

**The political economy of applied geomorphology:
Navigating the rapids**

Speaker: **Professor R.J. Wasson**
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Chair: Harvey Neo, Department of Geography, NUS

Date/Time: Friday, 31 October 2014, 3.30 – 5.00 pm

Place: Earth Lab (AS2 02-03), Department of Geography, NUS

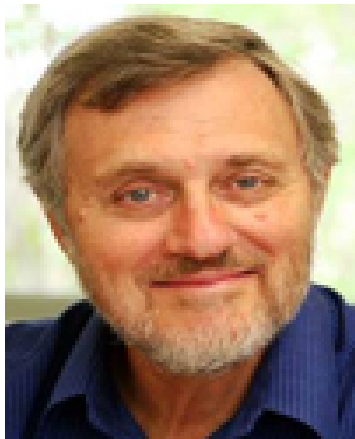
Abstract

I position Geomorphology and the rest of Physical Geography in the natural sciences because it and they are from the same epistemic stable. Natural science is socially and politically situated but there are many scientists who believe otherwise. For scientists wanting to influence policy and management there are four different ways of behaving that will be detailed, with varying degrees of political engagement. Whichever way they behave they need to recognize that the uncertainties in their pronouncements are mostly aleatory and therefore subjective (in a probabilistic sense). Objective uncertainties are restricted to a few laboratory sciences.

The four ways of relating to policymakers and managers may be all that is needed. But if the scientist wants to increase the probability of success both of his/her technical input then there are other considerations. In the South in particular the land manager should be centre stage, a claim that may also apply in the North, with respect for the knowledge and expertise of land managers, and alertness to the reasons for their actions that are damaging to water and land in the eyes of the scientist. In addition the science should be holistic to avoid false conclusions, and it should critically examine and if necessary challenge 'grand narratives' of the kind often used by policymakers, managers and scientists to legitimize a political position.

The scientist should also be aware of the possible injustices that particular technical solutions can create, and of the criticisms of ultra-relativists. The scientist doesn't need to be expert in policy and politics but should be sufficiently socially aware to ask difficult questions. These issues will be illustrated in Timor Leste and Sumba.

About the Speaker



In his most recent positions prior to joining NUS in 2011 Professor Robert Wasson was Director of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Dean of Science and Head of the Department of Geography and Human Ecology at the Australian National University, then Deputy Vice Chancellor Research and International at Charles Darwin University, Australia. He has taught and researched at Sydney University, Macquarie University, University of Auckland, Monash University, and the Australian National University. He was trained in geomorphology and his research interests are: causes of change in river catchments; environmental history; extreme hydrologic events in the tropics; cross-disciplinary methods; and the integration of science into both public and private sector policy. He has done research in Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Timor Leste, Malaysia, India, Nepal, Pakistan, China, Myanmar and Thailand.

He is currently a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute of Water Policy at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and is examining flood risk in relation to climate change and human vulnerability over long periods in India and Thailand, the political economy of disaster management in India and Thailand, and the ways in which false policies become locked in.

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