A Professional Code of Ethics for the 21st Century
The Ethics Committee's Proposal

Printed on page 19 is the proposal of the Society of American Foresters (SAF) Ethics Committee to revise the society's Code of Ethics. The decision to accept or reject this proposal will be made by the voting membership by means of a referendum on the national SAF ballot this fall. This and other articles in this issue provide some background on the proposal, which has been discussed in various venues over the past few years—at Critical Issues Forums at the Memphis (1997) and Portland (1999) national conventions; in articles published in the Journal of Forestry (September 1995), Forestry Source (April 1999, July 1999, April 2000), and Western Forester (January 1999); in formal presentations by the Ethics Committee to the House of Society Delegates (HSD) and to SAF Council (1997, 1998, 1999); and through announcements and discussions on the SAF news listserve.

Why Change the Code?
In the course of working with the code, hearing cases, trying to interpret the code, thinking about how the code could promote ethical behavior within the profession, and particularly while developing the land ethic canon in the early 1990s, it became clear to the Ethics Committee that it would be worthwhile to review the entire code (see Cornett 2000). SAF Council and the House of Society Delegates also recognized this, and by Council support of an HSD motion (1996), the Ethics Committee was directed to undertake such a review. Thus the review has been ongoing, along with other Ethics Committee activities, for about five years.

In the course of its review, the committee found enough problems, or at least areas where the code could be improved, to conclude that tinkering with a few words here and there was unlikely to result in a clearer or more cohesive code. A complete rewrite was in order.

The current code, in its basic form, content, and language, is nearly 50 years old. There have been several amendments, but really the only substantive addition since 1948 was the adoption of Canon 1, the land ethic. Although being 50 years old is not by itself a sufficient condition for change, members’ comments and the Ethics Committee’s own experience suggested several reasons to recommend revision.

First, there are areas in the current code that the Ethics Committee felt were ambiguous, redundant, too specific, or unnecessary:

• Canon 1 in the current code is a very stark and simple statement: “A member will advocate and practice land management consistent with ecologically sound principles.” Despite its brevity and seeming incisiveness, some have questioned whether it can actually be interpreted in a way that provides guidance and enforceability.

By Samuel J. Radcliffe
Canons 3, 12, 13, and 15 are all specific cases that revolve around a more general maxim, "Be honest." Can't we simply refer to that maxim?

- Canon 8 deals with the general concept of confidentiality but is limited to the employer-employee relationship. Shouldn't it be broader?

- Canon 10 is a special case of conflict of interest, which as a general issue is addressed in Canon 9. Do we need both canons?

- Canon 14 provides guidance on a purely business decision, not an ethical decision.

- Canon 16 deals with violations. We should encourage and expect members to use the code, but failing to bring charges should not itself be a violation of the code.

Second, the code lacks a clear statement of those values that distinguish forestry as a profession. This code is not only for SAF members—we need to tell others about the core beliefs that drive our behavior. Value statements provide context for the behavioral principles we're trying to enforce, a sort of built-in legislative history: "Here's why we will behave in this way, and these are the beliefs that are driving us." The Code of Ethics should be the manifesto of the profession. A more explicit declaration of forestry's core values could bring meaning and wholeness to our code.

Finally, the code's language and format are legalistic and somewhat disjointed, which is counterproductive to the objectives of motivating ethical behavior and inspiring members to reach for a higher level of professionalism.

In summary, we felt that with a complete revision, we had an opportunity to clarify the meaning and intent of the code, to explicitly state the core beliefs of the profession, and to create a more inspirational document.

Proposed Format

The current Code of Ethics consists of a preamble and 16 canons. The proposed code consists of a preamble and six principles and pledges. As in the current code, the proposed preamble is intended to describe the scope and purpose of the Code of Ethics and to point users to the implementing foundation and rules (the SAF Constitution and Bylaws). Both the current and proposed codes address the three areas in which foresters have ethical responsibilities: land stewardship, service to society, and professional relationships.

