

Ecologists, ethical codes, and the struggles of a new profession

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Environmental management is a growth industry. One environmental magazine reports its subscribers this year number thirty times those of five years ago. Environmental management is apparently an investment in social good as well; but it is a difficult one to make. Since 1946, the ratio in America between social good and environmental cost has shifted. Then one beer bottle was reused an average of forty times. Now beer bottles and cans are usually used once. Then and now the USDA agricultural output index per capita is approximately the same, but now five times as much nitrogen fertilizer is used to maintain that ratio. The ways in which we produce our goods and use our resources have been transformed, at substantial social cost. Americans have been awakening to that cost, and the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act was one expression of that awakening.

The National Environmental Policy Act requires the government to describe the environmental impact of what it wants to do—say, open a nuclear power generating plant or close down some Penn Central branch lines—in an "environmental impact statement." Many states have enacted similar legislation; and preparing environmental impact statements has thus become a major new task, one which requires interdisciplinary exchange and interaction. More—it requires those preparing such statements to interact with politicians and with bureaucrats, with special interest groups and with persons from all social strata. Granted the best intentions (which are not so easily granted), understanding, tolerance, respect, and cooperation are slow to develop.

In 1973, under increasing pressure to contribute to, prepare, and review environmental impact statements and

faced with problems of conflict of interest and inadequate statements, some California environmental experts sought to establish an association which would help them to cope with the new demands; and one of them immediately set about to design a code of ethical practice. In one year, membership in the California Association of Environmental Professionals increased from 40 to 450. The group began to achieve recognition from state governmental agencies and private groups and corporations. It had a code of ethics, which concentrated on concerns common to professionals working in the field. Why not a national association then?

Indeed, it has appeared. The National Association of Environmental Professionals marked its official birth by the "Energy, Environment and Ethics Seminar," November 5-7, 1975, presented in conjunction with George Washington University's Continuing Engineering Education Program.

Tens of thousands of invitations were sent out, but only 100 or so persons of diverse professions attended—accountants and economists, planners and architects and engineers, biologists, biochemists, mineralogists, and sociologists. The small turnout and diverse backgrounds of those in attendance suggest that environmental professionals are still not sure who they are. Coming from many different states and boasting disparate institutional affiliations, these academics, entrepreneurs, and government workers had in common simply their skills and responsibilities in the field of environmental management. All were concerned, as members of a budding profession, to define their roles and defend their turf. In Washington it was politically and psychologically pressing for the association and its members to distinguish themselves from others for whom they may be

mistaken. Speakers at the meeting were adamant in dissociating themselves from those they called "professional environmentalists"—private citizens and "do-gooders" affiliated with non-professional environmental organizations.

Environmental professionals usually have well-established professional identities within their respective but diverse fields, and they pay at least lip service to rules of scientific rigor, objectivity, careful data collection, description, and analysis. In contrast professional environmentalists are considered to be amateurs lacking the capacities or training to fulfill these professional and scientific goals. Further, their ability to understand and assess the information offered by environmental professionals is sometimes called into question, as is that of the general public.

At the Washington meeting environmental professionals often presumed their non-professional friends to be emotionally biased. Indeed, they sometimes are. But unlike the environmental professionals, the professional environmentalists are not searching for self-identification. They have firm personal, institutional, and ethical affiliations, which provide a degree of autonomy as well as certain accepted procedures by which to assert their prerogatives. Not having these unambiguous affiliations and procedures, environmental professionals need to clarify and evaluate their general and disparate professional goals in light of their new integrative function. If they can do so, they may acquire a degree of autonomy; certain prerogatives will be granted them by other professionals and by clients, officials, and the public.

Interestingly one of the first tasks of the National Association is to reassess and reformulate the California code of ethical practice in order to make it acceptable to a growing membership. The board of directors sees the formulation and development of a code as an important step in identi-

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fying environmental professionals, defining their roles, and establishing their responsibilities and prerogatives.

