

Balancing Science and Activism

Gerald 'Jerry' Niemi
Professor, Department of Biology
Director, Center for Water and the Environment
Natural Resources Research Institute
University of Minnesota, Duluth

Outline of Presentation

- Briefly describe my background
- University policy on activism
- SCB “policy” on activism
- Some general experiences
- Summarize
- Questions

What is activism (or activist)?

- Activism
 - a) philosophical – a theory that the essence of reality is pure activity, especially spiritual activity or process,
 - b) the doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving **political** (?) goals
- Activist – name for an individual who **favors, incites, or demands** intensified activities

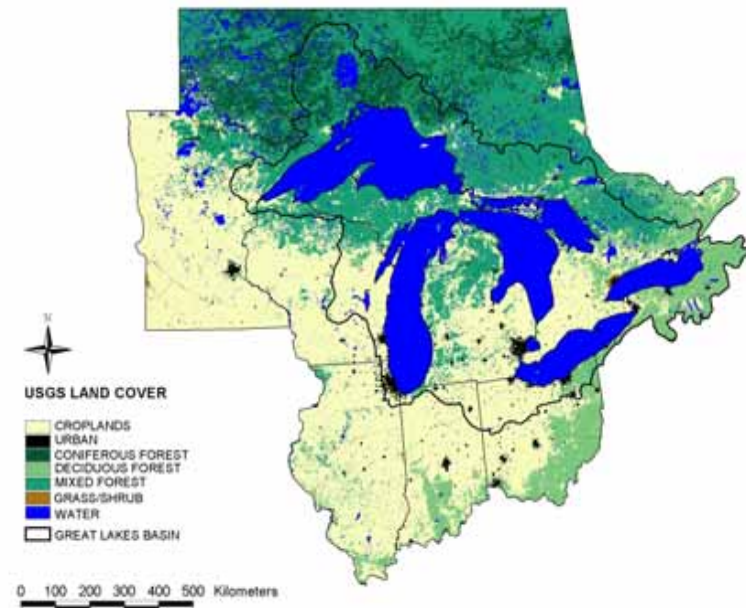
Natural Resources Research Institute (U of Minnesota) Mission Statement:

- To foster economic development of Minnesota's natural resources in an environmentally sound manner to promote private sector employment.



Center for Water and the Environment (NRRI, U of Minnesota) Mission Statement:

- The economic growth of MN depends on sustained yield and protection of its natural resources.
- CWE is committed to understanding problems that impede the environmentally sound development of the economy.



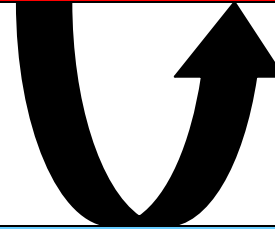
My background

- Director – 18 years (1988 to 2006)
- Supervise – 50-80 staff (including 10-16 Ph.D.'s)
– note each with very different perspectives
- Two tenured faculty in the Institute
- Vice-president of Minnesota Society for Conservation Biology
- Member of Chamber of Commerce, former Rotarian, but also Audubon, Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club (also AAAS, AOU, ESA, SCB, etc.)

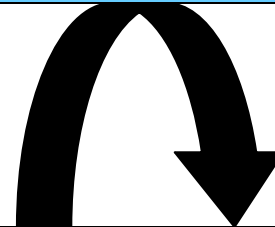


How do we truly achieve sustainability?

