

## **Do Wetland Professionals Have An Obligation to Be Activists? An Opinion**

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To be brief, I'm a wetland professional in the midst of a crisis, one that is increasingly common among ecologists. The problem? I like many am a moralist working within a system that is ethically and fundamentally flawed. Having once detected a deep fault line running through the field of environmental regulation, we see it again and again daily because of the compromise, bad science and rank anthropocentrism in our field. Yet the environmentally sensitive public views our work with admiration, little knowing the actual struggle we have with our accomplishments.

We use government regulations, purportedly flowing from scientific consensus, to make crucial decisions in the high stakes game of development. Unfortunately, these imperfect rules serve neither humanity nor Nature. And today's volatile political climate threatens to weaken even these laws. Further complicating matters, my colleagues in the environmental field stand silent as a fierce ideological battle swirls through the land.

A wetland expert, I make regulatory decisions on a weekly basis. I try to ascertain the intent of state and federal laws, and I value objectivity. Yet I find myself increasingly dismayed by the aftereffects of my work. The multiple degradation of countless individual sites cumulatively adds up to a vast disaster being acted out across America. Dishearteningly, we play a large role in this debacle because we turn our backs on this truth. We who know the most say the least.

### OVERVIEW

Working predominately in Massachusetts, I have delineated hundreds of wetland sites. My delineations often determine what portion of "undeveloped" land is buildable. After I mark a wetland line, the wetlands are "saved." I'm good at what I do, and I apply existing laws carefully. Great victories for the environment result from these activities, right? Developers are left with twenty lots instead fifty. A commercial site gets 100,000 s.f. of building, rather than 500,000. Nature wins. But the victory comes because it's always man doing the measuring.

My imbroglio--in fact, every conscientious ecologist's inevitable problem--results from our intimate knowledge that every carefully wrought compromise in reality deals a direct body blow to Nature. Knowing the carnage which commonly follows these regulatory "victories" does not necessarily lead to solutions designed to prevent their reoccurrence. Rather, this uncommon knowledge we hold only points us, if we ponder our work, toward the dark heart of the conflict between humanity and Nature itself.

As a seasoned professional in watching natural lands legally destroyed after regulatory victories, I assure you that although declarations of environmental triumph are not disingenuous, they are certainly hollow. Typically, the approved development immediately envelops the upland to the wetland edge, creating a pseudo-ecotone, a

razor's edge along the landscape where Nature over hundreds or thousands of years had fashioned a soft richness. Rarely do we see buffer zones built into this process; clearing goes to the defined wetland edge. Even more rarely are upland areas saved if they have no measurable "resource" value.

There are critical problems with this contemporaneous methodology: one is our overemphasis on the value of wetlands to the detriment of important upland areas. Another is that upland wildlife is driven for survival into wetlands. Last, wetland vegetation itself is inevitably altered by the sudden edge effect. The inevitable lawns, sidewalks, buildings and bituminous roadways, which parallel the wetland edge are man's orderly replacement for the diverse biotic regime which previously existed.

### THE SLIPPERY DANCE LIES IN THE COMPROMISE

Compromise--so widely prized--is simply a euphemism for the partial, rather than total, loss of Nature. The fact remains that our current laws slow development at best, alter the landscape in ways we cannot even anticipate at worst, and allow the creation of a desperately sanitized regime, which we describe as "improving the property." This honored paradigm sacrifices natural sinuosity for Pythagorean geometry, critical uplands for waterways, and diversity for an artificial landscape, which can only be maintained with constant applications of chemistry and power tools. In the end, after all the plans have been approved and the rolling fields and gullies re-graded to precision, Nature is bullied away, confined to its roughest terrains, pushed into barren badlands and lonely rivers.

Today, at the terminus of our century, humanity on this continent leaves a sculpted and make-believe version of Nature. For environmentalists who know better, this realization creates a dire crisis. And damningly for those who know better but fail to speak, I say that their holy green dance in the public eye is unspeakable arrogance in the robes of Nature's good keeper.