Each of the proposed principles is a statement about the collective values of the profession (professional beliefs), and is coupled with a pledge that our behavior will conform to those beliefs. The pledges draw strength from the statement of beliefs: By expressing these values, the principles provide the context for interpreting the behavioral pledges.

Either in the preamble or in the principles, the proposed code expresses the following values:

- Serving society is a profession's primary objective, and stewardship of forests is the means by which this profession serves society.

- Forestry is neither a purely utilitarian nor a purely ecological endeavor; it draws from both traditions. As a result, human uses, ecological functions, and environmental conditions are all important outputs or measures of forestry practice.

- Forestry must consider the needs of future generations; therefore it is im-
**Preamble**

Stewardship of the land is the cornerstone of the forestry profession. The purpose of these canons is to govern the professional conduct of members of the Society of American Foresters in their relations with the land, the public, their employers, including clients, and each other as provided in Article VIII of the Society's Constitution. Compliance with these canons demonstrates our respect for the land and our commitment to the wise management of ecosystems, and ensures just and honorable professional and human relationships, mutual confidence and respect, and competent service to society.

These canons have been adopted by the membership of the Society and can only be amended by the membership. Procedures for processing charges of violation of these canons are contained in Bylaws established by the Council. The canons and procedures apply to all membership categories in all forestry-related disciplines, except Honorary Members.

All members upon joining the Society agree to abide by this Code as a condition of membership.

**Canons**

1. A member will advocate and practice land management consistent with ecologically sound principles.

2. A member's knowledge and skills will be utilized for the benefit of society. A member will strive for accurate, current, and increasing knowledge of forestry, will communicate such knowledge when not confidential, and will challenge and correct untrue statements about forestry.

3. A member will advertise only in a dignified and truthful manner, stating the services the member is qualified and prepared to perform. Such advertisements may include references to fees charged.

4. A member will base public comment on forestry matters on accurate knowledge and will not distort or withhold pertinent information to substantiate a point of view. Prior to making public statements on forest policies and practices, a member will indicate on whose behalf the statements are made.

5. A member will perform services consistent with the highest standards of quality and with loyalty to the employer.

6. A member will perform only those services for which the member is qualified by education or experience.

7. A member who is asked to participate in forestry operations which deviate from accepted professional standards must advise the employer in advance of the consequences of such deviation.

8. A member will not voluntarily disclose information concerning the affairs of the member's employer without the employer's express permission.

9. A member must avoid conflicts of interest or even the appearance of such conflicts. If, despite such precaution, a conflict of interest is discovered, it must be promptly and fully disclosed to the member's employer and the member must be prepared to act immediately to resolve the conflict.

10. A member will not accept compensation or expenses from more than one employer for the same service, unless the parties involved are informed and consent.

11. A member will engage, or advise the member's employer to engage, other experts and specialists in forestry or related fields whenever the employer's interest would be best served by such action, and a member will work cooperatively with other professionals.

12. A member will not by false statement or dishonest action injure the reputation or professional associations of another member.

13. A member will give credit for the methods, ideas, or assistance obtained from others.

14. A member in competition for supplying forestry services will encourage the prospective employer to base selection on comparison of qualifications and negotiation of fee or salary.

15. Information submitted by a member about a candidate for a prospective position, award, or elected office will be accurate, factual, and objective.

16. A member having evidence of violation of these canons by another member will present the information and charges to the Council in accordance with the Bylaws.

Code of Ethics for members of the Society of American Foresters

Preamble

Service to society is the cornerstone of any profession. The profession of forestry serves society by fostering stewardship of the world’s forests. Because forests provide valuable resources and perform critical ecological functions, they are vital to the wellbeing of both society and the biosphere.