Economy



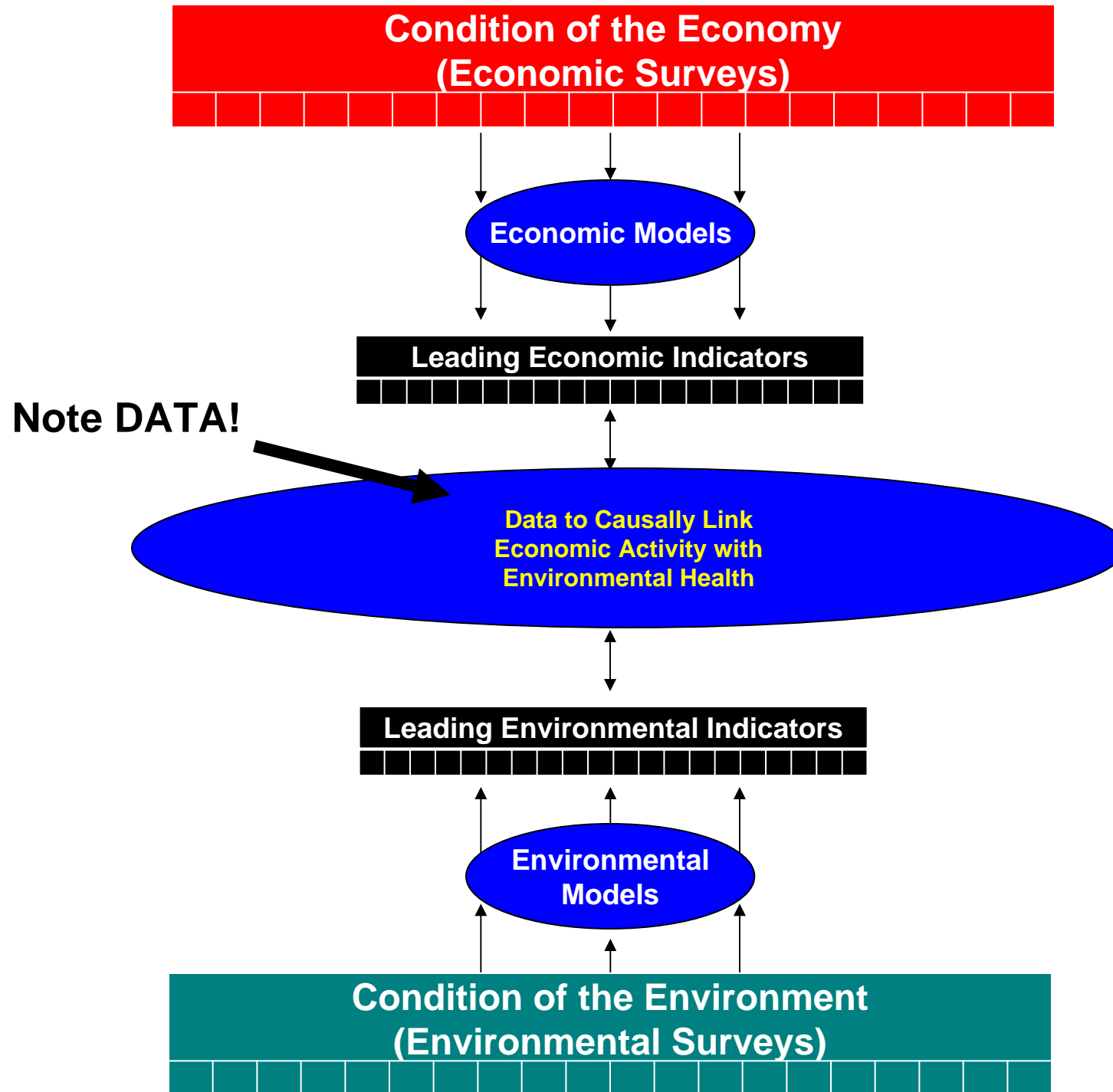
Public Policy Decisions



Environment

Poor Information
On Consequences

Few Integrating
Mechanisms



University of Minnesota – Board of Regents Policy

“Academic responsibility implies the faithful performance of academic duties and obligations, the recognition of the demands of the scholarly enterprise, and the candor to make it clear that the individual is **not** speaking for the institution in matters of public interest.”

MN Chapter of SCB – review of primary functions in 2003 – (as determined by poll of chapter members)

1. Resource for local/regional researchers in conservation-related fields (by far)
2. Information center on regional environmental events, projects, etc.
3. **Environmental Advocacy** and Public Education

Quotes of published dialogue on 'Advocacy'

- “The line is **thin** between judgment informed by sound scientific data and speculative judgment based on little data and much personal interest” (Fenn and Milton, Fisheries 22:2, 1997)
- “I suggest we should be calling for professional **responsibility** rather than debating advocacyuntil we consider use of our scientific knowledge as a responsibility, society will view us as advocates.” (Karr 1993, Cons. Biol. 7:8, 1993)

What does our Society (SCB) say?

