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AN ETHICS PRIMER FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS INTENDING TO BECOME NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

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ABSTRACT: Natural resources managers and administrators frequently face problems which have ethical dimensions. This paper is intended to help students learn how to become more comfortable and sophisticated with ethical aspects of their management studies, to learn to include ethical tools more in their decision making, and consequently to become better prepared to manage resources later placed in their care.

Many of us realize that ethical questions are fundamental to our work. Most of us feel that we have an adequate understanding of and ability to distinguish between “right” and “wrong” behaviors. But we are unable to discuss ethical ideas fluently and we feel insufficiently well prepared to include them in public forums where management alternatives are discussed. A “primer,” discussing and illustrating a small number of basic concepts and principles, will not make philosophers of us but it can give us basic building blocks and sufficient confidence that we can continue to grow in our study of and our abilities to use those ideas.

For example, how large is the “moral community”? To whom or what do I have obligations? Aldo Leopold’s land ethic argued that an extension of ethics would include the land; that is, we have moral responsibilities to other living creatures (and perhaps to non-living components of our environment). In public meetings we hear it argued that all animals (and all plants, or some animals only, or all nature, or rocks and waterfalls) have rights. We hear it said that hunting is immoral, that allowing deer to starve is wrong, that any interference with nature is ethically questionable. If we can better understand, not just the emotional depth, but logical, cultural, and religious sources and the arguments for and against these various positions and their ethical ramifications, we will find ourselves better prepared to enter into ethical aspects of public discussions regarding resource management, and further, to use ethical tools more effectively in making management decisions.

This paper discusses this and several similar fundamental concepts and illustrates their importance in resource management.

INTRODUCTION

In early June of 1958 a baby deer was left in a cardboard box on the front steps of the Indian River station of what is today called the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. I was a wildlife biologist then, stationed at Indian River. It was clearly impossible to return the fawn to its mother. Also, no zoo or animal “orphanage” wanted more deer. Individual deer had been raised more or less successfully in the past, although this practice is generally illegal, and the adult deer then may become a nuisance or a danger. It was generally agreed that the fawn had to be killed. I took it into the woods, cut its throat, and left its corpse.

When I tell this story to my freshman class of natural resources majors, the long and relatively unsophisticated discussion sometimes centers around the rightness and wrongness of killing the deer, but usually focuses on possible ways to keep it alive. When I encountered this problem almost 40 years ago,

I was completely unprepared to raise or consider any moral questions related to the situation. I very frequently faced (and our students will face) similar questions which had (or have) ethical or moral dimensions. Is sport hunting itself a morally right or neutral or wrong activity? What about fishing? Are certain kinds of traps cruel? And are they therefore wrong to use? How should I deal with the information that I have regarding a man who illegally kills a deer to help feed his very poor family? Should “chicken hawks” be killed because they kill the farmers’ chickens? Should bison be killed because they may transmit brucellosis to cattle? If we have reduced predators by various human activities, do we have a responsibility to replace them or their behaviors to retain a certain “balance of nature”? Should the last few members of an endangered species be captured in an attempt to “save” the species?

I could have been far better prepared. And our students and the public deserve that our future professional workers in the

natural resources receive a much more sophisticated university education and that professionals become much better prepared to deal with ethical aspects of their work. Clearly, all of us could benefit from fullblown courses in environmental and natural resources ethics, taught by philosophers who also understand environment. And I argue for the inclusion of such courses in our curricula. Meanwhile, I believe that it is possible for each of us to become gradually more sophisticated and comfortable with this discipline.

I am not thinking of “professional ethics,” those questions which arise as a part of my relationship with colleagues and employers. (Should I put in a full day’s work each day when my state government temporarily institutes “payless paydays”? What is my obligation as a consultant when I know that my client is behaving illegally? As a government employee, may I accept gifts from citizens or from prospective contractors with my agency?) These are important, but deserve a separate treatment. I am thinking instead of the ethical questions which arise during the making of policy decisions and during the conduct of management practices which relate primarily to the ways I treat our natural resources and environment.