Members of the Society of American Foresters have a deep and enduring love for the land, and are inspired by the profession’s historic traditions, such as Gifford Pinchot’s utilitarianism and Aldo Leopold’s ecological conscience. In their various roles as practitioners, teachers, researchers, advisers, and administrators, foresters seek to sustain and protect a variety of forest uses and attributes, such as aesthetic values, air and water quality, biodiversity, recreation, timber production, and wildlife habitat.

The purpose of this Code of Ethics is to protect and serve society by inspiring, guiding, and governing members in the conduct of their professional lives. Compliance with the code demonstrates members’ respect for the land and their commitment to the long-term management of ecosystems, and ensures just and honorable professional and human relationships, mutual confidence and respect, and competent service to society.

On joining the Society of American Foresters, members assume a special responsibility to the profession and to society by promising to uphold and abide by the following:

Principles and Pledges

1. Foresters have a responsibility to manage land for both current and future generations. We pledge to practice and advocate management that will maintain the long-term capacity of the land to provide the variety of materials, uses, and values desired by landowners and society.

2. Society must respect forest landowners’ rights and correspondingly, landowners have a land stewardship responsibility to society. We pledge to practice and advocate forest management in accordance with landowner objectives and professional standards, and to advise landowners of the consequences of deviating from such standards.

3. Sound science is the foundation of the forestry profession. We pledge to strive for continuous improvement of our methods and our personal knowledge and skills; to perform only those services for which we are qualified; and in the biological, physical, and social sciences to use the most appropriate data, methods, and technology.

4. Public policy related to forests must be based on both scientific principles and societal values. We pledge to use our knowledge and skills to help formulate sound forest policies and laws; to challenge and correct untrue statements about forestry; and to foster dialogue among foresters, other professionals, landowners, and the public regarding forest policies.

5. Honest and open communication, coupled with respect for information given in confidence, is essential to good service. We pledge to always present, to the best of our ability, accurate and complete information; to indicate on whose behalf any public statements are made; to fully disclose and resolve any existing or potential conflicts of interest; and to keep proprietary information confidential unless the appropriate person authorizes its disclosure.

6. Professional and civic behavior must be based on honesty, fairness, good will, and respect for the law. We pledge to conduct ourselves in a civil and dignified manner; to respect the needs, contributions, and viewpoints of others; and to give due credit to others for their methods, ideas, or assistance.

The Society of American Foresters’ Bylaws specify processes through which a member’s violation of the code may lead to reprimand, censure, expulsion from the Society, or other disciplinary action. Any two persons, whether or not SAF members, may charge a member with violation of the code. Such a charge must be made in writing to the SAF President and must refer to the specific Pledges alleged to have been violated.
operative that we maintain the capacity to meet those needs;

- Forest landowners, both public and private, have rights, but they also have responsibilities.
- Both science and societal values should influence forestry.
- As with any other profession, we hold high such things as honesty, fairness, good will, and respect for the law.

The pledges are the specific standards of behavior that serve the same purpose as canons in our current code. That is, violation of one or more of the pledges may lead to reprimand, censure, or expulsion from the Society, under the processes contained in the SAF Bylaws.

Table 1 shows that nearly all the values or behaviors addressed by the current code have a corresponding place in the proposed code. The exceptions are current Canons 14 and 16, which for reasons outlined above, the committee believes are inappropriate.

Changes in the Land Ethic

Many of the proposed changes might be viewed as saying the same thing in a different way, and comments from SAF members during the proposal development indicated no great sensitivity to the particular words chosen. However, the wording of Canon 1, the so-called land ethic, has since its adoption been controversial, and so the proposed changes here deserve some discussion.

The Ethics Committee is on record (Cornett et al. 1994) as saying that Canon 1 is enforceable only if one essentially discards the words and appeals to the spirit that was behind its adoption in 1992. Some of the elements of that spirit are these:

- We recognize the systems nature of forests.
- Biological relationships may constrain our ability to manage forests for single uses.
- We manage such systems with an eye toward the future, not just the present.