SCB Code of Ethics

2. **Advocate** the use of reliable information, rigorous scientific methodologyin management decisions
5. Avoid actions or omissions that may compromise their responsibility to conservation and science.
7. Perform professional servicesonly in areas of competence.....
8. Refuse to allow personal interests, compensation or personal relationships to interfere with professional judgment
12. Treat colleagues and professional contacts respectfully...

Society for Conservation Biology

Strategic Plan – 2006-2010

- P. 6 – III Policy – *Rationale and Strategic Impact*

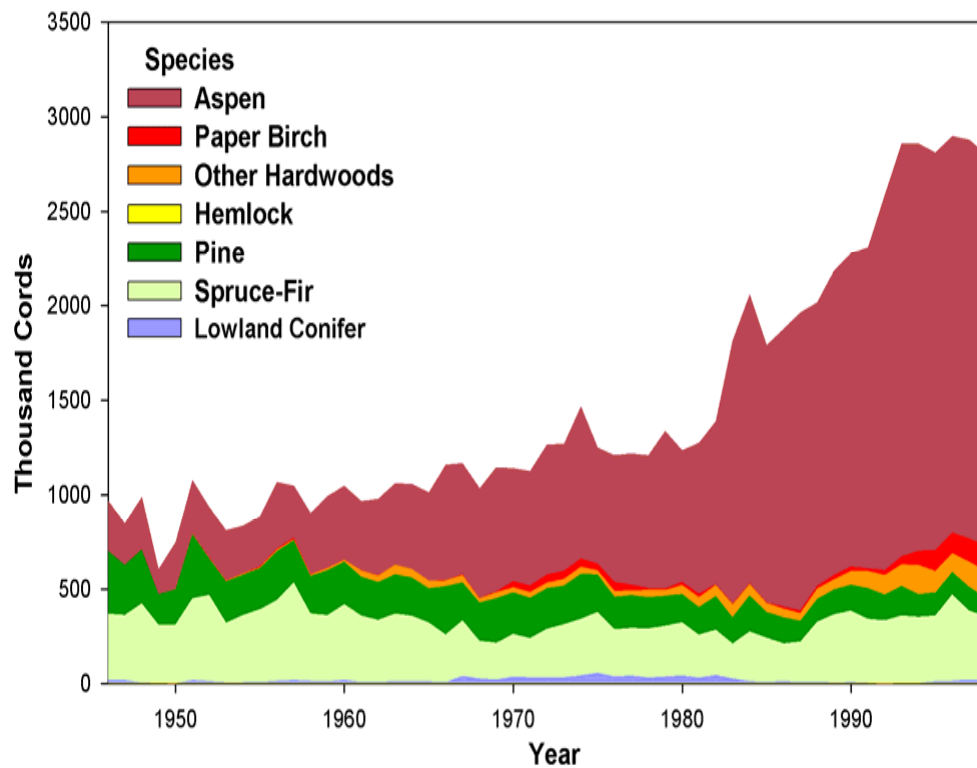
“Resolution of most conservation issues will benefit from the application of scientific expertiseOur mission and values require that the SCB **engage actively** in policy to ensure that the highest quality scientific information is applied to conservation/biodiversity issues.”

Society for Conservation Biology
Strategic Plan – 2006-2010 - continued

- P. 8 – V. Impact and Reputation –
Rationale and Strategic Impact
*“At the most basic level, powerful constituencies, interest groups, and institutions should **look to us as a source** of sound information that will help them solve problems”*