AN ETHICS PRIMER

I believe that each of us, whether faculty, other college or university staff people, natural resources students, or professional managers and policy makers already in the field, with only a little help, can grow in the following ways:

- 1) increased confidence in our ability to deal with ethical subject matter
- 2) increased ability to recognize and begin to explore ethical questions
- 3) increased ability to recognize moral dimensions of and analyze the positions of others
- 4) increased “mental fluency” and thus ability to participate in public discussions over moral aspects of our work.

In my case, to the extent that I may have grown, it has come from a determined effort to badger my philosopher colleagues, participation in ethics-related short courses and workshops, reading extensively, and having the nerve to step into waters of unknown depth and write papers related to ethics. All of this, of course, includes a willingness to accept the embarrassment that comes, as every student knows, with trying to discuss a subject with which one has a limited acquaintance.

This paper is not intended to be an ethics primer but to argue that each of us can prepare his or her own primer by actively engaging in intellectual exploration of the obvious moral aspects of our professional subject matter. Reading, note-taking, attendance at conferences and workshops will help one to grow. Particularly, I believe that the preparation of a personal “encyclopedia of ethics,” with personally created

definitions and accompanying descriptive materials can be a powerful learning technique. Perhaps 30 to 50 concepts, with a maximum of two pages devoted to each, will result in a basic tool of sufficient scope to deal with many ethical questions and at the same time not so large as to overwhelm one with its content. This “primer” can grow and become more sophisticated and detailed as notes are gradually added.

In addition, I have found that concept maps are an extremely powerful tool which can help us to understand concepts and the relationships between them. A concept is, according to Novak and Gowin (1984), “a regularity in events or objects designated by some label” (for example, see moral community as discussed below). A concept map visually displays several related concepts; one’s notion of the interrelationships between them is demonstrated by the use of connecting words. For each of the concepts in your “primer,” you should be able to draw a diagram or concept map showing a few other concepts and their relationships with the central concept of interest. Novak and Gowin (1984) describe methods for making concept maps.

Also, to ensure contacts with expert philosophers, it is useful to become a member of an organization such as APPE, the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics; ISEE, the International Society for Environmental Ethics; or IDEA, the International Development Ethics Association.

Finally, regular reading of a journal such as Environmental Ethics will help you to grow in your understanding of this subject, as well as providing a source for further notes for your primer.

WHAT IS ETHICS?

“Ethics is a branch of philosophy concerned with morals (the distinction between right and wrong) and values (the ultimate worth of actions or things). It considers the relationships, rules, principles, or codes that require or forbid certain conduct” (Cunningham and Saigo 1990). Natural resources ethics and environmental ethics are subsets of ethics.

Some Ethical Theories

Stewards of natural resources and of aspects of our natural environment are likely to find 1) that they draw their own ethical conclusions from more than one source or ethical theory, and that 2) members of the public with whom they interact in their professional work will also have drawn upon several different ethical theories or sources. Generally, ethical theories provide frameworks which help us to reach ethical conclusions in some consistent, logical, and defensible way. Clearly, it is useful to understand the basis of both one’s own and of others’ ethical arguments. The following materials draw mainly from Shannon (1987) in general construction and some details.

Consequentialism. Consequentialism, and its most common subtype, utilitarianism, analyze possible actions by asking “which possible action will (or would be expected to) bring about the most good (or happiness, or pleasure, etc.) for the most people”? This is closely related to economists’ ideas of utility, and can be traced back to Jeremy Bentham (1748-1842) who was both an economist and a philosopher (Becker and Becker 1992). A consequentialist might ask whether certain proposed hunting or fishing regulations might produce the greatest overall good for all affected people. Would the consequences of allowing larger Canada goose harvests by native peoples in Canada offset the possible reduced recreational opportunity in the United States?

Rule-based theories. Rule-based theories specify obligations or duties, that is, they stem from rules. The “ethical act is one in which I meet my obligations, my responsibilities, or fulfill my duties . . . obligations and rules are primary” (Shannon 1987). Rule-based ethics often go by the awkward name, deontological ethics (“deon” is Greek for “duty”). The ten commandments are the best example.

