

**A Matter of Conscience:  
Silence Within the Wetland Field**

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Our technological, economic and political systems are supposed to serve people. If it becomes impractical to have healthy forests and stable communities to ensure the passing of biological wealth to future generations, then there is obviously something wrong. Rather than degrade forests and communities to adjust to the needs of these systems, we should adjust the systems to the needs of forests and communities. This change will not happen, however, until people who have an interest take an interest.

-- Mitch Lansky, Beyond The Beauty Strip

**Where We Are**

As wetland scientists we are the keepers of the secret of incremental wetland loss. Daily we walk fields and forests and pristine wetland meadows, knowing that mediocre, poorly planned development almost always follows in our footsteps. Yet we watch in silence. We watch in full knowledge, as wetlands, buffer, and critical upland areas are lost forever. We, more than any other professionals, are trained to understand the value of these areas. We, more than anyone, have a responsibility to be aggressive and vigilant in wetland protection. We are the keepers at the gate, and we are failing in our most basic responsibilities.

The new moral paradigm of our profession has emerged: We enter the wetland field because of our love of Nature. In our enthusiasm we seek academic training to further our knowledge, all the while considering ourselves environmentalists. We gain professional employment and then, invariably, become silent participants in the great wheel of a consumer society, turning our heads as the imperative of constant growth throws its weight against the gentle force that originally attracted us.

Although none of us dispute that wetland losses occur in every state, public perception is that wetland regulations have stopped these losses or that regulations have gone too far. Yet we know that virtually every project in an undeveloped area alters, modifies, and reduces the biomass of that area in a manner that is negative and irrecoverable. Do we publicly denounce these losses? Rarely. Why? The truth is that we do not do so because we don't want to lose our jobs.

Yet how many of us have reached the conclusion that the patterns of society's growth are coarse and careless, politically motivated, driven by deep concerns for profit, and rarely directed by conscious stewardship? How many of us walk from site to site with a niggling feeling of uneasiness about our own role in advancing development?

Most of us entered the natural sciences because of our passion for Nature, our spontaneous awe at Nature's infinite facets, our understanding that we are personally enriched in Nature's presence. Now, as private consultants, educators and state or federal regulators, we fall into the pattern of being good workers. We go to our jobs, write reports, issue learned analyses and return home.

### **Where We Aren't**

The majority of us do not volunteer personal time to public education. We do not join advocacy groups, nor do we stand up publicly to offer alternatives to inappropriate development.

Yet as experts, we know that viable alternatives exist. Cluster housing, green space in critical habitat areas, wildlife corridors and sensitive use of buffer zones can ameliorate much of the impact of blanket development (McManus 1994). Implementation of these ideas does not have to come at the expense of citizen's rights. Wetland values far outweigh the value of short term agricultural or development uses (Reinhold 1994). But public knowledge of these facts and public enthusiasm for these values will only come about when we speak up.

We are the experts. If we don't share our knowledge, no one will care about the natural values we defend. We, better than anyone, know that society, with its checkerboard of houses, offices and complex infrastructure, is, in reality, just repeating the old Colonial cycle of cut-and-burn. We know the destruction that will follow the first re-intrusion by machine. Knowledge is not power, but rather a deep obligation on our part to speak out to those who do not possess this information, who cannot easily make the connection that the quality of their lives and the quality of Nature are inextricably intertwined.

Certainly our profession is not united in this vision that all is not well (Garner 1996). But I do venture that the vast majority of us still consider ourselves environmentalists. Further, we feel that we lose our impartiality when we join any group with an agenda. No scientist wants to be seen as a propagandist. Whether we feel a personal uneasiness with our society's visions or not, we often believe silence is our only viable alternative.

