

From the Precautionary Principle to Precautionary Science

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The precautionary principle (PP), which has been incorporated in various policy documents around the world, encourages action in response to environmental threats even in the face of incomplete scientific information. Nevertheless, many thinkers regard it as misguided or even incoherent. In response to these criticisms, some have argued that scientists should engage in "precautionary science" (PS) as a way of extending or replacing the PP. In order to evaluate the merits of this suggestion, the present paper examines a range of case studies from contemporary environmental research. Drawing on these examples, the paper accomplishes three tasks: (i) it proposes a rough characterization of PS; (ii) it argues that at least some forms of PS escape classic criticisms of the PP; and (iii) it highlights a practical challenge to implementing PS (namely, that it sometimes requires acting contrary to the typical norms of scientific disciplines).

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