The Role of Science in Assessing International Environmental Standards: Lessons from the Case of Animal Welfare Guidelines

El Papel de la Ciencia en la Evaluación de las Normas Medioambientales Internacionales: Lecciones del Caso de las Directrices de Bienestar Animal

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Abstract

Introduction: The case of animal welfare guidelines presents a unique opportunity to examine the role of science in assessing a range of international environmental standards that share both qualitative and quantitative parameters. In such domains—from food safety and water quality to urban planning and wildlife management—stakeholders have incentives to present their interests as being more 'science-based' than competing interests. Similarly, intergovernmental organizations requiring consensus-based voting insist on 'science-based standards' that can be little more than a cover for dominant policy interests. ***Material and Methods:*** A series of interviews conducted in 2008-9 with expert stakeholders concerning international animal welfare standardization—available at http://bit.ly/dB3Zvh—provide the groundwork for this study's analysis. ***Results and Discussion:*** In the case of animal welfare, different veterinary subdisciplines will tend to prioritize one welfare parameter—from biological functioning to natural living to affective states—at the expense of others. It is the role of sound policy to balance these interests and preferences. Understandably, intergovernmental organization delegates are loath to submit to guidelines that do not speak the common language of science, but 'strictly science-based standards' are, in most cases, an unattainable panacea. ***Conclusion:*** From risk assessment and hazard analysis to mitigation and the precautionary principle, various approaches exist when addressing environmental concerns. The animal welfare case demonstrates that policy domains which originated from ethical rather than scientific movements require an interdisciplinary policy that embraces scientific inputs as essential but acknowledges the diverse and multivalent interests of various stakeholder groups.

Keywords: science-based standards, international environmental policy, animal welfare, stakeholder analysis