



Water and Culture Institute

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Investing in Values: Incorporating Ethics into Environmental Policies

Summary: I am proposing a consulting assignment to survey key actors having an interest in ethics and environment, review recent practical experience, and write a report suggesting ways of harnessing the experience and energy of these groups to bring ethics into the mainstream of environmental decision-making.

Background

Amidst the urgent strategizing to respond to climate change by reducing energy and water use through conservation, re-use, and new technologies and practices, there is an equally urgent need to address the role of environmental values and ethics. Popular adoption of new behavior patterns to support sustainable management of our land and water require more than better laws and financial instruments, although these are certainly important. Americans (and people everywhere) respond to ideals that captivate their imaginations. What are the ideals that can inspire our creativity in finding new solutions for meeting the climate-enhanced environmental crisis?

The old objective of “protecting the American way of life” rings hollow when that very lifestyle is under indictment for contributing to the crisis. A new frame of reference is needed that puts flesh on the abstract concept of “sustainability” and invites emotional as well as logical endorsement from regular people. Our new mantra needs to refer not only to Americans, but to People, and at the same time, it needs to refer to the natural world and the entire planet. “Securing life for People and the Planet” describes the new direction that we need to take. We need to replace the metaphor of “conquest of nature” with that of “partnership with nature” where we work for nature, and use our scientific and ethical wisdom to find ways that nature also works for us.

The environmental literature is brimming with examples of how different fields of scientific knowledge can contribute to sustainable resource management through technologies, laws, policies, and institutional arrangements (e.g., witness the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Elinor Ostrom for her work on institutions governing natural resources). What seems to be missing from this diversity of environmentally applied science is the application of ethics and value systems at an operational level. While the academic study of environmental ethics is burgeoning, the ethics of water use, for example, is barely mentioned in professional discourse about water management policies or practices. Indeed the need for bringing ethics into the discussion is regularly

mentioned within the water profession, as an unmet priority (e.g., Sandra Postel's 2008 article, *The Missing Piece: A Water Ethic*).¹

A Roadmap for Integrating Ethics into Natural Resources Management

Broadly speaking, there are four major constituencies interested in applying ethics to the policies and practices of managing natural resources: (1) Indigenous Peoples, (2) religious groups, (3) professional ethicists, and (4) environmentalists. The interests of each constituency is discussed briefly, as background to the Roadmap:

1. *Indigenous Peoples.* Public declarations by Indigenous Peoples' representatives routinely refer to their spiritual connection to the Earth and their sacred responsibility to protect natural resources. Such statements are fully consistent with their religious precepts, and with ethnographic data showing how indigenous value systems are intimately tied to the maintenance of local ecologies. Recent statements from Indigenous meetings to discuss climate change (Anchorage, Alaska in May 2009) reaffirm these principles.
2. *Religious Groups.* From the World Council of Churches to Interfaith dialogues, there is a growing interest in faith-based stewardship of natural resources and the planet overall. The Earth Charter initiative has been closely aligned with these interests.
3. *Professional Ethicists* include academics (Environmental Philosophers and Historians) who have identified ethical principles as a key dimension of sustainable behaviors. Their research and writings have practical implications, but practical application is left to others.
4. *Environmental Organizations.* Many environmental groups were established as a result of strongly held ethical principles (e.g., John Muir and the Sierra Club), which remain central, if hidden features of the organizational culture. In practical advocacy work, these organizations normally invoke economic and sometimes social arguments, but rarely ethical ones.

Each of these groups represents a potential resource of knowledge and activism for applying ethics to water management (my particular interest) or environmental management in general. Most environmental organizations are already focused on policy, but they rarely bring in ethics as a central concern. Conversely, academics in philosophy and history have a deep understanding of environmental ethics and how values have given rise to particular management practices (e.g., straightening rivers which was popular until recently), but they rarely get involved in policy discussions. Religious groups have strong values, and will talk about policies, but rarely do they interact with those who are making environmental policy decisions. Indigenous Peoples' organizations and individual leaders speak very articulately about both values and

¹ http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_missing_piece_a_water_ethic

policies related to their own territories. They have much to teach, but are rarely invited to share their ancestral wisdom in operational policy contexts.

The “roadmap” that I am suggesting can lead to new perspectives about managing our natural resources runs through all four of these groups, to network among them and to inspire each of these groups to play a more proactive role in applying ethics to resource management. Each of these constituent groups is well represented by organizations that have leaders, members, and websites. All of them have already established interests in issues of environmental management and climate change. Inviting them to consider how values and ethics can play a more prominent role in natural resources management will be a reasonable and possibly welcome request.

My suggestion is that there are individuals and organizations within each of these constituent groups who will respond positively to a request for their involvement in the challenge of applying ethics/values to promote sustainable resource management. Their professional, organizational, and personal energy is ready and available, but needs to be tapped and encouraged.

Specific Proposal

I am proposing to conduct a qualitative survey of key organizations within each of these constituent groups to sound them out on the idea of raising the profile of ethics and values as a practical concern of environmental management, and to ask their support and suggestions for doing so. Their responses will be compiled and reported as one section of a proposed two-section report. The other section would be a literature review of cases where one or more of these constituent groups actually influenced natural resources management policies and an analysis of how this came about. I would propose to focus the cases on the water sector, where I have the most experience, and where there are ample cases of value-laden controversies where some or all of the four constituent groups were involved. The conclusion of the report would propose next steps for harnessing the wisdom of these overlapping constituencies and applying that knowledge to natural resources policies at local, state, or national levels.

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