

## CHAPTER 21

# Reflections on Professional Ethics in Conservation

On reading over these past writings from over the years, a number of more general questions about professional ethics in the practice of land management come to mind. I offer them here as informal observations in the form of questions to stimulate discussion among students, and, hopefully, some introspection among leaders in our professional organizations.

- The ethics codes for the land management professions considered here are all very similar – why do we need separate ones? The reason is that ethics code drafting is parochial and political – nobody wants to cede control. What’s ethical does not depend on whether you’re a forester or a wildlife biologist. The specific problems might differ at times, but that’s easily handled.
- A certain obligation to perform *pro bono* work is recognized as part of the classic learned professions. Yet I have never heard any suggestion that forestry and other wildland professionals owe a duty of *pro bono* service to indigent clients, nonprofit organizations, or the public. If we are a profession, why is there no discussion of *pro bono* work?
- I think most would agree that we don’t do enough to educate about professional ethics or discuss it in our professional and technical journals. There are a number of options, and numerous opportunities for practitioners to exercise leadership on this issue.

- Most of the ethics codes considered in this book display a reluctance to be clear about specific unacceptable behavior. The ACF code is an exception; it specifically prohibits certain actions.
- We are not taking ethics seriously by adopting, with such fanfare, vague, one-page ethics codes. Drafting committees, we are told, are worried about tying hands of ethics committees . . . but that's exactly what rules are for – to reduce bias and haphazard thinking. Accountants and attorneys got beyond this long ago. They found there was no substitute for providing clear advice on numerous practical situations.
- Vague rules cannot be enforced. What good are they? I think it is time for the professional societies to come clean and admit it – one page ethics codes couched in extremely general language are advisory and aspirational only and are NOT enforceable.
- In conservation fields, college and postgraduate training in ethics is very thin. In the field of engineering, institutions manage to find time for a full 3-credit course in professional ethics. Engineering is highly technical; curriculum time is at a premium. Yet the engineering professional societies consider ethics an educational priority. I am not aware of a single forestry school that requires a 3-credit professional ethics course. I wonder when institutions training foresters, wildlife and fish biologists, and allied conservation professionals will decide to catch up with the engineers. In the growing fields of environmental sciences and management, broad based professional societies are few. Many graduates of such programs will find in time that as they specialize, they will join one professional society or another, but usually without benefit of any training at all on ethics during their education.
- In some programs, students are encouraged (often not required) to take courses in ethics- related fields. Too much of this, it seems to me, consists of general environmental ethics or reviews of philosophical thought which do not get into the details of professional practice that students need.

- In light of the above reflections, it is reasonable to wonder whether the leaders of these professional societies are really serious about acting like professionals, or whether ethics codes are something like required courses in college, things you go through because you have to, but you then pay the subject no attention afterward.
- There is every reason to leave the “leaders” behind and act professional ourselves. Here’s a good start – we can each make a personal study of professional ethics a priority and treat it as a professional skill. As we are involved in planning meetings, we can ask for time to be made for discussion of ethics issues. I find when this is done it is usually appreciated. Simply asserting that we are professionals does not make it so. We must act like it.

