

Personal Values & Professional Ethics

The Society of American Foresters has proposed another revision of the Society's Code of Ethics. Changing a profession's code of conduct might cause considerable controversy. Some will support the current wording and oppose change, and others will see great merit in the new wording. Regardless, what we need is a code that articulates the core professional values of all foresters. A first step, then, is distinguishing our personal values from the core values of forestry.

The substantial revision of the Code of Ethics that has just been proposed may well generate considerable controversy within the Society of American Foresters (SAF). Some believe the current code is not sufficiently specific to foresters, difficult to interpret (especially the land ethic), and counterproductive to motivating ethical behavior (Radcliffe 1998). Others will support the current wording and oppose change. Some may want whichever code better reflects their personal values.

Too often, it seems, foresters avoid a discussion of ethics, especially when one or more parties are dogmatic and "know" they are right. However, ethics is born when we respond to conflict and consternation by trying to develop procedures and standards for assessing ethical judgments. When resolving the conflicts, it is important to distinguish between personal values and core professional values. Ultimately, SAF needs to identify the core professional responsibilities and clearly outline the rules for meeting those responsibilities.

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This article is intended to help members discuss professional ethics by clarifying what is irrelevant and what is pertinent to identifying core forestry ethics. We start by laying out some background.

Absolutists and Relativists

Two common postures have tended to give ethics a bad name: Absolutism and Relativism. Absolutists believe they are in possession of Eternal Moral Truth, universally binding upon everyone. Ethical decisions are either black or white, and all right-thinking people know the difference. On the other hand, Relativists have noticed many contradictory sets of Eternal Moral Truths, all commanding equal certainty (and all ethical decisions are gray). If either the Absolutists or the Relativists were right, there would be little point in discussing ethics. The Absolutist knows the answer in advance, and the Relativist knows there is no answer.

It follows that two conditions must be met in order to derive something from a genuine conversation about ethics. First, there can be no room for dogmatism. We must try to have open minds and be willing to change our views if there are valid reasons for doing so. And second, we should not be so open-minded that our brains fall out. Between the dogmatic Absolutist and the capricious Relativist are foresters who aspire to responsibility in ethical judgments. Probably most foresters want to be able to give a good account of their actions. Many foresters

tion, requires two distinctive virtues: a willingness to entertain views in opposition to our own, and a commitment to try to form the most responsible judgment on the matter at hand.

Ethics and Moralities

In working toward an understanding of ethics, it is often helpful to begin with morality. When we speak of morality, what we have in mind is people's beliefs about their obligations. Most of us were raised in communities with one predominant set of ideas, and as we mature we typically learn that people from other backgrounds have different ideas about how they should behave.

Two problems typically emerge when we apply our native moralities to issues in professional ethics. The first is the problem of disagreement. It is clear, for example, that societies differ in their ideas about how parents should discipline children and how children should respect parents. Samoan morality is different from that found in Sweden. What do we do when there is disagreement between moralities? Is the other culture always wrong? Do they lack a developed moral consciousness?

Sometimes we avoid disagreement by avoiding discussion. But if we converse, we may discover deep differences. For example, foresters may enter our field with various preprofessional moralities, and accordingly, SAF members may have conflicting notions about the profession's obligations. If all we have is our individual morality, all

Idaho, we may never meet anyone who is fundamentally different. It can seem blessed indeed to live in such a place. But even there, national ethical issues may not be covered by the prevailing local morality. Morality, the set of beliefs we grew up with, often falters in the face of new and troubling professional dilemmas. For example, our teachers did not cover the ethical complexities of pest control. We thus enter our professions with our native moralities as our original baggage. If our profession gives us nothing to supplement these, our moralities often are insufficient to resolve conflict or help us discern the honorable way.

Even if we are convinced we are right and others are wrong, we can still try to develop an independent standpoint from which issues can be decided. When we start trying rationally to decide who is right, looking at the justifications for both sides, we are involved in a process of self-reflection. Ethics is nothing more than systematic critical reflection about our obligations. And professional ethics—in forestry, for example—is what one gets when a profession learns to carry on such a discussion internally.

Personal Values and Ethics

Just as we bring a morality into our profession, so each of us has a set of prioritized personal values. Values may be thought of as end points in explanations of actions—any action, like applying a silvicultural treatment. One can ask Jones, "Why did you apply a herbicide to this stand?"

