

Understanding the Use and Influence of Publications of Intergovernmental Environmental Organizations: Evidence from an Analysis of Internal Sources

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In the global village of the twenty-first century, intergovernmental organizations have significant roles in addressing world-wide problems. Continuing serious environmental degradation, found at the top of the list of major concerns, is drawing growing attention by such organizations. In seeking solutions, they produce thousands of publications in print and digital formats, many of which have policy implications. However, the methods by which the organizations' publication, dissemination, and promotion practices increase awareness, access, and use of this grey literature are understudied. Elucidating these processes is needed to ensure that information has ample opportunities to enter decision making cycles. If policy makers are inefficient in their use of this growing body of grey literature, they may make decisions in an untimely manner, not act at all, or overlook risks that could or should be managed more effectively.

Our research programme is investigating this topic through detailed case studies of intergovernmental and governmental organizations focussed on marine environmental matters. In previous papers we reported on initial citation studies of grey literature of two case study organizations. In this paper we discuss additional findings arising from one of organizations, namely the Gulf of Maine Council on the Marine Environment (GOMC), an intergovernmental organization with a complex governance arrangement guiding its publication practices. The paper presents results based on a preliminary analysis of interviews of personnel associated with GOMC as members of its primary Working Group. Our previous research has focussed on citation analysis to understand uses of grey literature. However, we believe that additional methods, including investigating internal sources, are needed to fully appreciate the fate of grey literature of organizations like GOMC.

Tracking the pathways of grey literature begins with determining the publication and dissemination practices from the perspectives of informed insiders. Data obtained in interviews of the GOMC Working Group members conducted in 2009 highlight a variety of pathways that grey literature can take after publication. The interview data provides insights into factors that influence the practices used to produce, disseminate, and promote awareness of grey literature. Intergovernmental organizations face considerable challenges when they rely heavily on grey literature as their main method of publication. This study emphasizes the importance of grounding an understanding of these issues with the internal knowledge of the organization.