

PERSPECTIVE

The Environmental Professional in Public Office: Putting Schizophrenia to Work for You

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The Environmental Professional who happens to be employed by the government is in a peculiar position. For this situation, let us presume that the public employee has achieved an advanced level of education as a forest ecologist. The job held, however, is broadly regulatory and the employee is responsible for controlling public activities such as development, mining, and road construction wherever they may occur within the political jurisdiction. The political jurisdiction extends well beyond forest ecology and includes lakes, streams, marshes, and perhaps even the airshed, soils, and groundwaters.

As you can easily see, the employee is going to be well versed in assessing impacts to one type of system within the jurisdiction, and somewhat limited in assessing others. This employee is, however, educated and can achieve some level of lateral thinking, thereby applying broad ecological philosophy to the lesser-known systems.

Now let's complicate things a bit. If the political jurisdiction is large enough, the managers may decide to allocate the regulation of the south end to one employee, and the north end to another. The complication is added when the second employee is presumed to be a History major who took a government job right after college and was transferred and promoted into the regulatory arena (I did not make this up). One side of the jurisdiction is being regulated by a PhD ecologist, and the other by an accident of employment history.

The reason that I have presented this scenario is to try to answer two questions brought up at the last annual conference of the National Association of Environmental Professionals. One I have come to call "Management by Dogma." In this instance, the regulator appears to have no conscious thought whatsoever. If an application for a permit arrives on the desk and it contains a regulated component, then the regulation is to be applied to its fullest extent. To illustrate this, I have included a photograph of a mangrove tree growing in the middle of a Florida campground. This plant is normally found in marine intertidal waters and is highly regulated. In this particular instance, however, it would be absurd to attempt to apply the regulation. This is an example in the extreme, but does illustrate the point that there will always be situations where a regulation may not be applicable. But of the two employees, which is better able to make that decision? Of the two employees, which can be given latitudes the other is not? Should that occur, which attorney for the regulated public will decide there is

arbitrary application of the regulations? Which labor union will demand equal freedoms of interpretation? Which snooty PhD will demand a higher pay scale because of the superior expertise?

Government is thereby forced to put in place the “Management by Dogma” policy and require all its employees to treat the entire regulated public in like manner. To the historian, this makes the job easy, and we often hear, “That's the policy. I can't do anything about it.” On the other hand, this frustrates the dickens out of the ecologist.

This frustration led to the second question, to which I referred earlier. At the conference, several Environmental Professionals expressed dismay over the total conflict in ethics that their job demanded. On the one hand, there was the ecological ethic that their science and education had imparted. On the other hand, was the regulatory policy and direction. In many instances, an Environmental Professional was cornered into approving a proposal that they knew, as scientists, was a bad one.

The resolution is in the schizophrenia. The job that the government Environmental Professional has is most often not actually as a biologist, chemist, geologist, etc. The job typically is as a representative of the people of their jurisdiction, enforcing the laws passed by elected officials reacting to both political and scientific pressures. In that job, the environmental background may not be much more valuable than the history degree. It is required for purposes of appearance and so that the employee can have some understanding of what is going on. The ethic is to act as an enforcer of regulations. Ethics is about doing what is expected by your client or consumer, and in this instance, the ethic is simply to enforce the law. This may seem harsh, but the point has to be made.

The second personality of our schizophrenic employee will arise when the regulation comes up for review. The managers will look to their staff for their primary interpretation of how well things are being managed. It is when the elected and appointed officials ask the ecologist if the regulations are effective that the ethics of the Environmental Professional, the ethics of the scientist, kick in. It is at this point that the employee must pull out all the stops and express in strict scientific and professional terms just exactly why the regulation must be changed or, in rare cases, kept as it is.

The reality is that this change in ethical responsibility can shift from moment to moment. In one instant, the employee may argue in private with the manager that the permit should not be issued; in the next, the employee may go to the office and sign it because it complies with the law. The acceptance of the schizophrenia allows us to feel good about this situation, because at least when the alter ego is allowed to come out, it is not the historian who is giving advice to the elected body.

Figure 1. A red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) growing in an upland commercial setting, Florida Keys. Planted as a landscape tree. It is still protected.

