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THE PROFESSIONAL CODE OF ETHICS¹

A. E. PATTERSON²

Effects are the results of conduct. Such conduct may be good or bad, and canons of ethics are the outgrowth of practices, both good and bad. No society is perfect; therefore friction, which is frequently the sign of unethical conduct, exists in all society. From period to period, and from place to place, certain standards of conduct have been listed as acceptable, and others nonacceptable. These standards have not necessarily been the same in different places at the same time, nor at different times in the same place. Seldom among society as a whole have these accepted standards of conduct been written in the form of law, or for that matter written at all. Most are impressed upon the individual before maturity by parents, or associates, or are learned, belatedly, while the results of nonadherence are being endured.

Many of these standards of conduct have preceded the legislative laws later developed to restrict the minority who refuse to abide by the concepts of the majority. Some supersede and are even more strict than the law; and some, as with most professional canons of ethics, set forth those practices which, although not illegal, do not further the wellbeing of the individual, his professional group, or society in general.

Professional canons of ethics are not designed merely to protect the professional worker, or to promote the interest of the profession itself, although these two objectives are frequently found to a greater or lesser degree in practically all such codes. The foremost objective of the professional code of ethics is to further the interests of the public which it serves. It is based, therefore, largely on altruism and a sense of service, rather than egoism.

This attitude certainly does a profession no harm. When advertised in a dignified manner, before the public, it attracts respect for the profession and its individual members. When the general public realizes that the members of the profession are required, not by legislative law, but by their own group action to protect the public interest, a faith in the ability of the individuals and in the work which they perform is generated.

Such is the nature and purpose of most professional codes of ethics. The profession of forestry, however, has an even greater responsibility and opportunity than some other professions. Practitioners in most professions deal with the individual or with small groups of individuals, and their decisions or the results of their decisions are usually of interest only to the individual or a closely related group. Directly, this may also be true of the professional forester, but it is also true that the decisions of the forester will many times affect the well-being of generations yet to come. Thus, no profession has greater need for the guiding principles of altruism than forestry.

Members of several professions, including some members of the profession of forestry, contend that a written code of ethics

is unnecessary; that an unwritten code, based on an intensive "esprit de corps" and the supposition that all members of the profession are gentlemen and will conduct themselves both in business and pleasure as such, is enough. In a numerically small, compact profession this line of reasoning is good and frequently workable. In a profession with thousands of members of varied employment and many interests, it is mere wishful thinking.

The written code has proved itself superior in other learned professions; the profession of forestry is no exception. A code reduced to the written form clarifies the thinking of the group, and in itself serves to bind the group more closely together.

In all professions the ideal is service to mankind rather than monetary gain. Whenever a profession accepts a code of ethics it is a declaration to society of this ideal, and to a certain extent enlists the aid of society in the furthering of the ideal. Thus, good relations with the public are established, and public confidence in the profession is strengthened.

No individual member of a profession can live in a world alone. Just as his training and professional knowledge are based on the experience, research, and thinking of those who have preceded him in the profession, his present and future gains must come through a continuous exchange of information with his colleagues. Although he may make some progress without this exchange, it will be slow and halting. Those who have passed their knowledge on to him in the past have given to him not only a means of service and livelihood, but also a staggering responsibility. This knowledge must be put to its best use, and he must consider it his private responsibility that it is used fairly, and only for the purpose for which it was intended.

Thus, in accepting a code of ethics the individual agrees to discipline himself according to the dictates of the code; and in return he is favored with protection from the egoistic and selfish motives of fellow workers. In addition, he receives the confidence of the public, who may not know him personally, but who know the moral obligations of the profession. This public confidence can only be maintained by the individual, by a show of both technical and moral competence in all instances.

In many ways the forester is similar to other professional workers. In a few ways, especially in relation to his work, he is decidedly different. Most foresters, even at an early stage of their career, work alone under a heavy load of responsibility. Their every action may potentially involve large sums of money, or the safety and welfare of present or future populations. Instant decisions are often necessary both in times of stress and in everyday work. In such moments, the forester must rely upon his technical training, his former experience, and his moral judgment. The last of these is seldom the least. Foresters are not exempt from human weaknesses or temptation, and unless they are guided by a code of ethics they may unwittingly make the wrong decision. The code must always be foremost in the mind of the forester, and his every action and decision should be tested within its crucible.

¹ An adaptation from A Syllabus on Professional Ethics, A. E. Patterson. Society of American Foresters; Washington, D.C.; 1949.

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