The Land Ethic: What Does It Mean in Practice?

Stewardship of the long-term productive capacity of land and water, and sustaining the functioning of ecosystems, are the underlying reasons why society assigns technically trained people to work in natural resource and environmental management. Yet, translating these broad social ideals into operational guidance for practice has proven difficult, and the results often disappointing. Here, we consider how the “Land Ethic”, perhaps the most famous formulation of these ideals, fares in professional society codes.

THE SOCIETY OF AMERICAN FORESTERS CANON

In 1992, the SAF membership adopted the following Canon, placed first in its Code:

A member will advocate and practice land management consistent with ecologically sound principles.

Recognizing the intellectual debt to Aldo Leopold, this was always called the “Land Ethic” canon, although the term does not appear in the text at all. This language was adopted after several years of debate. Other resource societies include commitments with substantially the same meaning.

In 2000, a revision of the Code modified this language somewhat. The term “ecologically sound” was dropped, and three additional concepts introduced into the first “Principle and Pledge.” These were:
Current and future generations

Long-term capacity of the land
(essentially fitting the concept of sustainability into the Code without using the word)

Materials, uses, and values desired by landowners and society

This restatement of the “Land Ethic” canon recognizes the competing claims of future generations, of landowners and society. It emphasizes long-term productive capacity as the bottom-line issue, instead of specifically ecological concerns.

So, the issue now is, What exactly do these Code provisions mean in practice?

Professional groups have an obligation to explain and elucidate how these broad ideas are to apply to management decisions. Unless this is done, the Ethics codes will remain nice generalities but will be ignored by professional managers as not very helpful in the real world. Or, even worse, their vagueness will be used by some to justify virtually anything at all.

Unfortunately, we have to conclude that the professional societies have not done very much to assist entry level members, much less seasoned veterans, to apply and implement vague commitments that sound like a Land Ethic. At present, it would be very difficult to actually bring an ethics action against a member for violating this canon. To my knowledge, it has never been done.

A significant faction within the SAF strongly opposed the Land Ethic canon as well as other provisions of the 2000 Code revision. A short summary of some of their concerns is in the article by Billy Humphries listed in Further Reading below. Concerns included that a Land Ethic canon could create legal liabilities for members, is too vague to create enforceable obligations, and is likely to conflict with private property rights.

Does it matter whether a professional society’s Land Ethic is precise and enforceable or not? Perhaps not. A Land Ethic provision in an Ethics Code can be seen as an instructional and aspirational mandate – bringing our attention back to the long-term, abiding purposes for which we practice our trade. In fact, an inspirational objective is highly ranked in the SAF’s 2004 Ethics Guide.
CONFLICTS OF CANONS AND COMMITMENTS

A Land Ethic, taken seriously, is likely to conflict, at times sharply, with other Canons in an ethics code. If it doesn’t, it probably isn’t much of a land ethic!

But it’s an imperfect world:

• Clients often want the money more than long-term ecological integrity, which is valued at zero on their balance sheet.

• Large organizations are understaffed and cannot re-examine and open up every problem that comes along to research and re-assessment.

• Some decisions cannot realistically be deferred.

• There is never enough money to do all that needs doing.

• As one individual, you can’t change everything at once. You will have to choose your fights.

• In actual management, we can rarely satisfy all important values at once.

• There is often disagreement as to how fast we need to move to correct an admittedly unsatisfactory situation.

For some people, the conflict between their personal views and Land Ethic and what their clients or organization is doing is too much. They must then withdraw and seek employment elsewhere. In consulting, you can “fire the client.” But for most of us in the world of work, simply resigning is difficult, if not impossible. The Ethics Codes seem like cold comfort in situations like that.

Discontent over the organization’s policies led a number of US Forest Service employees to found an organization, the Association of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. (AFSEE). They have a website and a publication, Inner Voice.

Personally, though, I am not certain that it is helpful to label all differences of opinion about policy as questions of ethics.
A PERSONAL LAND ETHIC

As matters now stand, then, each of us is challenged to formulate our own personal Land Ethic – our own sense of when something is “too ugly” for us to participate in. Our professional societies have left the matter way up in the air, in the form of loose generalities.

Marking out such a personal land ethic cannot be taken lightly, especially as some people are in a position to impose their own ethic on others. It is not a task for single afternoon, or even a single college course, but rather for a lifetime.

It is often discouraging for some of us veterans to see how quickly new college graduates are acculturated into a culture of expediency within the organizations where they are first employed. Not surprisingly, new employees have to show their employers that they “mean business” and can get the work out. Social pressures within organizations can be subtle but powerful. Discussion is seen by some supervisors as “boat-rocking”, challenges to accepted ways are labeled as naïveté or inexperience. “That stuff they told you in college won’t work in the real world” (well, admittedly, sometimes that’s true). Also, most organizations can bring to bear strong social and informal pressures for at least overt conformity with, if not vocal support for, the organization’s practices and norms.

Reading widely and continuing to participate in professional discussion of these issues is important. My personal recommendation for cultivating and growing your own Land Ethic (or whatever you choose to call it) is to dip into Aldo Leopold’s Sand County Almanac a few times a year. If you don’t already own one, there are low cost paperbacks on the market.