

Ethics as a Bridge between Traditional and Contemporary Water Governance¹

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"Water ethics" refers to the way we apply values to decisions about water. Every water decision, and perhaps every non-water decision, has an ethical dimension. Sometimes that dimension is obvious but usually the ethical dimensions are subtle and can be easily overlooked.

The decision taken in the city of Detroit (in the United States) last year, to turn off the water taps for households that had not paid their water bills for more than three months, was denounced as "unethical". The injustice was easy to see because the decision violated those families' right to water, declared by the United Nations as a fundamental human right. But the mayor of Detroit felt that his action was necessary to protect the water utility from bankruptcy. He placed his economic responsibilities above his social responsibilities. In this sense his actions reflected ethics, but the wrong ethics. He failed to give adequate weight to the social consequences of his decision to turn off the water supply to those houses.

Could this type of punishment, depriving a family of access to water, ever happen in a traditional community? There is a strong sense of communalism in traditional societies, but there can be discrimination as well. In India, caste-based discrimination can deny lower castes access to the water sources used by the upper castes. Here the value placed on upholding traditional caste distinctions takes precedence over generally accepted standards of social justice.

In this presentation I want to make only two points. My first point is that there are ethics underlying just about every water decision, policy, practice, and governance arrangement. We need to treat the value-motivations (ethics) of water actors as being just as important as technical information about water flows, or economic information about fee payments. Just as "You can't manage what you don't measure", I am suggesting that you can't make informed decisions without understanding the ethical motivations of both the users and the decision-makers and the ethical implications of the decisions. My second point is that the "language of ethics", i.e., identifying the values underlying behavior and debating the rightness or

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wrongness of those values, can provide a way of bridging the divide between traditional and modern water governance. By learning about the ethics behind both traditional and modern water policies and practices, we will gain a new respect for traditional practices, and we will learn lessons about designing a hybrid approach to water governance combining the best of both worlds.

Categories of Water Values and Ethics

Can "water ethics" really be so prevalent that every decision about water contains an ethical dimension? Yes, and part of the explanation is that there are a range of value categories and there are ethical principles around each. I distinguish five basic categories of values:

1. *Environmental values* about the importance of clean water, aquatic biodiversity, and riparian vegetation, as well as healthy rivers, lakes, and aquifers;
2. *Economic values* about conserving water, avoiding waste, and making best use of the water that we do use;
3. *Social values* about human health and well-being, including access to clean water and sanitation;
4. *Cultural values* about identity and one's spiritual and personal relationship to the water environment;
5. *Governance values* about participation, transparency, and accountability in managing water resources.

Decisions about new water infrastructure such as a dam, levees, irrigation diversion, or a new canal usually affect several of these value categories, and often all of them. For example, a dam has negative impacts on the environment, should have positive impacts on the economy, and has mixed impacts on social, cultural and governance values. The dam might enhance social welfare through more stable agriculture and electricity generation; it might displace traditional villages, and it might take authority away from local government leaders.

Weighing the potential negative and positive impacts can reveal strengths and weaknesses of the proposal to build the dam, but this level of analysis is inadequate to guide the decision about whether or not the dam should be built, or whether and how the plans should be revised. Those practical decisions need to be guided by the priorities and ethics of the stakeholders. If the dam will harm the environment, how badly will it be harmed and what options are there for mitigating the impacts?

The ethics of the decision, to build or not to build, is not simply a question of environmental values vs. economic values. There are social values to consider (Who will win and who will lose if the dam is constructed?) and cultural issues (What religious or archaeological sites will be affected?). Governance values include the role of all stakeholders in the decision-making process, as well as the governance arrangements after the dam is built.

Developing a Common Reference for Water Ethics

How is it possible to apply water ethics to practical decisions, when the stakeholders who need to reach consensus on the decision have conflicting ethics? Whose ethics should prevail? Questions about privatizing urban water supply services provide an example of conflicting ethics. Proponents of privatization in the EU point to the benefits of management efficiencies and better service. Opponents base their objections on governance ethics: Local

citizens should control their own water supplies through their elected officials. How can arguments about different categories of values be reconciled? If some stakeholders (e.g., business interests) place a high value on efficiency, while others (e.g., poor urban families) are concerned with having a voice, a solution could be pursued that meets both sets of concerns.