Rule-based ethics tend to have a clear and certain starting point but an insensitivity to consequences. I must tell the truth, even though it badly hurts a friend’s feelings. I must report the law violation by the deer poacher whose family is truly hungry.

Rights-based theories. This set of theories begins with statements about rights (moral, not legal, rights) being entitlements to certain “social goods” simply because one is a human being (or as we will expand this term later, a being of a certain kind). One need not earn rights; they simply exist because we exist. The claims of individuals are central to rights-based moral theories, and it is common to find conflicts between claims of different individuals to rights. Do you have a moral right to cross my private property to reach otherwise inaccessible public land? May I defend my lambs against the depredation of your (our) public eagles or wolves? Do I have a moral right to “more important” (e.g., subsistence farming) withdrawal uses of water than does the city of Richville which has a prior legal claim and is now using that water for lawns, golf courses, and car washes?

Intuitionism. Some people (all of us?) argue that sometimes we cannot cite rules or argue logically but we “just know that something is the right thing (or the wrong thing) to do.” One of the greatest difficulties we can encounter in a public forum is that this source of ethical judgment is not logical nor susceptible to rational argument or discussion.

Virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is a moral theory which bases right behavior on virtues, that is, on dispositions such as “courage, temperateness, liberality, magnanimity and justice” (Becker and Becker 1992). Long lists of virtuous behaviors can be created as guidelines for virtuous acts.

We are all likely to find, or to know already, that we use (and that we “believe in”) one kind of ethical theory primarily. But as we observe our own thinking processes more closely, we may be surprised to see ourselves moderating our primary stance by the use of a secondary theory. (I know that I am supposed not to lie, but the truth would hurt his feelings terribly.) And, as we continue to observe others’ choices of actions, we can begin to see in their discussions that they are using, individually as well as within a community, several ethical theories.

SOME SAMPLE ETHICAL CONCEPTS

As beginning students in moral philosophy, the tools that we need at first are mainly a vocabulary and an extended understanding of the meanings of concepts as used by writers in discussing ethics. The following concepts are typical of those encountered most frequently in discussions of, for example, environmental ethics, and should present a short-cut into much of the relevant literature. Much of the following, where there is no citation, is drawn from Becker and Becker’s (1992) *Encyclopedia of Ethics*.

Moral considerability. Moral considerability refers to the questions of what people and what things have rights or to what things we must give moral consideration. What things can be treated simply as property or as objects and what ones deserve to be thought of in terms of the rightness and wrongness of our treatment of them? May I treat my dog or my horse in any way that I wish, or must I consider their interests? May I conduct classroom experiments on live animals without considering their welfare? May I hunt or fish or trap or cut down a tree as I please (within the law) and without regard to the possible feelings of those organisms?

Some people argue that only human beings are morally considerable; they deserve moral consideration; the treatment of other living things is only a matter of our preference, not of right or wrong. Leopold (1948) uses the example of slaves hanged by Odysseus after the Trojan Wars. The slaves were regarded solely as objects, and their treatment “only a matter of expediency, not of right or wrong.”

Moral agent. A moral agent is one who has the capacity to make decisions regarding the rightness or wrongness of one’s proposed actions, and to act upon those decisions. A newborn baby cannot make moral decisions and so is not a moral agent. An adult human being living in a coma similarly is not a moral agent. But note that we (who are moral agents) nevertheless have obligations to those people. If I cannot act upon a decision that I might mentally be able to form, then I may not be a moral agent with regard to that particular question.

Moral subject. Today we almost universally believe that all human beings are moral subjects. That is, the way that we treat each other person is a matter of rightness or wrongness.

All people have interests and rights, and they should be subjects of our moral concern.

It is not so easy for us to agree what other (if any) things are moral subjects and thus deserve moral consideration.

