

CHAPTER 4

Point by Point Explanation: Society of American Foresters Code

This chapter briefly explains the terms used in one ethics code, that of the Society of American Foresters. This code is quite similar to those adopted by other resource management professional societies, so it serves as a good example. It addresses most of the issues that come up in the codes of many professional resource societies. It is not held up as a model, but it serves our present purpose as an expository device. It is also the field most familiar to the author. Codes of several other natural resource groups are in the Appendix. More complete discussions of specific points are in later chapters and in the Applications section.

PURPOSES OF AN ETHICS CODE

The Society of American Foresters (SAF) Ethics Guide states three purposes of a code:*

1. Clarify core values;
2. Guide professional conduct for the benefit of society;
3. Inspire members to exceed minimum standards when possible.

SAF CODE – OVERVIEW

1. The Code consists of an explanatory *Preamble*, followed by a series of six points in common format. Each point consists

*Source: Society of American Foresters Ethics Guide: 6

of a broadly stated *Principle*, followed by specific *Pledges*. Generally, the Pledges restate separate provisions (Canons) of the previous Code. The current Code was adopted in 2000, following a revision that boiled it down to a set of six sections, from a previous version containing 16 Canons.

2. The *Preamble* states the profession's mission of forest stewardship and emphasizes the importance of forests to society. It then refers to two heroic figures of the profession, Aldo Leopold and Gifford Pinchot, who are said to exemplify the profession's highest traditions.
3. It states comprehensive and ambitious goals for the Code, including protecting and serving society, fostering long-term stewardship, supporting good business relationships, and then reiterates service to society once again.
4. To coin shorthand names for the Principles, they are six:
 1. Land ethic.
 2. Importance and role of landowner/client objectives and rights.
 3. Importance of science.
 4. Public policy and role of foresters.
 5. Communication, confidentiality.
 6. Civil and dignified behavior.

You will note that the SAF Code tries to present obligations in a positive tone. The term "unethical" nowhere appears in its Code, in contrast to some other societies who use it frequently.

DISCUSSION OF PLEDGES AND PRINCIPLES

Now some brief comments as to what the specific Pledges contained under each Principle might mean . . .

Note: these are my own personal observations and have no official status as far as SAF is concerned. I am trying to interpret what they say, not what I might like them to say. In this discussion I try to comment on the general concepts incorporated in the Pledges, and indicate some of the issues of interpretation that will arise. More specific points will be taken up later, so this opening introduction does not supply anything like a thorough discussion.

It will be important to carefully read the discussion in the Society of American Foresters Ethics Guide pp. 24 ff at this point.

Land Ethic

Until recently, the SAF Code was without a Land Ethic Canon. One was added by member vote in 1992. In a new environmental age, a Land Ethic seemed to many members to be necessary and appropriate. Yet, it is far from self-explanatory and to date, SAF has done little to provide details as to its interpretation.

The Principle states that foresters have a “*responsibility to manage.*” Yet many foresters are in staff positions or are scientists. Entry level foresters often have limited autonomy. How they are to respond to such a mandate when they do not control decisions is an issue.

Land is to be managed “*for current and future generations.*” Presumably this means we need not be altruistic toward the future and refrain from using forests, yet we are in some sense to provide for future generations. But how much? Do we merely refrain from cutting? Or, must we actively invest?

The first Pledge commits Members to *practice and advocate* management to “*maintain long-term capacity of the land.*” This leaves considerable room for current management to reduce growing stock so long as soil productivity is unaffected. (And on very small ownerships, this can be necessary at harvest time.) The pledge goes on to mention a “*variety of materials, uses and values*”, endorsing the multiple uses of forests. This hints that single use management, at least over large areas, could contravene the Land Ethic. Finally, the notion is introduced of values desired by the “*landowner and society.*”

This statement affirms that both the landowner and society as a whole have a legitimate stake in how forests are managed.

Importance and Role of Landowner/Client Objectives and Rights

This Principle expands upon the duality of landowner rights and social claims on private land. The duality is stated matter-of-factly, but little is offered by way of guidance as to how to balance or resolve dilemmas created by this situation. The Principle simply acknowledges the facts as they are – in today’s society, a view of outright supremacy of unrestrained landowner desires is untenable. Forestry came into being in this country as a response to the problems

created by the supposed right of owners to do whatever they please. Society's interests are described in terms of a "*stewardship responsibility to society*." Note the way this is stated . . . both the terms stewardship and responsibility have multiple shades of meanings. There is no suggestion here that society as a whole possesses any specific, identifiable rights in the matter.

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A sentence from the previous Principle is then repeated virtually verbatim, with the added concept that management is to be in accord with "*professional standards*." No indication is given, in the Code itself or elsewhere, concerning the sources of such standards. In some professions, extensive discussion is given to professional standards to be adhered to by Members, usually in an annex to their ethics code. You don't even have to get out of college to know that there is debate within the profession as to what good management practice consists of. And our notions of "good management" have changed over the years.