"Well, I wanted to control the weeds."

"Why did you want to control weeds?"

Jones answers, "To grow more wood." For Jones, growing more wood is often a decisive reason for suppressing competing vegetation.

Now Jones is asked, "Why do you want to grow more wood?"

At this point Jones doesn't know what to say. "If you don't understand why I want to increase wood production, I can't explain it to you." Jones's ability to account for the action has reached a limit. For Jones, growing more wood is an ultimate value. Now

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will listen to criticisms and ask, What is the right thing for foresters to do? In productive discussions with others, we learn to take into account what we have overlooked and to disregard what has been shown to be irrelevant. Ethics, as a form of human conversa-

of us—as different as we are—are stuck. Our differing moral beliefs probably cannot provide a pluralistic profession with an ethical consensus.

Matters may be different in small homogeneous communities. In an isolated rural village in, say, Alabama or

explanations for increasing wood production will vary. Some may want to increase profits; others may want to sequester more carbon; some may want to meet the material needs of an increasing population; still others, not caring about profits, may want to increase the supply of a renewable energy source. Personal values vary.

We try to develop routines and skills to realize the goods we want more of in our lives and to avoid the evils of which we want less. While some may work for world peace, others may seek wealth or notoriety. At this level, what is good and bad depends on personal values. Counseling and deliberation can help each of us make authentic decisions that express our most profoundly cherished values. We can reflect on our values, revising and re-ordering them.

Personal values are not relevant to issues in professional ethics. If we have to decide whether to use a certain brand of tree paint, it can happen that choice X most perfectly expresses one forester's personal values while choice Y most perfectly expresses another's: The "right" decision for one may be at odds with the "right" decision for the other. If we take this viewpoint in deciding any ethical issue we are merely determining which forester is going to be happy with the outcome. It is often difficult to account for personal values. How can one forester defend a preference for yellow tree paint when another likes blue?

In reasoning about personal values we sometimes ask, "What can I live with? What do I want? What is going to let me sleep at night?" But such questions are not questions in ethics. For all we know, there are murderers who sleep like babies every night, killers whose wicked deeds are perfect expressions of their most profoundly cherished values. Yet nearly all of us will agree that the murderer is unethical, and thus an action can express deeply held, reflected-upon personal values and yet not be ethical.

Core Professional Values

Here is a key to the resolution of some critical issues in professional ethics: Is the value in question a per-

sonal or professional value? More familiar to us are our personal values: A forester may prefer mint ice cream to pistachio. Plainly the forester doesn't like mint ice cream as a forester: It is only a personal preference.

The forester may also prefer valid arguments to invalid ones, truth to

falsehood, clarity to obscurity. These, however, are not mere personal preferences. They are preferences that every good philosopher should have. Similarly, a good forester ought to like it when a forest is saved from being converted to pastureland and ought to not like it when cows destroy newly planted seedlings. Foresters who do not care either way have probably made an error in career choice. The value a forester places on protecting soil and water quality is not just a personal value the forester happens to have: It is a core value for the practice of forestry. When we talk about core professional values, we speak of purposes that each SAF member should have in common with others. Core values make it possible for SAF members to reach agreement on some issues of professional ethics.

Value Analysis

In dealing with ethical dilemmas, a helpful step is to do a value analysis. Ethical dilemmas characteristically involve conflict between two or more core values. They involve hard choices that force us to give up something important. In setting down the values that are affected by different choices, we can focus attention on the important aspects of each option. Though we may have different moralities and personal values, if we can set these aside and consider instead only what good foresters ought to be caring about (if SAF members can agree to restrict discussion just to those core values, anything else being personal rather than professional), then we may

be able to make progress in working out sound principles for professional practice.

It is not so much what one person should care about, but rather what the good forester should care about. The purpose of setting down SAF's core professional values is to allow that dis-

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inction. For those of us in forestry, the values articulated by Leopold (1949) and Pinchot (1947), as important as these professional commitments are, may nonetheless conflict. It is the basic ethical task of the profession to come to a consensus on how these and other core values should be articulated and, equally important, how they should be prioritized.