This development should catch the attention of those who have considered the place of ethical codes in other professions. No doubt, such codes have made some difference in how the professionals view themselves and how outsiders view them. But many professionals have pointed out that codes often have limited value when practitioners are faced with ethical difficulties in day-to-day practice. And general precepts may offer little reassurance to skeptical outsiders about the actual behavior of professionals. Skeptics question whether codes of ethics primarily serve professional self-interest by defining who are legitimate practitioners or genuinely maintain high-quality services and protect unwary consumers.

These issues could be seen lurking in the background when persons attending the November seminar raised questions about the draft code of ethical practice essentially based on the code of the California Association. Those professionals not directly concerned to prepare and review impact statements protested that the draft code seemed germane only to those who did prepare and review such statements. Already the National Association was faced with a question of finding a fit between its code and its plausible membership. Board members were immediately sensitive to this point. They wanted to make sure that environmental managers who did not prepare or review environmental impact statements did not feel excluded—a good political response.

But the ethical considerations are broader. Whose perceptions of the ethical problems faced by a profession ought to be taken into account in formulating a code? Politicians, bureaucrats, industrialists, professional environmentalists, and the public generally have a stake in environmental management, and may have views quite different from professionals.

Whatever the final form of the code, vague or concrete, limited or broad, it is only in the association's institutionalization of structures and procedures that code requirements can be given force. The draft code exhorts environmental professionals to

disclose financial or personal interests in projects for which they write environmental impact statements. But how much of a financial interest, of what sort, is needed for there to be an ethical issue? What sorts of personal interests are being talked about: someone's bias towards railroad as opposed to truck transport; someone's concern for species survival, strong genetic pools, or national security; someone's friendship with persons who stand to benefit from a particular recommendation? Persons attending the Washington meeting questioned the propriety of firms' doing their own environmental impact statements on projects they wish to initiate. Obviously such companies have substantial financial and personal interests in the outcome. Is the simple disclosure of such interests enough? Should the code disallow statements prepared by those who stand to benefit substantially from project approval? Will a stipulation in the code that environmental professionals enumerate in their statements each available alternative to the preferred project, including the "no-build or null alternative," be sufficient? Should the code suggest a role for public interest or community groups in the preparation or review of impact statements? Should the association review statements where conflict of interest is likely, or acknowledged, or alleged? Should the association censure professionals, private firms, governmental agencies or community groups that suppress information or give misleading information? What role should environmental professionals or the association play in the legislative process? It is in creating procedures for dealing with specific problems of conflicting interests that a code of ethical practice can be kept relevant to the day-to-day ethical concerns of professionals and non-professionals alike.

Other important ethical problems remain. For example, persons attending told stories of environmental professionals who were fired for honesty, of others who wrote reports which their clients shelved because they did not support client interests. Should the association play a role in support of environmental managers who find themselves punished for ethical practice? Unless some provisions for deal-

ing with these sorts of problems are provided, the code seems likely to be weak. Other questions persist. Should the association certify or license professionals? Should the association censure those who perform incompetently or in bad faith; or leave that prerogative to the courts?

From another angle, what does constitute a good environmental impact statement? What criteria and standards are important? Which forms of expertise are essential? The general statements in the draft code point in the right direction, but they are not in themselves sufficiently specific to be helpful to professionals suddenly thrust into new and complicated projects. The association might provide its members a helpful service by pledging its responsibility say to collect and distribute good environmental impact statements, or to analyze various statements and distribute the results of that analysis. Only in such ways are vague, encoded ethical exhortations likely to be translated into practice.

Finally, one task which a standing committee on ethics in the National Association of Environmental Professionals might assign itself for coming years is an assessment of the ethical problems which inhere in the relationship between its profession and the federal government. The government often sponsors environmental research, offers environmental professionals employment, and acts as their client. Consider, for example, the ostensible conflict between the values of "national security" and its concomitant "secrecy" and the association's values of "full disclosure" and "public participation," as enunciated in the draft code. Consider the ethical difficulties that may arise over government procedures in funding research: to cover its costs, a firm may continue to do research it knows to be inferior or irrelevant. Consider governmental demands for quick answers where there may be none. The formation of a National Association seems a natural response to new conditions created by our concern for environmental management; but students of ethical codes and professionalism generally will be keeping an eye out for the long-range "environmental impact" of another new profession.