Questions of safety give rise, in one form or another, to many of the choices made by people and organizations in resource and environmental management. Because they can involve weighing of inexplicit policy guidance, and may involve important resource trade-offs and financial costs, safety questions are often technically very difficult. Specifically because of this, they engage our ethical obligations as well.

**OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY**

All organizations are subject to state and federal regulations concerning employee safety. Yet, safety as a management focus has not always been strong in the past. There can be a tendency to see it as someone else’s job. You would be surprised at how poor the safety management, recordkeeping, and training can be in many public and private organizations. Safety demands a constant focus on the basics, in repetitive situations where people get sloppy and forget. Good managers have to risk being seen as obsessive scolds by constantly reminding people of safe practices – “This is a hard hat area.”

It’s an old cliché that “safety is everybody’s job” But it’s true. So a basic tenet of professional ethics is that you have to be a contributor to a positive safety climate and working attitude. With training, alertness, and a good attitude, this will come quickly. Accident prevention is just like fire prevention – you never stop. Usually when a really bad accident occurs, it is found that some one contributed to it by being lax on some routine policy, repair, or precaution.

Despite various legal quibbles, an organization implicitly assumes duties toward the safety of contractors working on its land, and
toward members of the public who may be visiting. These are complicated matters. Law and practice will differ from state to state. There are few things more boring than reading liability insurance policies . . . but it might be good for you to do so.

Your organization should already have rules, practices, and training procedures in place. Your first mission is to familiarize yourself thoroughly with these. Doing these basics right—all the time—is a hallmark of a professional.

**RISKS TO THE ENVIRONMENT, SUSTAINABILITY**

But there are other policy questions for resource management in which you will become involved, if not as the decision-maker, then as an adviser, analyst, or participant. In conservation professions, we encounter issues of environmental risk or risk to future productivity at every hand. That’s what our work is about. Some examples:

*How should we design culverts to minimize risk of blowouts?*

*Does this pond need to be closed to ice fishing to eliminate a risk of overfishing?*

*What evidence do we need to have to adopt (or cancel) a fish consumption advisory due to toxics in fish?*

*How much water withdrawal from this stream for farming (if any) can be allowed without posing a risk to endangered salmon stocks?*

*A heavily used pond has become infested with an invasive species of milfoil. Should it be closed to use? Treated with an herbicide? Is there some other option?*

Decisions of this kind all involve a dimension of safety or risk. Some may seem trivial from a natural resource perspective, others could involve major ecological damage or contribute to species extinctions. Ethical issues may arise when we have to make balancing judgments on these choices.

**FEATURES OF RISKY DECISIONS**

Decisions about risk or safety have some common features:

1. The degree of risk may be in dispute, possibly highly contentious dispute.
2. There may be too little information to clearly measure the
degree of risk.

3. Decisions may be needed now, before final answers can be
supplied by research.

4. On high profile cases, there may be highly polarized
involvement by interest groups and by politicians, in an
atmosphere in which “facts” are being used loosely, if at all.

5. There may be heavy political pressure of various kinds
brought to bear on those whose duty it is to speak to what
“the facts” actually are.

6. The decision process is often anything but neat and tidy. It
may involve multiple complex analytical and quasi-judicial
processes, layers of appeals and multiple agencies. Frustration is routine.

7. Doing nothing may also carry risks, though they may be
underestimated or difficult to evaluate. In such cases, inac-
tion or deferral is also a decision.

One thing that complicates many safety debates is that those who
benefit from a proposed decision are different from those who will
experience the costs. As economists would say, the incidence of costs
and benefits is different. Our society does not do a very good job of
finding good ways through such decisions. In the past, projects were
bulldozed through while ignoring the costs, especially environmental
ones. Today, it often seems that the opposite is true.

In the case of chemicals, few of us, regardless of our level of
training, can claim actual expertise concerning their safety for human
or environmental health. Yet we must share responsibility for choosing
to use them or not, and how it is to be done. Unfortunately, with the
general public, the existing regulatory structure relying on the EPA has
a level of credibility somewhere south of the CIA right now. Nobody
believes the people who supposedly know the most about it.

Participants in highly polarized controversies all like to burn
incense before the idols of “Good Science.” They reserve to themselves,
though, the right to cherry-pick the available information to define
what “Good Science” says. Partisan scientists line up on opposite sides
of the debate, leading to public cynicism about science in general.
If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that the “right”
decision is not always clearly evident. But there will be participants
who have no doubt about what it is.

Decisions that used to be made in local offices, by land managers
themselves, with little specialized technical input, are now played out
with extensive involvement of various interest groups. The press,
politicians, and, not infrequently, lawyers can all be involved.

As professionals, we can now expect to be held to account for
judgments we make – and in highly public forums to boot. We must
respond to this higher level of accountability by making sure that our
judgments withstand scrutiny technically, professionally, and ethically.
We have to do this while under considerable administrative, political,
and financial pressure, often from close friends and associates.

As resource managers, we are usually not scientists. If we are, our
scope of expertise is likely to be quite specialized, and often not
directly relevant to the specific question at hand.

You already know all of this. So how does ethics fit in? How to per-
form ethically on questions of safety in these conditions?

**FIRST, THE CODES . . .**

Decisions about safety do not fit neatly into ethics canons from pro-
fessional society ethics codes. But they are there, implicitly.

Quite a number of terms in the SAF Code reflect, at least implicitly,
a recognition of the importance of risk.

Members are to demonstrate a “commitment to the long-term
management of ecosystems”, and “maintain the long-term capacity of
the land” This obviously includes consideration and management of
various kinds of risk.

The Code identifies “sound science” as the proper basis for action,
along with social values.

A principal ethical concern, then, is to maintain intellectual honesty
in applying what is known to the problem at hand. An awareness of
how tentative and conditional knowledge can be, and of our own
limits, is usually healthy.

Members of the American Fisheries Society “accept the
responsibility to serve and manage aquatic resources for the benefit of
those resources and of the public.” Doing so will regularly involve
making judgments about risks to productivity.
The Code of *The Wildlife Society* includes similar commitments. Aiding others in making judgments about long-term risks to resource productivity and environmental or human health will be some of the most difficult and demanding work you will do in this field. Such decisions may carry a heavy weight of responsibility for consequences, and could affect large numbers of people.

No ethics code can fully map out this difficult terrain for us. But professional ethics, taken seriously, admonishes us:

- To handle information and competing ideas in a professional manner.
- To be careful in keeping separate our personal views as individuals, our analysis of the science and the data, and our formal roles in the decision process.
- Keep our duties to clients, employers and the public in a clear focus in our minds at all times.
- When these conflict, as they may, seek advice and do not take refuge in slogans.