

EDITORIAL

Introduction to Special Section on Natural Resources and Ethical Issues: Ethics and the Intensity of Resource Use

John H. Perkins

Recently, Paul Thompson of Michigan State University invited me to participate in a conference on the ethics of intensifying the uses of resources. This problem of "intensification" forced me to think about environmental problems in a new way with parallels to most of the articles in this issue's special section on Natural Resources and Ethical Issues.¹

First, consider what it means to intensify the use of a natural resource. Thompson notes that a more intense use is a more efficient use: if a natural resource is used as an input, then intensification means getting more output for the same amount of input.

Intensification, however, is often confused with simply getting more output. Human beings find it too easy to forget *how* the extra output was created and whether it can be obtained *for the indefinite future without harming others*. We are prone to be careless about *process, time, and justice* as we use resources.

Morganroth and Wasberg, in their respective articles, remind us of the devastation that can follow getting more output. Logging practices on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington State left a wasteland, and building dams upriver destroyed people and towns on the lower Columbia.

Both of these stories are linked to intensification. Intensive timber harvesting made each parcel of soil yield more wood. Dams on the Snake and Columbia Rivers enabled higher agricultural yields and cheap barge transportation.

Were not these intensifications of soil and water use part of progress? A better standard of living? And therefore moral and ethical?

Morganroth and Wasberg remind us, however, that the economic benefits created by more intense resource use can desolate landscapes, people, and cultures. More importantly, they remind us that in terms of *time* and *justice*, the ethical foundation of intensive resource use was shaky.

Wogaman and Troster address the issues more generally by looking at the viewpoints derived from the Judeo-Christian and other religious traditions. Both focus on the creation of the earth by God: people must preserve, not destroy, that which God created.

Many concerned about the environment may easily conclude that the situations described by Morganroth and Wasberg were unethical. I share this conclusion, but a major question goes begging. Do situations exist in which intensification is moral? In some situations would it be unethical not to move towards more intensive use? If so, how are we supposed to tell the difference?

A simple example of "good" intensification might be the following. Internal combustion engines were made to burn cleaner and deliver more miles per gallon after 1970. In short, we got cleaner automobile exhaust and more fuel efficiency by intensifying the use of gasoline.

Another example gets more difficult. Farmers now raise three to seven tons of grain per hectare, where they used to obtain one to three tons. How? We intensified the use of soil by fertilization, irrigation, and genetic selection of crop types.

Good, right? Well, yes. Grain supplies are more abundant and less expensive. Hunger persists, but it is less pervasive than before agricultural intensification started in the 1950s.

But we also have water pollution from nutrients running off farmland, and we have created a narrower genetic foundation for our crop plants. Moreover, the higher yields invited and sometimes demanded pesticide use and thus pollution. And, some farmers could not adopt the new practices and thus suffered economically. Is it, therefore, an open and shut case that intensification of agricultural resources was morally good?

Consider a final example. Water is becoming increasingly scarce relative to demand in many parts of the world. Is this not an argument for intensification of water use? I think the answer is clearly yes. Each drop must be used more efficiently.

Unfortunately, we have three things hampering our thinking about intensity of resource uses. First, our existing codes of ethics, including NAEP's (the National Association of Environmental Professionals), do not frame the issues for us in a helpful way. As Wogaman notes, NAEP's useful Code of Ethics² exhorts us to behave honestly. That's good and necessary, but not sufficient.

Second, these same codes also don't mandate consideration of entire ecosystems. In the religious terms of both Wogaman and Troster, this would entail stewardship of God's entire creation. When we don't think broadly, we end up with devastated towns, people, and landscapes, as Morganroth and Wasberg note.

Finally, and probably most importantly, environmentalism is hampered by a sense that all people need to do is just use fewer resources. This mind frame may be useful, but it avoids the challenges faced in creating decent lives for a growing number of people. More intense uses of resources are needed.

We must constantly juggle the trio of *process, time, and justice*. Without all three, intensification is very likely to move from outcomes that are moral and ethical to those that are immoral, unethical, and ultimately destructive.

Notes

1. Special Section on Natural Resources and Ethical Issues, 2004, *Environmental Practice* 6(1):March, Oxford University Press, Cary, NC.

2. For those readers who are not members of the National Association of Environmental Professionals (NAEP) and therefore not familiar with the Code of Ethics, the Code may be found in the back of each issue of *Environmental Practice*.

Address correspondence to John H. Perkins, The Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA 98505; (fax) 360-867-5430; (e-mail) perkinsj@evergreen.edu.