### **Where We Should Be**

Yet, accepting that argument creates an inevitable collision with our instincts and our conscience. For in our silence we become the keepers of the secret of continuing wetland loss. In our acquiescence to timid professionalism, to a strict Aristotelian neutrality, we have become party to the consequences. I say that silence in the garb of good science gives impartiality a meaning never intended by scientists ancient or modern. Noss and Cooperrider in *Saving Nature's Legacy* write, "The only science worth doing is one firmly grounded in an ethic and emotional commitment. Without values and commitments, science is perilous or at least irrelevant."

Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*, has written about his “deep hope that someday we might all become native Americans, at home in our grand place.” For me reading that phrase was an epiphany, a moment of coalescence when my own uneasiness as a working professional was explained. Whether we choose to romanticize our predecessors or not, indigenous populations had a miniscule impact on Nature. They were simply another species, essentially integrated with their world. McKibben does not argue that we should seek to return to the short-lived and hardscrabble world that preceded agriculture. Rather he snaps his fingers in our face and says that pre-European peoples were part of Nature, not apart from Nature. He grieves for the losses of Nature and seeks alternatives. The cultural paradigm of growth and constant expansion must be modified to allow us to once again be of Nature rather than its adversary.

Yet expressing sentiments as strong as McKibben’s can be dangerous. All of us want respect from our peers. All of us fear being singled out. No professional wants to be seen as an extremist. Keeping our opinions to ourselves allows us to pat ourselves on the back, while not exposing our views to public scrutiny.

Further, our own academic training, strong in science and silent on moral issues encourages this reticence. How many of us have taken extensive courses in professional ethics? Personal beliefs are avoided as matters of science. Having forceful convictions that are driven by moral principles is considered problematic. For all these reasons, we invariably find that saying nothing is safer.

Yet, after years of my own long reflection, I reject that logic.

Silence is a mistake and a professional error. Nothing changes when we neglect our deepest misgivings. Foolish, ill-conceived laws are not re-written. Public consciousness is not transformed. Unchallenged misinformation takes on the aura of truth. Political and economic agendas, rather than scientific facts, drive important dialogues. When experts increasingly focus on the minutiae of their fields, they lose their voice and influence. A review of articles in recent volumes of *Wetlands*, the journal of the Society of Wetland Scientists, finds an exclusive focus on matters of arcane science, and a total absence of material addressing matters of public dialogue or issues of development impacts to biologic systems. The words, ethics, morals, character, values, responsibility, principles, are missing from our journals. To twist an old cliché, we have buried our heads in the wetlands.

In a purely anthropocentric sense, we have an obligation to become involved in political dialogue. Equally in a moral sense, we have an obligation to be forthright in our awareness. We cannot afford to be peripheral players if we ever care to be more than educated technicians. We view ourselves as professionals, yet professionals are driven by character and spirit to be deeply engaged in debate on issues of local, national and global importance. Are we involved in matters that influence environmental decision-making, or are we scientific bean counters, only wringing our hands over the effects of sediment transportation on the distribution of *Spiraea latifolia*? As Garrett Hollands, a senior

wetland scientist with ENSR, stated bluntly in a recent seminar, "Like it or not, politics are in your life every stinking day, and you better get involved."

We should not assume that expressing ourselves in a political forum categorizes us as extremists. Our hands-on knowledge of incremental loss and of antique zoning regulations which result in insensitive construction techniques can be transformed into work that will eliminate on-going wetland losses. Rather than being passive observers, we should be aware of our importance as seasoned experts; we should influence dialogue and offer viable alternatives to insensitive and unnecessary development proposals.

Our public dialogue need not, should not, be one of stridency or even of emotion. Involved scientists can maintain a dispassionate stance in a political forum. Our duty, though, is unequivocal: we should be at the heart of the continuing maelstrom that surrounds the protection of wetlands and their associated resources. We have a moral imperative to speak out. Our voices should be clear, persistent and persuasive. We should speak as experts, never failing to reiterate the values of the natural systems we so thoroughly understand. For if we fail in this duty, our silence serves only to increase the unending loss of the wetlands we purport to study and preserve.

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