As an example from wildlife management – it was proposed to save the California Condor from extinction by incubating eggs in captivity and then releasing the birds. Some scientists bitterly protested that this would fail and be the end of the species. I understand that this course was followed, and has so far been successful. The point is, for that problem there was no "standard" at the time. The best-informed scientists were divided as to how to save the Condor.

The final pledge under this Principle requires that Members will "*advise landowners of the consequences of deviating from such standards*." It is not stated whether this advice is to be formal or informal, in writing or not, in what degree of detail it is to be presented, or what the source of the standard is to be. It clearly implies an out for the forester, however. Once advising of consequences, the forester is free to proceed with operations that in their judgment deviate from standards. (Does this contradict earlier language pledging that management will be in accord with standards?)

Importance of Science

This Principle enshrines science as the basis of forestry. It embodies an assumption that science speaks with a single voice, which at times it does not. How science speaks is left to the forester to judge (using “*most appropriate*” data). There are three important components to the pledges:

First, that of *continuous improvement* of knowledge and skills. This states a basic hallmark of a profession – continuing education – and makes it an *ethical* obligation.

Second, it mandates that members perform *only services for which they are qualified*, and

Third, it introduces the *social sciences* as being coequal with the biological and physical sciences. This has been controversial with some members, given the difficulty of gaining consensus on many issues within the social sciences. It could be that the principal social science intended by this language was finance, but no indication is given.

Public Policy, Social Values, and the Role of Foresters

Public Policy arises for the first time in Principle 4. Previous principles dealt with the individual forester. This principle urges that policy should be based on “*both scientific principles and social values.*”

The Pledges are three:

- to help formulate “*sound forest policies*” and laws.
- “*to challenge and correct untrue statements*”.
- and “*to foster dialogue*” among various groups concerned with forest policy.

Note that these are stated as affirmative obligations. They are not optional. SAF members are to go forth into the world and carry out these pledges. The Principle does not call on us to sell our worldly goods and become missionaries. But it does obligate members to participate at some level in these activities.

One issue for interpretation – it is not usually scientific principles that are involved in management decision-making. Rather it is specific results, in particular places, interpretations of imperfect or short-term experiments, and competing views of new concepts and data. So pointing to general principles would seem to be of little help.

As a general matter, it is plain that science and public values are involved in policy. Yet, it is symptomatic of this postmodernist age that the Code's authors could not bring themselves to appeal to the now unpopular concept of a "public interest," which so animated the profession's founders a century ago.

Communication, Confidentiality, and Conflict of Interest

This Principle deals with "honest and open communication" as a key to good service. The sense of the sentence seems to mean service to client or employer, but perhaps it can be read as a hint at the public interest component of the profession as well.

Foresters are "to present accurate and complete information," not biased or selectively edited to support a viewpoint. Yet foresters, as consultants or employees, are expected to advocate client or employer viewpoints in business negotiations, legislative proceedings, or public debates. Usually this entails a point of view that may not be seen as "complete or accurate" by persons holding opposing views. In addition, they are "to indicate on whose behalf public statements are made" This sounds clear enough. But if I advocate publicly, say in a letter to the editor, a viewpoint that coincides with my employers, must I reveal who my employer is? Or only if my employer asked me to write the letter? This pledge is an example of how very general pledges need to be interpreted before they can actually help in answering day to day questions.

This Principle also contains pledges dealing with some of the more business oriented ethics issues:

Conflicts of interest are "to be disclosed and resolved," though they are assumed to be self-defining as far as the Code is concerned. In practice, however, the issue is often whether a conflict exists or does not exist.

Finally, *proprietary information* is to be respected.

Civil and Dignified Behavior

This principle holds that professional and civic behavior is to be "based on honesty, fairness, good will, and respect for the law." It would seem that professional behavior by *definition* would encompass honesty, fairness, and respect for the law. Those terms could by themselves define professionalism. The term "good will" is a concept

that sounds generally virtuous but whose meaning may be less than clear. The term may suggest that nasty, hostile, or prejudiced attitudes are out of place.

Conduct by foresters is to be civil and dignified, and to embody respect for “the needs, contributions, and viewpoints of others.” Foresters today are often subjected to what they consider to be unwarranted, unscientific, and even scurrilous attack. Some SAF members have wondered aloud why they are not entitled to respond in kind. This pledge simply suggests that professional behavior requires a certain calm, and demands turning the other cheek even when subjected to verbal abuse (recall that a previous pledge mandates responding to scientifically dubious claims).

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The final phrase is simply a ban on plagiarism a mandate to give due credit to others when warranted.

Again, I emphasize, do not rely entirely on these brief notes . . . read the Code itself and the commentary in the Society of American Foresters Ethics Guide.

Key points about professional ethics codes:

1. They usually state ethical mandates in very broad terms, and leave key terms undefined.
2. Pledges (Canons) within codes frequently conflict. In many practical ethics questions, you will be able to identify two or even more Pledges that would pull your judgment in opposite directions.
3. Whether the problem identified actually exists in a given case may not be immediately clear.
4. For all these reasons, extensive interpretation is required to apply ethics codes to actual decisions.

That is why this primer is just a start on your (hopefully lifelong) ethical education!