Ethical finesse. Because choosing among conflicting core values can be difficult and painful, it is often useful to try to find ways in which the issue can be sidestepped or made to go away. Often it is possible to assemble a checklist of strategies for evading the hard choice. Is there an economical way of controlling pests without using effective pesticides? Ethical finesse (Jameton 1984) lets us avoid having to give up something precious, such as integrity. There is nothing wrong with ethical finesse. Indeed, it is helpful to have a checklist of maneuvers for getting out of a dilemma. But professional ethics does not consist entirely of finesse. Sometimes hard choices must be made, and SAF may eventually have to decide about a tough ethical question.

Principles of professional conduct. In engaging the ethical question (the hard choice that persists after all other possible solutions have been tried and have failed), it is a good idea to think in terms of rules. The result of a successful conversation in professional ethics ought to be more than merely a decision made in the case at hand. If the decision is sound and grounded in core professional values, then it might well

be made by all SAF members under similar circumstances. It should be possible to state an ethical canon—a rule—telling professional foresters how to act under those circumstances.

Such a rule might be a candidate for inclusion in the Code of Ethics, pro-

we consider what would happen if everyone were to do the same. The principles of any SAF code (and, indeed, in all codes) are intended to govern the professional behavior of all SAF members. For example, although it may not discernibly damage the

Enlightenment has often waited at the end of disagreement. Conflicting positions should be set out and defended with great care: All participants should be concerned enough to state them precisely and as persuasively as possible. Where exactly is the point of disagreement? What kind of disagreement is it? Is it a disagreement over personal values or professional values? What would convince us that one side was correct?

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viding guidance for the whole field of forestry. A code of ethics gives a measure of protection to professionals when clients or employers direct them to act unethically. It is one thing to refuse to comply for personal reasons, quite another to refuse to comply for reasons of professional ethics. A strong Code of Ethics would be of great value to SAF (Arnold 1976).

Assessing Principles

It is difficult to set out cookbook instructions for resolving ethical dilemmas. Many issues require us to decide what responsibilities a professional should and should not assume. Some problems may be too complicated to yield to a simple rule. Sometimes all that can be done is to list the considerations that professionals should take into account, without indicating how these should be weighed against one another. Professions have sometimes labored collectively for years, both intellectually and politically, working through an issue. Codes are best thought of as living, evolving documents. Nevertheless, there are some useful strategies for generating and testing principles.

Generalize. In assessing a code of ethics, it is often helpful to consider how uniform compliance with a rule might change accepted practices. It is commonplace in ethics that actions taken only by a small number of people may have consequences quite different from the same actions done by nearly everyone. What nursery managers do may be permissible even though we would never want foresters to act in that same way. In generalizing

profession if a single member takes credit for the work of another, a widespread practice would ultimately destroy SAF's credibility. There are two central questions here. First, what are SAF's core professional responsibilities? And second, what are the rules that, if they were honored, would enable SAF, collectively, to meet those responsibilities?

Guard against topic changing. Sometimes questions in professional ethics go unanswered because they are not clearly asked. Guard against unwittingly changing the subject. Do not drift into a discussion of personal values or change the topic to law and institutional reality—human artifacts that can be criticized and changed.

Consider the role of the profession. To be effective, the Code of Ethics must be clear and understandable to foresters. Although it is true that the main purpose of a code is practical guidance, actions taken by the SAF Ethics Committee can make a profound difference in the way dilemmas in professional ethics are resolved. But to be meaningful, SAF's canons should be vigorously supported (Arnold 1976; Stuart 1994). In addition to ruling on specific ethics cases, there are many other ways that SAF could foster an atmosphere conducive to ethical behavior (Unger 1994). For example, SAF could establish an award for foresters who engage in ethical behavior under difficult circumstances.

Nurture disagreement. One does not win an argument by silencing opponents. Those who disagree with us can nearly always teach us something new or remind us of something forgotten.

Conclusion

A responsible profession constantly debates the dimensions of its professional responsibility. The final product is not a document to hang on a wall or show to Congress, but rather a lively and enlightening dialogue. Within a profession, ethics is best thought of as a collective undertaking by which practical wisdom is developed and employed. It is a shared critical reflection on the common obligations as professional foresters. This process is now under way as SAF revises its Code of Ethics. During this process, each new principle should be given a "value analysis" to ensure that it reflects a core value held by professional foresters.

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