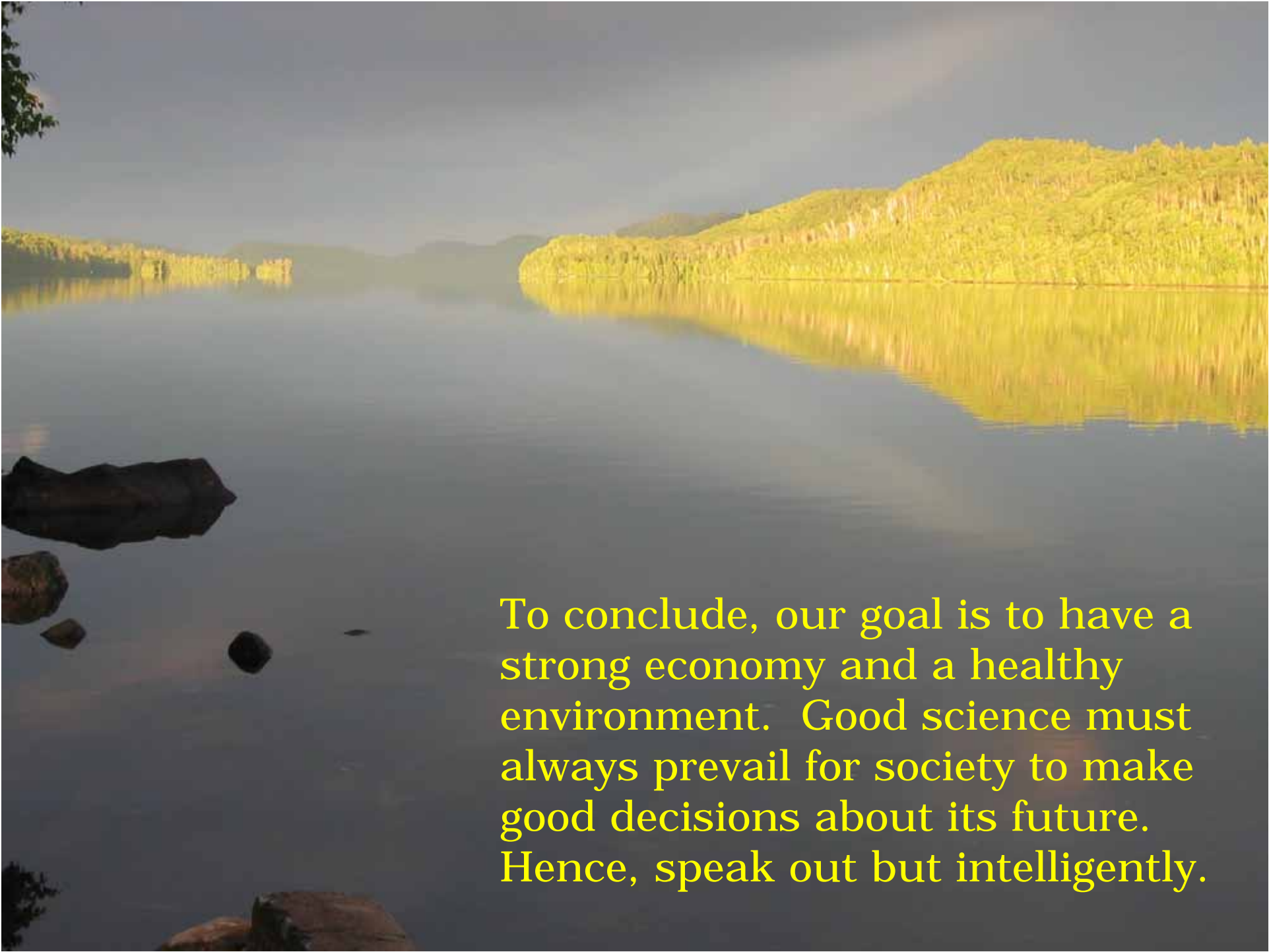
Brief Examples

- Climate change
- Forest management and fire



Conclusions – as SCB Chapter Representatives

- Be responsible scientists – it is your responsibility!
- Contribute in your area of expertise
- “Advocate the use of reliable information”
- Be cautious about highly emotional or personal issues
- Let good science be your guide – seek the truth
- There are many alternatives for advocacy



To conclude, our goal is to have a strong economy and a healthy environment. Good science must always prevail for society to make good decisions about its future. Hence, speak out but intelligently.