

# Foreword

The success or failure of our actions is largely determined by the decisions we take. While history tends to judge these in terms of their outcomes, a close examination of the reasoning and processes that lead to those decisions can be salutary. In my experience as an archaeologist, I was constantly faced with conservation decisions. For example, during a stratigraphic excavation: which levels to remove in order to explore the underlying layers; which area to sample and which to leave unsurveyed? Likewise post-excavation, decisions need to be made regarding which phases to present in order to construct a narrative that is not only historically reliable but also of interest to the public. This is important, since getting the story right is paramount to the success of the site, and in turn, to its long-term sustainability. Those who, like me, have been involved in rescue archaeology prior to public works also know how challenging these decisions become in an emergency when time is tight, resources are insufficient, and public pressure is high, owing to the inconvenience caused by the excavation. All of this increases the risk of making wrong decisions.

Conservation principles adopted since the early twentieth century acknowledge the need for decisions to be informed by the best available scientific evidence, and accordingly, substantial efforts have been expended in building up a significant body of knowledge to support conservation decisions. However, an approach founded solely on technical or historical considerations neglects the importance of human factors in determining decisions and their outcomes. A symptom of our time and its changing social values is a certain loss of confidence in authority figures, such that acceptance of expert opinion has become eroded. This is exemplified by the debates surrounding climate change, the connection of which to anthropogenic activities would appear scientifically irrefutable, but is nevertheless disputed by some. Indeed, while it is difficult to unpick knowledge from belief, on all sides, trust plays an integral role. The conservation field has been diligent in examining the quality of its knowledge base for decision-making, but it is important to also examine the processes by which conservation decisions are made. The importance of stakeholder participation and the ways in which different interest groups impact conservation decisions and vice versa have long been recognized. However, the manner in which this relationship is affected by decision-making processes – and the systematic study of these – is a topic of relatively recent interest.