

Are Canadian federal scientists being muzzled?

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By ~~Stephen Bede Scharper~~

This was the question posed earlier this month at the American Academy for the Advancement of Science meeting in Vancouver, where a group of scientists, scholars and journalists joined a panel entitled, "Un-Muzzling Canadian Scientists: How to Reopen the Discourse."

They outlined a disturbing trend, suggesting federal environmental scientists are being systematically barred from communicating their findings to the public.

According to panelist Margaret Munro, science writer for Postmedia News, the Conservative government issued a media protocol that has served to suppress scientific input on issues of public interest.

The protocol states: "Just as we have one department, we should have one voice. Interviews sometimes present surprises to ministers and senior management. Media relations will work with staff on how best to deal with the call (an interview request from a journalist). This should include asking the program expert to respond with approved lines."

According to Munro, "The more controversial the story, the less likely you are to talk to the scientists. They (government media relations staff) just stonewall. If they don't like the question, you don't get an answer." This, she observed, was in marked contrast to her government dealings up until that time, in which she had unencumbered access to federal scientists who were often quite eager to share their findings. Munro shared several examples of what she termed the "muzzling" of scientists by the government.

One celebrated case is that of Dr. Kristi Miller of the Department for Fisheries and Oceans, who published an article in the flagship journal *Science* claiming that declining salmon stocks may be linked to a cancer-related virus. The research raised myriad questions, including whether the virus might have been imported by the local aquaculture industry.

Despite widespread media interest, the government reportedly declined all requests to interview Miller.

Thomas Pedersen, a senior scientist with the University of Victoria, suggests such developments have a political basis. As Pedersen told the BBC, "The Prime Minister is keen to keep control of the message, I think to ensure that the government won't be embarrassed by scientific findings of its scientists that run counter to sound environmental stewardship," he said.

“I suspect the federal government would prefer that its scientists don't discuss research that points out just how serious the climate change challenge is.”

Is some science more problematic for the powers-that-be than others?

Galileo, as history reminds us, was another scientist whose discoveries were an inconvenience to the reigning power of his day. The notion that the Earth was not the centre of our corner of creation was upsetting for a politically empowered church that had invested a lot of time, money and theology in the idea that we on Earth were the pivot of the celestial spheres.

Given the Canadian government's recent withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, and its unshakable commitment to mining the tarsands, one can see why it might not rush to feature science detailing the baleful effects of climate change.

According to Miriam Diamond, professor of geography at the University of Toronto, the attempt to muzzle environmental scientists is rooted in a deep bias that often places environmental research on the lower rungs of the academic ladder.

Diamond, who won *Canadian Geographic's* “Environmental Scientist of the Year” Award in 2007, sees the recent large-scale firing of contract researchers and “re-profiling” of scientists at Environment Canada as an extension of such silencing, and part of a larger “culture of fear” that has emerged among federal environmental researchers.

Among those whose federal contracts were recently severed is Marianne Karsh, who had worked with Environment Canada since 2006. Karsh, a forestry expert specializing in biodiversity and climate change, was with the Adaptation and Impacts Research Division (AIRD), which has now been “discontinued,” according to Karsh, despite its high rate of productivity, its fiscal responsibility and an auditor's recommendation that it be given additional support. This division provided research and information on areas likely to experience hazardous floods, windstorms, tornadoes and similar climatic events in light of climate change.

While Canadian environmental scientists aren't being placed under house arrest for their findings, they are it seems being silenced, “re-profiled” or downsized by a political power that is seemingly allergic to evidence that challenges its gospel of growth through the mining and burning of fossil fuels. Given our present environmental challenges, our environmental scientists, now more than ever, need to be supported — and heard.

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