

ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT AND STRUCTURED DECISION MAKING: IS IT REALLY THAT EASY?

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ABSTRACT

The terms adaptive management and structured decision making are now commonplace in the field of wildlife management. The essential elements of each include unambiguous, measurable objectives, management alternatives for achieving those objectives, and at least a conceptual model for predicting the consequences of enacting each alternative. Many self-proclaimed practitioners do not understand the complete and correct application of these decision making tools, and many of the most likely beneficiaries are fearful of attempting to use them for similar reasons. The most common misconception is that these approaches equate to modeling or decision making by trial and error. The next most common misconception is that large amounts of data and complex simulation models are required before starting either process. Obviously, more information leads to more informed decisions, but frequently starting with a structured process leads to gathering more of the right information to inform decision making. Developing and applying adaptive management and structured decision making, done correctly, requires multiple participants representing analysts, researchers, managers, and beneficiaries, each of whom bring different essential skills to the process. However, none of the participants must possess all of those skills. When representatives from each of these groups work within their own skill sets, the rest is comparatively easy and requires only that all parties share a basic understanding of the process, a commitment to a shared set of wildlife conservation objectives, and transparent, open communication regarding the essential elements. Adaptive management also requires a commitment to monitoring to inform future decisions. The steps used to develop these decision support tools for conservation and wildlife management are the same for problems that range from site-level decisions to apply specific management actions, landscape-level decisions to prioritize areas for acquisition and management, and policy decisions that affect conservation at continental scales. Many of these problems do not require full application of adaptive management unless iterative decision making is required, and there is uncertainty with regard to the mechanisms leading to the consequences of management. Adaptive management can provide a means of learning more about those mechanisms while maximizing the likelihood of success. It is relatively easy to understand the development and implementation of these powerful management tools. The difficulty lies in obtaining the commitment necessary for their implementation.

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