboratory in Corvallis, Oregon.*

