PART I:

PROFESSIONALISM AND ETHICS
This book was written not to offer a handbook of right and wrong answers to ethical questions, but to aid you in developing skills of ethical reflection. This short essay was published more than a decade ago in the *Journal of Forestry*. 

If we wish to improve the ethical standards of all natural resource and environmental management professions, we need to stimulate and reward the exercise of ethical reflection – that is, reflective discussion and thought about upcoming issues, in the context of ethics, that help a person make right choices. A great deal is gained by studying ethics codes. Reviewing and discussing cases is also important. But these are only aids in developing a core professional skill, the skill of ethical reflection.

This critical skill enables professionals to make sense of the general and formal rules, and of the case examples offered in courses, readings, or discussions. Ethical reflection focuses on developing sensitivity to the kinds of situations that can lead to unethical decisions; it helps detect potential problem situations early; and it develops the ability to recognize available options that can assist in resolving a problem in a satisfactory manner.

The ethical choices that foresters face generally fall into several basic categories: business or policy situations that develop over time in unforeseen ways; ethical claims or canons that conflict; ethical rules that are very general and subject to legitimate debate as to how they apply in specific situations; and positions that offer strong temptations.

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Cultivate awareness. One way to develop an ethical basis for decisions is to read, attend meetings, and cultivate an awareness of the kinds of situations that tempt people to behave unethically. An excellent starting point is to periodically review applicable codes of ethics, and apply them to recent situations in your experience. Discuss these situations with associates and friends in informal settings.

As you develop awareness, you will also develop foresight. You will learn to recognize situations early for their dangers. When you sense such a circumstance arising, stall for time or find a gracious way to defer a decision until you can think the matter over and consult with others. Always think ahead. Where could this situation go? Will it place me in a position where my ethical standards will be challenged?

Learn to see marginal or ambiguous situations more clearly. Frequently ask yourself:

- “Is this ethical?”
- “Could it lead me to act unethically in the future?”

Ask certain questions during the early stages:

- “How would it look to someone else?”
- “Who else is affected by this decision and how?”
- “Is there an angle I’m not seeing?”

Choose a mentor. Cultivate one or more friendly but tough mentors – not yes-people. Your mentor need not be your boss, though you are fortunate if your boss would be tough-minded but helpful.

You may need to try a few people out for their advice before finding those with the necessary depth of experience and understanding, and an interest in your development. A mentor who always gives you the easy answer – “No, there's no problem here” – is only teaching excessive regard for expediency. Find another one. They who walk with the wise shall be wise.
Don’t just bring up the tough problems. Talk over the routine ones too – asking if you’re overlooking something. I always prefer to disclose any minor conflict of interest myself, and I’m surprised at how often I overlook one. Asking for advice will prevent minor lapses. Not only that, it gets you into a good habit.

**Construct options.** When a situation raises an ethical concern, think of the options. Are there ways to deal with this situation openly with all parties so that any appearance of improper behavior can be avoided? What is the most straightforward approach? Many of the borderline concerns can be addressed by merely disclosing the situation to all affected parties and asking their advice.

For example, a potential client calls asking if you would accept an assignment. Your first response is, “We are delighted to be on your list. But we have worked for Company X, one of your competitors. Would you see that as creating a conflict in this situation?” Many times they will say no. Before accepting the assignment, it may be wise to consult Company X too. They will appreciate being consulted and will remember your thoughtfulness.

**Act courageously.** Recognize and support sound ethical decisions by others, even when they cost you convenience, money, or opportunities. Be tough-minded with yourself: What is your real motivation for this decision? Is it ethical standards? The expense? Convenience or expediency? To spare yourself embarrassment?

Be ready to admit a mistake – to yourself, to others, to the injured party. This can take uncommon courage. The most severe punishment that can be administered to a child is to be compelled to apologize. Some children never outgrow this. Admitting an ethical mistake will not damage your reputation – it will improve it.

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Client confidence can be influenced by appearances – that is often all that people have to go by. Many of us react with disgust when we read about members of Congress junketing around in the private jets of high-rollers who are later found to be savings and loan looters. But we ourselves are not always careful to avoid or to carefully manage
situations that might give rise to an appearance of a conflict of interest.

Develop skills. A valuable aid in facing ethical situations can be found in Arch Patterson’s four questions:*

- What does my conscience say?
- What would it be like if everyone did this?
- How would it feel if everyone knew about this?
- How would I feel about this tomorrow?

Gaining wisdom is a journey, not a destination. Anyone who can develop habits of ethical reflection will be best equipped to handle the ever more complex and murky choices that life brings. Gaining skill in ethical thinking is no different than gaining skill in estimating timber, playing poker, or fly-fishing. It requires expenditures of time, energy, interest, and learning. If you are really serious about fishing, you learn something even when you come home with no fish: This is also true of developing your skill in dealing with ethical questions.

When we treat ethics as a professional skill to be developed, and when we develop commitment to the highest personal and organizational standards of ethical behavior, then forestry will be well on the way to realizing the promises in its ethics codes.

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