Moral community. Moral agents and moral subjects are often considered to be members of a moral community. But how large is that moral community? Besides human beings, do other beings have rights? If so, which beings? (And what rights?) Among the most frequent and most violently argued questions which wildlife biologists, and to a lesser extent fisheries biologists and foresters, encounter these days are those over the presumed rights of other beings, and our obligations to treat those other beings as deserving moral consideration. How we treat them then is a question of right and wrong based on their moral standing; they are moral subjects.

How do we decide what are proper subjects of moral concern? One common set of arguments stems from the respects in which other beings resemble human beings? Are they alive (do we need to treat rocks and waterfalls with moral concern?) Do they have "interests," e.g., to remain alive? Perhaps plants qualify. Can they feel pain? (Are they "sentient"?) Perhaps most vertebrate animals would qualify under that standard. Can they think? Do they have intellects (e.g., whales, porpoises, squid)?

Animal-welfare and animal-rights groups such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) tend to concentrate their arguments on mammals and birds. But we have also heard the emotional discussions about classroom dissections of frogs and other organisms. I remember very distinctly the clear discomfort of a student when an instructor dumped a seine-haul of fish before a class on the shore and unconcernedly began to lecture while the fish flopped around on the sand. I have before me as I write a wallet-sized card with the photo of a round goby, an exotic species rapidly spreading in the Great Lakes region since 1990. This University of Minnesota Sea Grant card advises fishers to "Always dump your bait bucket on land, never into the water." Are living fish moral subjects; are they members of our moral community? This is, I think, typical of the difficult questions that students and professionals in natural resources majors will need to deal with much more frequently than we did in the recent past.

Many people seem to include all vertebrate animals in their moral community; legal rights are often similarly defined. For example, at Cornell University "all vertebrate animals used for teaching, demonstration, or research at Cornell (including cold and warm vertebrates) are subject to protection by both federal and state laws" (OSP 1997).

Moral extensionism. What we think of as the moral community seems to be growing rapidly larger. Extending

rights to animals is often called zoocentrism, and to all living things, biocentrism. Some go further and speak for ecocentrism, that idea that all of nature has rights, or alternatively, that we have obligations to all of nature.

This expansion of our moral community was proposed by Leopold (1949) in his discussion of a "land ethic." By "land" he meant not only the surface of the earth, but all of the plants and animals, the ecosystems, the natural processes occurring there. Leopold suggested that stages in our ethical development included 1) the personal (I must not steal from you), 2) the relation between an individual and her community (I must pay just taxes; I must participate in civic activities) and 3) our relationship with the land. Rather than seeing land as only property and entailing no rights or obligations, we need to see it as a community of which we are a part and which requires moral consideration. Although Leopold did not speak much of an international community or of the longterm future, as an ecologist he surely would include them in his moral community. Astronomer Carl Sagan would extend the moral community still further: "The cognitive abilities of chimpanzees force us, I think, to raise searching questions about the boundaries of the community of beings to which special ethical considerations are due, and can, I hope, help to extend our ethical perspectives downward through the taxa on Earth and upwards to extraterrestrial organisms, if they exist" (Wilson 1997).

Many other concepts could be defined and discussed here, but that is the reader's job. Your primer will be different from mine, but no doubt we will both include ideas such as rights, obligations, autonomy, intrinsic value, reverence for life, and many others.

MORAL DILEMMAS

Moral dilemmas (if they occur at all; some say that there is no such thing) are situations in which there is a conflict between two right things to do, not between a right and a wrong choice. And the need to choose one action over another results in a morally difficult situation.

Kidder (1995) argues that there are four common types of moral dilemmas:

1. between truth and loyalty
2. between the individual and the community
3. between short-term and long-term interests
4. between justice and mercy.

Dilemmas Between Truth and Loyalty

I probably have no moral dilemma when my brother asks me how I like his new necktie. I can gently break the news to him with a minimally stated truth. But a critically injured mother who asks about her baby's welfare, when the baby has just died

in an accident, may present me with a dilemma.