The problem with the words of the land ethic canon is that they render this spirit apparent only to those who actually went through the process of debating and voting on the 1992 referendum. Right out of the box, the words not only fail to deliver this spirit, they may even deliver the wrong message. A literal reading says that foresters will manage according to only one set of criteria—ecological criteria. By their exclusion, economic and other social criteria are at least implied to be irrelevant. The Ethics Committee believes that such an exclusion is inconsistent with foresters' core values.

Our goal with this proposed revision is to more explicitly communicate the spirit that drove adoption of the land ethic canon. We attempt to do this with statements of values that we believe are widely held within the profession. We acknowledge that this proposed code sounds more anthropocentric than the current code, but in our view it better reflects the range of values that underlie forestry today.

In the proposed code, the land ethic is most directly addressed in Principles 1 and 2. Principle 1 recognizes that (a) we have a responsibility to future generations; (b) maintaining the capacity of the land is the means by which we provide for future generations; (c) society requires not only materials (timber, etc.) but also nonconsumptive uses (bird-watching, etc.) and values (biodiversity, etc.).

Proposed Principle 2 parallels current Canon 7, but the proposed principle links "professional standards" to the idea that property rights are not absolute. The concept of rights is fundamental to ethics, and property rights have never been addressed in the SAF Code of Ethics. Discussions within SAF over the past few years and at the Critical Issues Forum on core values at Memphis in 1997 have made it clear that property rights are an issue of great concern to the profession. The principle recognizes that landowners have a say in how their lands should be managed, but this must be in the context of the stewardship values that are expressed in the preamble and in Principle 1.

One aspect of Principle 2 that has come under criticism, even though it is already a part of the current code, is the idea of "professional standards." Members are concerned about who sets the standards, how they are communicated, and how the principle would be enforced. The committee has several responses to these concerns:

First, the principle does not con-
Our Ethical Roots

Because my history with SAF ethics goes back to the mid-1970s when I was appointed a member of the Committee on Ethics, I was asked to provide a summary of cases of unethical conduct brought before the Society.

The following information is based on a review of the confidential ethics files from 1931 to the present.

Before the development in 1948 of the SAF Code of Ethics, and the National Committee on Ethics, SAF had a standing committee known as the Committee on the Maintenance of Professional Standards. That group served as an investigating body on charges of unprofessional conduct brought to the Society, and would present information to Council for its deliberation. Council could then dismiss the charges, or vote for censure or removal from membership. During this time, those alleging charges of unprofessional conduct maintained their confidentiality and were rarely known by the accused. It is clear from the correspondence that SAF leaders struggled to develop appropriate procedures to ensure due process and the integrity of their investigations. Significant process changes were incorporated in the 1950s.

Of the four cases considered, two were sustained. Generally, the cases of that period involved conflicts of interest, disloyalty to the employer, or fraudulent practices. I found only one case of alleged unethical activity in the 1950s and one in the 1960s. In both cases, conflict of interest was at the heart of the matter.

In the 1970s through the 1990s, 23 cases were brought before the Committee on Ethics. There were allegations of insufficient credit for scholarly work, conflicts of interest, theft and embezzlement, providing misleading information to the public, poor field practices that could relate to the land ethic, and misleading information resulting in harm to the reputation of a fellow professional.

During the past 30 years, approximately 30 percent of those cases brought before the Society have been sustained. If one looks at the percentage of cases sustained throughout the entire period, it is approximately 28 percent.

So what can we conclude from all this information? First, there are relatively few cases given the age of the Society. I suspect that the increase in cases over the past 30 years is the result of a better understanding of the code and the charging process as well as individual responsibility.

I also believe the primary reason for so few cases over the years is that the profession does adhere to high ethical standards. Most of us did not enter the profession of forestry to make a lot of money; we entered it because we cared about the forests that are our responsibility.

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Literature Cited


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