CHAPTER 15

Resource Professionals in a Political World

Who am I speaking for?

Professionals in wildlife management, forestry, fisheries, and natural resources research, at one time or another, get involved in project decisions and policy debates. This may happen at work, or in a role as a member of a local planning board or conservation commission. All I can do to help you here is to offer a few observations from several decades of experience "in the trenches" in public service, in consulting, and academic work about natural resource policy. Here I use the SAF Code for teaching points; similar points are found in many other codes.

CIVIL AND DIGNIFIED

The SAF Code pledges members to conduct themselves in a “civil and dignified manner”; which is to say, in a professional manner. When we are under pressure, and feel unfairly criticized, anger can be a normal reaction. Controlling that reaction is part of a professional approach to things.

I usually find that if I write something in anger, it is best to place it in a desk drawer for a day or two and then edit it again, focusing on what is really important and deleting phrases that merely vent rage or that immoderately criticize others. When I don’t follow this rule, I often regret it. E-mail makes it easy to “fly off the handle.”

RESPECT OTHER VIEWS

The Code also requires that members “respect the needs, contributions, and viewpoints of others.” Some members find this
difficult to do in situations where critics of our work are free to employ insulting terminology and extreme characterizations of what we’re doing, and to selectively edit information in ways we may find unfair.

Activist leaders from all points of the ideological compass are often drawn from ranks of people who love to hear themselves talk and who are given to sharp and unflattering characterizations of their opponents. Their constituents applaud good “zingers.” This style of rhetoric is motivated less by persuasion than by getting press attention and by getting nods of approval from one’s own side of the aisle. So, debates about natural resource matters are often driven down to the lowest level of civility and end in outright hostility.

The SAF Ethics Code is saying that part of a professional approach should be to make every effort – in public discourse as well as internal debate – to avoid the name-calling and labeling that seem now to be standard practice.

Lowering the decibel level, if it can be done, usually helps.

**CHALLENGE AND CORRECT**

Professional societies usually believe their members know best. Thus, they mandate that their members “challenge and correct” misperceptions and misstatements about their field. Usually the members want their paid staff to be busy “correcting” opposing views about science and policy. Apart from generalized complaining and hortatory rhetoric, however, it is not clear just what individual members are supposed to do to meet this ethical mandate.

In one Society’s Code, an interesting variant appears. The American Fisheries Society code:

“Restrict, to the extent feasible, criticisms of technical results and conclusions of other researchers to professional forums such as meetings and technical journals.”

This seems to be based on a desire to avoid “washing dirty linen” in public. But this does not apply to policy issues.

The ACF Code (# 5) obligates members to “discourage and condemn the spreading of untrue, unfair, and exaggerated statements concerning forestry.” Perhaps the condemning is to be done in a “civil and dignified” manner, though . . .
DO NOT SELECTIVELY EDIT THE FACTS

On any contentious issue, there may be many “facts.” Some of them may be in dispute. (some of them may even turn out to be false, or at best only weakly supported). Dramatically opposing views of “the facts” may be backed by distinguished scientific authorities (“the dueling professors”). All the same, professional codes admonish members to refrain from selectively editing the facts in presentations to the public. Probably if this were enforced, memberships of professional societies would be a good deal smaller than they are now, and would consist mostly of cloistered monks.

The AFS Code addresses these points. These introduce some useful notions:

II-4. Express opinions on aquatic resources subject(s) only if qualified to do so by training, experience, or study;

II-5. Clearly separate professional opinion from accepted knowledge or fact in all communications.

Which reminds me of an anecdote. I once worked on a western National Forest for a summer. With an assistant, I was studying possible socioeconomic impacts of a proposed ski area project. The Acting Forest Supervisor came to our area one time to ask how things were going, and asked us, “What is your objective opinion about what we should do?” I responded that I had opinions, just not any “objective” ones. There ensued a brief discussion of the issues. I was flattered to be asked, but when the Supervisor left, he was probably recalling President Truman’s old joke about the one-handed economist (“Give me a one-handed economist! All my economists say, ‘on the one hand... on the other’”).

If any ethical mandates need serious attention in public policy debates today, it would be these two from the AFS code. Adherence to these two notions would do more to upgrade the quality of professional participation in policy debates than anything else I can think of.

ON WHOSE BEHALF ARE YOU SPEAKING?

Another ethical question is to be clear about who you are speaking for. Large organizations, public and private, understandably have rules about who may speak officially on their behalf and in what ways. It
cannot be otherwise. People at junior levels are inclined to view this as neo-fascist thought control, however!

Individuals retain rights as citizens, whatever their obligations may be to employers during working hours. As citizens they may feel a need to publicly criticize their employers, and may feel it necessary to do so anonymously. It must be recognized that an ethical line is present here and if it is crossed, loyalty to employer becomes an issue. It is better to acknowledge in your own mind that you are making an ethical compromise than to pretend that the line does not exist.

**Ethical lines do not go away just because our personal views are not always immediately adopted by our employers.**

In other situations, a person may wish to support their employer’s point of view publicly, as through letters to the editor. The SAF Code requires that members state “on whose behalf” any public statements are made. There may be room for discussion as to exactly what “on behalf” means. Do these words mean literally “at the request of”? Or something else? While one can quibble, it would be best to interpret these terms generously and recognize that identifying your employer is sound practice.

One may argue, “Well, if they know I work for the paper company (or the fish and game agency) they won’t listen to what I have to say,” But that is not the point. What if citizens find out later who you work for? . . . They will then feel you are trying to conceal something. How does that help?

In summary, when we become involved in debates about public policy, we cannot leave professional ethics at the door. This may mean we have to make some uncomfortable decisions. It may force us to recognize that we cannot at once serve all the commitments we have in life. Better to face this directly and honestly than to pretend that for our personal convenience the lines are waived.

As a famous fellow once wrote, “In wisdom is much grief.” Ecclesiastes 1:18.