I may have discovered the first cattle egret to be seen in Michigan (McNeil, Janson and Martin 1963). When I went to a university museum and asked to see some study skins, the curator's first response was to ask me where I had seen the bird. Knowing that his intent was to collect the bird with a shotgun, I refused to tell him (until a few months later); I gave him only a general and perhaps misleading reply. This may have been a genuine dilemma: did I have an obligation as a scientist to reveal the location of the bird? did I have an obligation to protect the only known individual of its species ever to be found in the state from a would-be predator?

Dilemmas Between the Individual and the Community

We all know of the classic cases where refugees are hiding from a despotic regime, and a mother smothers her coughing baby to avoid discovery of the group. If we have extended our moral community to include individuals and populations of wild organisms, related questions arise. Should we capture the last few members of an endangered species in hopes that captive breeding programs will generate a viable population? Should wild horses be killed if they become so numerous as to damage seriously the range where they are resident? Should fish-eating cormorants be slaughtered for the benefit of trout fishermen around Lake Ontario? Should individual oiled birds be rehabilitated at great expense when those resources used in different ways might have important positive effects on habitat for the same species?

Some of the most difficult discussions between animal rights activists and wildlife managers occur because the former tend to look at the rights of the individual and have a limited regard for the more abstract ideas of population health and habitat conditions while the biologists think mainly in terms of the larger units and tend to be less careful about the way they choose to treat individual animals--the orphan deer, the trapped coyote, the caged experimental animal.

Dilemmas Between Short-term and Long-term Interests

Deer hunters like to have lots of animals around. In some places, winter feeding programs to reduce starvation have resulted in long-term damage to habitat from overpopulations of deer brought about by those "artificial feeding" programs. Similarly, hatchery-raised trout and game-farm-raised pheasants may provide more animals for our short-term recreational interests but negative effects on the qualities of the wild stocks of animals. The masses of snow geese that the bird watcher loves to see in their wintering areas in the U.S. are now causing longterm damage to their nesting grounds in northern Canada.

Dilemmas Between Justice and Mercy

These possible dilemmas seem mostly to deal with human beings. Examples in environment include: if we say that animals have rights, how should we deal with sick or injured and dying individual animals? Does the dying pheasant that I find at the edge of a marsh deserve to be left alone and to die "naturally" or to be killed quickly and thus to avoid extended pain? Or is this a matter of no moral question at all? It may be useful to remind ourselves here that many administrative decisions and management choices do not include much moral content. Extending a duck hunting season for a few days or revising the boundaries of a big-game management unit does not require a substantial moral inquiry. And moral dilemmas do get solved. By our actions or our inactions we express our choices; if we have been dealing with a true dilemma, it is appropriate that we feel a little bit uncomfortable with our choice of action.

SOME SUMMARY POINTS

Regarding ethics:

1. There is no one uniform "god-given" system of ethics to which all knowledgeable philosophers subscribe and from which they derive their positions about right and wrong behaviors.
2. Many people take and argue ethical positions without much prior reflection or understanding of the implications of their positions. (And they may not know that they are making moral statements, or they think that they are when, in fact, they are not.)
3. It is possible to start from quite different presumed sources of ethics or to use quite different moral theories and to come out with logically defensible positions which are quite similar.
4. It is possible for two philosophers working from the same moral theory to come out with quite different positions about the rightness or wrongness of an act.
5. The world is complex; morally-charged situations are complex. It is often a genuine advance to have simply identified and considered the moral aspects of a situation without unduly worrying about whether one's decision is the best possible in the sense of rightness or wrongness.
6. Genuine dilemmas arise and exist.
7. Some management problems and some policy problems do not have important ethical content.

Regarding how we deal with ethical questions:

1. We can all become deeper in our understanding and more skilled in our ways of dealing with ethical dimensions of our work.
2. Personal work plus occasional consultation with trained philosophers will help us to reach fairly quickly and easily a level of understanding which will make us capable of using ethical tools in our student, faculty, and professional career activities.
3. A little patience and considerable humility are in order when we discuss these deep and complex issues with trained philosophers (who, alas, are also deeply trained and experienced in, and perhaps genetically selected for, argumentation). Their work is important, and knowing how to ask for and use their help should be high on our list of how to deal with questions of ethics.

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