

NAEP President's Message—Our NEPA Years

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Stepping Forward

On a sunny Tuesday morning in September 1983, I literally walked out of a cattle barn where I had been doing morning chores on my father's centennial farm in central Illinois, walked back to the farmhouse, dressed in a suit, then drove 25 miles to the Central Office of the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) in Springfield, the State's capitol, to interview for a position on a new Special Studies team. This team's mission was to focus exclusively on engineering and environmental studies to support the preparation of environmental impact statements under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

In the interview I sat in an office chair surrounded by a dozen transportation engineers, managers, a Bureau chief and other professionals. A silver-haired man behind a large desk, smoking a pipe, asked me two questions. "Do you think you can write an environmental document that would meet all the proper federal environmental requirements for a transportation project?" He pointed to a shelf of books behind his desk. "Yes. I can do that," I said promptly. With another puff of his pipe, the Bureau manager asked me the second question: "Now you need to understand, you will be required to read and thoroughly digest the findings of all these technical reports (he pointed to a tall bookcase full of binders), assimilate the environmental content, take the findings and put them into a clear, concise, readable document that will be read by many audiences—transportation officials, the public, interest groups, resource agency managers and scientists, even lawyers. Can you do that?" "Yes. I can do that."

Two weeks later one of the transportation managers called me to say I had the job, to author an environmental impact state-

ment for the Interstate 72 Illinois River Bridge EIS Project. Little did I know at the time that IDOT had been challenged in court (*Wade vs. Lewis* 1983) over what was to become a court case that set national environmental precedence related to the cumulative significance of impacts in the evaluation of alternatives. I did what I said I would do and the first environmental impact statement I authored was deemed adequate in court and the proposed new Illinois River bridge received a Record of Decision and was constructed. IDOT received awards for the context sensitive design of the bridge and approaches, and they received enhancement determinations from the Illinois Department of Conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the State Historic Preservation Office. As one example, for the taking of about 15 acres of conservation lands for the bridge approaches, 600 acres of forest were put in the public trust for conservation. And so began my NEPA career.

I believe all of us who are NEPA practitioners have similar stories that either started our careers or presented themselves as high, unforgettable moments in our project work. These stories may be of challenging transportation projects, the siting of hazardous waste facilities or electrical transmission lines, or some other development project where need has been determined. The outcomes of these projects, as mitigation for identified effects, may include the restoration of wetlands, entire ecosystems, or the preservation of critical threatened and endangered species habitat. In all cases, as environmental professionals doing NEPA work, we have all stepped forward and stepped up when the project and the moment presented itself. We have all been leaders and NEPA champions through the decades, carrying out the spirit and intent of our national environmental policy.

A leader is someone who enables others to change for the better, to bring out your flourish as a human being, through the leader's energy, enthusiasm and his or her spirit. There was no greater leader of NEPA than Dr. Lynton K. Caldwell who is considered by many to be the creator of NEPA and the father of the environmental impact statement. When asked in an interview in 2003, what he believed is the next

step for achieving sustainability in the 21st century, he responded, "We desperately need a change of thought. Instead of simply continuing the old way of taking whatever resources we can discover, we need to bring about a change of ethos toward *reducing* consumption, *reducing* the burden on the environment . . ." (*Environmental Practice*, Volume 5, Number 4). Only leaders think in these terms.

Now 40 years later, after Dr. Lynton Caldwell helped draft NEPA legislation and through the years helped us honor the intent of the Act, it is us, it is all of you reading this message, that will lead our country through the next four decades of environmental challenges. I believe as environmental professionals we are best positioned to lead, to step forward, with our seasoned experience, our mindset toward stewardship, and our defined and focused intent on every project to achieve, through the best, most ethical practices, the goal of well-informed project decisions that have fairly considered the environmental effects of those decisions.

Making Connections

The best definition of stewardship I believe was articulated by Peter Block in his insightful book of the same title, *Stewardship* (Barrett-Koehler Publishers 1993). Block states that stewardship is being accountable for the well-being of the whole (your family, your community, your environment, our planet) by acting in service, rather than self interest. As environmental professionals, we know stewardship; we get it.

In my first job as an environmental professional in a state transportation agency, I learned very quickly what it meant to be a public servant, to be in service to others. Also, being raised on the family farm, now almost 140 years old, where we used simple, straightforward farming practices, I learned about the stewardship of land. Under the fortunate tutelage of my father, who practiced conservation tillage before it was the norm, I learned to leave grass lined swales and buffers near streams instead of laying miles of drainage tiles or allowing fertile soil to wash into stream

water. I learned it is better to replenish the soil's nitrogen through spreading livestock manure instead of an infusion of chemicals; and it is healthier not to confine cattle to 3' × 5' stalls but range them on ample pasture land. My father, as a Past President of the Illinois Soil and Water Conservation Association, dedicated a good portion of his life helping prevent soil erosion and improving water quality in the state's rivers and streams. This life example of stewardship cultivated in me an appreciation and connection with the central Illinois environment in a very tangible way and ensured my mindfulness toward the land and its care.