We can do better. Every working ecologist with a conscience knows this. Yet we earn our way by playing this game, by being participants in an "exciting field" where we pat each other on the back for being the good guys. This is a field where kids with a streak of real morality can study to become professional environmentalists. This is, as one of my colleagues proudly noted, where the rubber meets the road. This is a feel-good sort of place to earn a living. This is the ideal job thousands of graduates seek.

Except that this is also a place that, after a year or two as a professional, begins to twist your guts and make you angry. The charade takes a short time to unmask. Once the mask is off, the understanding that this job is just another facet of our growth-oriented society hits hard. For none of us can deny that after professional ecologists have left any undeveloped site, after the yellow blur of bulldozers begins, immense areas of habitat are lost and biomass is devastated. In their place we create a monoculture of grass which meets the deadened edge of the wetlands we have so proudly saved.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR LAWS

No moralist likes to feel like a fool. Yet to continue in this line of work one must grease the wheels of rationalization frequently. A strong dose of anthropocentrism, like a double aspirin, is the best thing. But, once one has seen the consequences of many of our carefully approved development schemes, the less confidence one feels in the sanctity of the game we have so loyally played.

What are the axioms which drive those of us who work with current environmental laws?

- Every regulatory decision is a compromise;
- In every compromise Nature loses;
- Nature's losses are too often characterized as Environmental Victories; and
- Each of mankind's Victories is in reality a further step in the massive human reordering of Nature.

Those of us who work in the maelstrom of the regulatory maze, those of us reasonably seasoned and wide-eyed, are inevitably flawed workers, crafts persons with a dirty secret, with a questionable agenda which we consciously or otherwise paint in shades of green. I identify our profession's quiet transgressions with further axioms:

- Every field decision is compromised by the use of politicized science;
- Every compromise is colored by economic considerations (while economic considerations cannot be used to measure the values of Nature); and
- Ecologists inevitably bring the flaws of egotism, fear and hubris to every field investigation.

## CHANGING THE PROFESSION

Can we change these realities? Those of us who get our boots dirty, who come back at the end of a day with briar scratches, poison ivy and notebooks filled with rain-smudged sketches, must stop playing mind games in which we are always the good guys. We must face the reality that we are trained to not only observe the interactions of Nature in its pristine state, but to also skillfully measure the effects of human activity upon Nature after a site is stripped. And we must admit that remaining silent about the negative changes we know will occur is glaringly wrong. We must admit that the aggregate effect of our continuing silence is the very diminishment of Nature herself. We must experience a sea change, must awaken now with shock like Aldo Leopold when he shot a she wolf and saw an inexplicable green fire of fierce intelligence in her dying eyes.

As ecologists we are often the only ones who walk through the backyards and rear woodlots of America. We can quantify the changes to native sites, and bring science to measure the carnage. Too, we see the native diversity of each landscape, the richness blazing from ancient hillsides--and this vision we are granted is often unique. Developers rarely conduct more than a cursory walk through a site; town and city officials worry about ticks; neighbors hew to existing paths and do not understand much of what they see. The solitary walk is left to us, as well as the responsibility for describing the losses that follow development.

## CONCLUSION

Do wetland professionals have an obligation to be activists? I believe so. I believe we must be more vocal, that we must actively talk about the character of what we accept as development. We must formulate alternatives, and be willing to critique the archaic zoning and environmental laws that determine the backbone of modern development.

And we must stop apologizing for Nature's often-mysterious diversity. Last year a newspaper interviewed a state biologist cataloguing butterflies in Rhode Island. In response to a question asking why the state bothered with such expensive enterprises, he muttered that someday scientists might find that these creatures hold the key to medical cures. In other words, we're going to save rare butterflies so that someday they might save us. This attitude is anthropocentrism at its ugliest. Why do we not equate Nature's right to survive as equal to our own? The biologist could only justify his work in the context of human gain. (The newspaper also noted that he then killed the butterfly as "proof" that it was sighted and so that it could be added to his "data base".)

As ecologists, wetland scientists, biologists, orthinologists--and yes, as activists--we must recognize that when we think of ourselves as good guys we must not unconsciously exempt ourselves from being part of the problem. We have a responsibility to play a greater role in the shaping of our world. Our silence is no longer tolerable.