

EDITORIAL

Intensity and Environmental Resources, Part II

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In the March 2004 issue of *Environmental Practice*, this page discussed the *intensification* of resource use as an ethical issue of considerable importance. Matters of *process, time, and justice* were particularly significant in terms of whether a particular pattern of resource use was moral or not.

The essence of the earlier editorial was that it was often difficult to decide if a particular intensification was ethical. All too often, the ways in which we use resources have both good and bad outcomes. Professionals and citizens alike must become like Solomon to discern where wisdom and the right path lie.

An important point, however, was not addressed in the earlier piece: What are the drivers for intensification? Another way of putting the matter is to ask whether we have a choice about developing science and technology to use a resource more intensively.

For at least two reasons, the answer is often "no." Human beings, for the foreseeable future, will be engaged across the world in efforts to wrest ever more benefits from a wide range of natural resources.

First, the global economy is becoming ever more capitalist in its motif. Capitalist economics rewards entrepreneurs attentive to innovations that allow more production at lower cost. This usually means a more intensive, efficient use of resource inputs. Historically, labor, soil, and energy have been the resources used ever more intensively.

The take-home lesson is that entrepreneurs often have no real options about adopting innovations. Those that fail to do so are forced out of business by the competition that can produce more with lower costs.

Second, the human population is still growing, but the earth's physical resources are fixed. If, for example, people still used soil resources at the intensity of our Neolithic ancestors, the human population would not be at six billion-plus people. There would simply not be enough food to support such a population size.

The take-home lesson here is that humans have little choice but to intensify their uses of particular resources, especially water, soils, and energy. Thus we are left with the idea that economic systems, as well as population trends, are pushing people to more intensive uses of resources.

If economic patterns and population growth are pushing so steadily for more intense, efficient resource use, why are the ethical quandaries so difficult? This was the editorial page's theme in the March issue.

The answers, of course, lie in *process, time, and justice*. The *process* of intensification may create winners and losers as new technology comes into vogue. *Time* is important because rapid change leaves bigger scars than slower shifts. If a society has no mechanism for *justice*, then the losers from intensification are likely to perceive that a great moral evil is loose upon the land.

Are environmental professionals the Solomonic characters who can usefully lend a hand during the messy changing of technology to get higher intensity of resource use? Many readers of this journal may not see that responsibility in their job descriptions.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and environmental management specialists, for example, may see their jobs in terms of planning and minimizing environmental impacts, but aside from learning to recognize and minimize environmental injustice, are they required or equipped to readily offer wisdom on intensification? Similarly, specialists in other areas may be reluctant to embrace the ethical quagmires involved with intensification.

Reluctant or not, several of the articles in this issue of *Environmental Practice* carry the embedded theme of intensification of resource use. Take, for example, the article by Brabban et al. Their review analyzes a consequence of the intensification of labor and land resources in the production of beef cattle. Feedlot-raised cattle produce more *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, which creates severe health hazards. Beef is now cheaper, but should we risk our lives for the lower price? Should water quality and health specialists spend their efforts destroying the deadly strains of *E. coli* or promoting alternatives to intensive feed lot operations?

Similarly, Albert et al. provide a description of intensive eagle husbandry, a practice to preserve cultural practices among the Zuni. Is human population growth a major cause of eagle habitat destruction? If so, should environmental professionals be agitating for population reductions or is confined husbandry needed to preserve a cultural practice?

Environmental professionals cannot escape from Solomon's obligations. This profession's work inevitably confronts difficult questions created by powerful forces beyond the profession's ability to control. Like it or not, the dilemmas of intensification are here to stay. It may be that the National Association of Environmental Professional's Code of Ethics¹ needs updating to reflect reality.

Note

1. 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*.

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