

EDITORIAL

Professional Work and Power in Environmental Practice

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Years ago, Magali Sarfatti Larson wrote an intriguing book on the nature of “professionalism.”¹ She identified the key element of professional work as the ability of a community of specialized workers to determine the standards of quality necessary to be considered competent by the community and by the public. In other words, Larson argued that professionals seek the power to set and enforce the standards for competency in practice, rather than let them be set by their employers or the general public. Too often, however, we tend to use the word “professional” as meaning just a specialized skill and knowledge base used to earn money. Larson’s more precise definition is needed to fully understand the tensions that permeate all skill-based occupations.

In today’s global economy it is not clear that any group of specialists has such power and autonomy, but attorneys and physicians probably come the closest. Scientists, engineers, and professors also have some of the needed power and autonomy, but these latter “professionals” are perhaps more beholden to their employers, who are the real deciders of the standards for competency. In fact, with the increasing presence of HMO’s and managed health care, physicians may be losing a significant amount of the autonomy and power (and income) to set quality standards that they enjoyed under entrepreneurial fee-for-service private practice.

¹ Magali Sarfatti Larson, 1977, *The Rise of Professionalism, A Sociological Analysis*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 309 pp.

So what does all this have to do with environmental professionals? A great deal. Environmental practitioners, like most professionals, generally seek a status in which their professional community is recognized as *a* major, if not *the* major, locus for determining the standards of competency. After all, if social convention and laws support such authority, then the holders of certified competency can use that certification to earn a living, probably a better living than if they are just a “skilled worker.” In addition, political and social prestige, to say nothing of intellectual satisfaction, is often associated with such professional power. In short, real professional autonomy makes for what most folks would call a pretty good job.

This brings us to the question, what is the level of professional power and autonomy, *a la* Larson, that environmental “professionals” actually possess? This editorial is not the place to attempt a full answer to that question. But it is appropriate to state that one of the major missions of this journal is to explore and promote “quality” and “competency” in environmental practice.

Environmental Practice, like its predecessor *The Environmental Professional* (1978–1997), reflects the work of members of the National Association of Environmental Professionals and the Association’s Code of Ethics. Members of the Association have long recognized that environmental practice is beset with controversy:

- What’s the right or best scientific and technical information to apply?
- How are politics and economics driving decision-making processes?
- Is the practitioner about to be coerced, subtly or blatantly, into rendering a judgment that supports the interests of his/her paymaster, but not the honest opinion of the practitioner?
- What are the obligations of the professional to consider or to divulge particu-

lar pieces of information, to employers, the public, and their own employees?

For better or worse, answers to the above questions are embodied in the work products of environmental practitioners. Whether or not environmental practitioners will have “strong” or “weak” professional power and autonomy will ultimately be based on those answers and, in democracies, upon the adequacy of those answers to the public.

This journal will work very hard, therefore, to make professional level environmental work transparent as to its scientific and ethical nature. We will work very hard to make this transparency useful both to practitioner-readers and to the public. And it is the latter who will decide how much autonomy and power to accord environmental practitioners and their professional associations.

To do our work means that we will publish a wide variety of materials with an equally wide variety of opinions on matters scientific, economic, political, and ethical. The editors won’t always agree with the opinions expressed by contributors. But we will think we have done our job if we provoke thoughtful reactions and discussions.

Please, if we upset you, give us your response. That is the way professionals work to improve the quality of their practice and ultimately the authority of their profession.

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