The 1960's that gave rise to NEPA was a decade of change and concern. Some of us reading this message experienced that turbulent decade of rampant pollution, deteriorating environmental resources, an assassinated president, war in southeast Asia, a nation in civil rights turmoil, among other alarming events. But it was also a decade of new-found freedoms and awakening environmental insight—insight that was seen through the eyes of our best scientists, ecologists, and even this nation's poets and authors, Ted Roethke and Rachel Carson among them. As a nation, we were finally realizing the importance of accounting for the consequences of human activity on our country's environmental resources.

Through the first two decades of NEPA and into the 1990's, our earnestness for documenting these consequences would be realized by heightened attention and more open public dialogue on the potential environmental effects of project proposals and the development of alternatives to those proposals. We now understood scientifically, and were able to document accurately, what human activities on the land were truly doing to the environment. As environmental professionals this affirmed our belief that the natural world cannot just be a stage for human consumption and should not be molded for the comfort of the world's populations.

As NEPA practitioners we know how to make accurate impact predictions; we know how to recommend more effective mitigation and ensure its "in place" performance.

Our scientific knowledge and analysis results can now better inform local officials and residents and help them reach better project decisions. We can now develop mitigation strategies that are more sustainable and more in sync with what people value most. We are more connected than ever before, to each other as professionals and to our environment that we serve, through better science, communication and better technology.

Discovering Relationships

We all know the value and reward of relationships: a friend, spouse, our children, but also the value of a trusted peer or life-long professional client. We also know the world of NEPA can be egregious as easily as it can be miraculous. In our current, lightning-paced, highly demanding work world, we sometimes become estranged to our surroundings and to ourselves, especially during current economic challenges. Life dreams and hopeful relationships may go unattended; the hard truth of people's suffering, as seen through the media and real life, continually challenge our best efforts as parents, as friends, and as peers. Those of us who have been doing NEPA projects for 20 or 30 years know there is a lot of "gut-checking" in our business. Within the sphere of our project work, the results of our analyses may not measure up to realities in the study area. When this occurs something doesn't feel right. During times like this we must know there is a time and place for the genuine. We must remember that the vitality of our life, and our most successful project work, depends on discovering, through each wonderful moment, different ways of being. It depends on us rediscovering our relationship with the earth to create a new sense of community linked with the earth, and in doing that a new professional and societal concern about our environment will emerge.

My father taught me the solidity of a Mid-western work ethic; my mother taught me not to talk about others or to say things that you wouldn't say sitting with them eye to eye. The poet John Knoepfle, also a life mentor, taught me to always focus on what I know. At age 85, John published two books—a book of poems, titled *Walking in Snow*, and an autobiography of his early

years as a teacher titled, *Looking Around for My Life*. His life is a living example that our lives never end at "retirement age," that we continue to grow as our relationships with family, friends, ourselves and others continue to grow. Throughout the decades of NEPA, I believe we have learned that for humans to thrive we must connect on multiple levels and celebrate our differences. We must also celebrate the differences and the boundless relationships that exist within nature.

Reimagining NEPA

NEPA has matured over the past 40 years that is certainly true. The environmental professions are not the same in the 21st century as they were in the mid-20th century. And what will suffice in the latter part of the 21st century may be just beyond our grasp now. As we move forward into the next 40 years of NEPA, I invite everyone to journey into the rich material of your lives, explore it, relish it and live the experiences in vivid detail. Because it will take our highest level of achievement; it will take courage, passion, and an inner conviction for us to ably contribute to the health and well-being—physical, cultural and spiritual—of our planet.

If we can look at today and tomorrow's environmental challenges with new eyes we can play a significant role in our changing profession and rapidly changing world. What is our next new way of thinking? What constitutes the balance between economic prosperity and a better quality of life for succeeding generations? How do we achieve environmental preservation and protection at a much higher level of realization?

To answer these questions we must respond with three actions. First, our environmental documents need to tell a better, clearer story regarding both the human and the natural world and the potential effects on those worlds. Second, our project outcomes need to set better courses of action for improvement and enhancement, and they need to better acknowledge all stakeholders and people indigenous to the study area, everyone who took part

in that miraculous decision-making process—because we are part of the same community.

Third, we are stewards and we are trained to be accountable. We are trained to serve something greater than ourselves. Yet as professionals facing future environmental challenges, the moment will require a higher level of preparedness and attention. If we are to truly re-imagine our NEPA years going forward it will be to embrace the

brightest and best ideas that evolve from the next generation of professionals.

There are two ways of seeing: first, the seeing of things, with the eyes, through the science and wonderment of optics. Second, the seeing beyond things, which is not about science or optics, but contains wonderment just the same: the wonderment of awareness. And this awareness is like a far away light that suddenly becomes intensely bright and within our reach—the illumination of

a path not before seen. This is seeing beyond things; this is vision in its truest and most complete sense and it affects us, in fact moves us, on all human levels. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century we are again perhaps in NEPA's formable years, yet I believe NEPA is as applicable today as it was yesterday, as it is tomorrow. And we are the right community of professionals with just the right amount of insight to understand what is happening to our environment and just the right amount of vision to do something about it.