

Redefining science to meet financial needs

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In my experience there have been three attempts to redefine science in order to secure financial gain. Probably, much of it unconscious, but I make the attribution nonetheless.

The first is the redefinition of a species. I think I've covered the Florida Panther elsewhere. Here's the trick. By defining a rare subspecies as a species, it will almost immediately qualify as an endangered species due to its rarity. That definition brings with it added power when applying for grants to study the organism or to manage it. The change was simple enough, but not scientific. Two organisms are of the same species if they can successfully breed and produce viable offspring. That is a very practical definition based on gene flow. In the new definition, the criteria might be an accumulation of characteristics or a percentage of genetic equality. By that definition it is entirely possible that the Australian aborigine and the South African Pygmy might be reclassified as different species. There is no biological practicality to the definition.

The second was the redefinition of the word extinct. Originally, it meant that there weren't any more. Now it means that the population has fallen so low that the mathematicians predict that it can never recover. I have been unable to deduce a benefit to that redefinition. It simply makes no sense.

The third is the interpretation of a statical analysis regarding correlation and causation.

In the original form, two factors were deemed to be correlated if there was an 80% predictable response in one factor as a result of a change in the other. The implication is causation, but that was to be proven by further study. In more recent years, a correlation of 20% has been used to substantiate the need for study (i.e. obtain a grant) using the argument that the correlation is not zero. It is argued that understanding the minor relationships is important in understanding how species interact with each other or with the environment. That statement is true, but hardly worth assessing when the other 80% is yet to be understood. The flaw in the logic is that one can achieve a 20% regression correlation using random numbers. This too has been addressed elsewhere in my writing.

The final redefinition that has me bugged came out of the United Nations Climate group. The word consensus is derived from the Latin 'common' and 'thought' and has been defined by dictionaries forever as 'unanimous.' That didn't fit the agenda, so the definition was changed to be something very fuzzy meaning 'generally agreed to.'