A code of ethics which clearly lays out the fundamental principles important to the various stakeholders can provide a starting point for building consensus. The development of a global "Water Ethics Charter" which is currently being undertaken by Water-Culture Institute, UNESCO, and others (See <http://waterethics.org>) will provide a template that could be adapted to local levels of a watershed, river basin, city, or region. Since the Charter addresses the multiple categories of values, the inclusion of the "soft" values (social, cultural, and governance) are less likely to be forgotten. At the same time, the Charter's template will help clarify the more tangible "hard" economic and environmental values.

The value principles that will be articulated in the Water Ethics Charter will provide a common language for discussing water governance and development options. This will be particularly important to facilitate meaningful communication cross-culturally, e.g., when a national water agency is proposing development that will impact traditional communities. Large water infrastructure projects (e.g., levees, dams, and canals) and industries which impact water (e.g., mines, oil & gas) are the obvious contexts where codified value principles would be useful at the earliest stages of planning. But less dramatic development, such as agricultural intensification programs, also need to address values.

An example is the Chhattisgarh Irrigation Development Project in East-Central India aimed at improving agricultural productivity and incomes of small farmers, including many indigenous communities. The project focused on economic values (new varieties of rice and higher value vegetable crops) and governance (organizing water-user associations) but neglected social values (e.g., role of women and employment opportunities for youth), cultural values (e.g., traditional crops, spiritual and identity importance of hunting and gathering forest foods), and environmental values (importance of local agro-biodiversity and water pollution from pesticides. A deeper understanding of the range of water-related values, along with a more participatory planning process, might have led to a similar but far more effective project.

Traditional and Contemporary Water Ethics

In general there are stark differences between the water ethics of traditional/indigenous communities and the dominant water ethics of modern farmers using industrial farming methods. But examining both groups more deeply will reveal nearly as many differences within each group. Traditional indigenous communities can have sharp disagreements on whether coal mining should be permitted on their lands, or whether pesticides should be used or not. Similarly, there is a great diversity of values within the ranks of modern farmers. The popularity of organic farming is a good indicator of these divergent values.

Traditional farmers tend to be much more aware than their modern counterparts about what their values are. As minority and sometimes "exotic" cultures they are also aware that their traditional farming practices and cultural attitudes carry a social stigma. While cultural revitalization movements can be effective in helping traditional societies retain their cultural identities, there are constant reminders from TV, films, and the Internet, that they are different.

Modern farmers, and the hierarchy of water managers in public sector agencies, are rarely challenged by circumstances to evaluate their values about water or water ecosystems. They have the luxury of making decisions based largely on economic costs and benefits, or in the case of managers, on political expediency. But their complacency is changing. The new reality of climate change is stimulating new thinking about water use and ecosystem protection. The arrogance of modern farmers vis a vis traditional farmers is changing as both sides realize their ways of life are under threat.

As both traditional and modern farmers face an uncertain future, clarity about their values and priorities becomes ever more important. Why should the traditional farmer give up his ancient wisdom in favor of high-input conventional farming, when the conventional farmers are starting to adopt more traditional practices? This is the right time to become aware of what our values are, which values are most important to us, and also which values we no longer wish to hold onto.

In urban settings, a similar re-assessment of water and water ecosystems is starting to happen, partly inspired by climatic uncertainty and the quest for water security. Healthy natural rivers and clean groundwater are becoming a more appreciated if still elusive goal. Urban waterways are being re-imagined as desirable features of the city-scape, for a mix of practical and aesthetic reasons.

Are we poised for a new era of water management based on ecological design and participatory governance? That seems to be one potential scenario, but the specter of climate change and more frequent droughts and floods is also giving new life to conventional water management based on large-scale engineering works. Will we sacrifice the remaining life of our depleted rivers to fill more reservoirs and pipelines, or will we shift into a new paradigm of co-existence with Nature?

Giving attention to the values underlying our water policies and investment decisions will become increasingly critical for a sustainable water future. Applying "ethics awareness" however is not only about thinking more clearly; it is also about finding a bridge between traditional knowledge of water ecosystems and governance, and contemporary challenges. I am hopeful that by exploring the underlying value principles motivating our water policies and practices, that we can blend traditional values about respect for nature into new governance solutions for the future.

Part 1. Introduction

A. General Statement

- This Charter establishes fundamental principles for managing water in ways that are... [environmentally sustainable, economically responsible, socially just and culturally respectful.]

B. Purpose of this Charter

- The aim of this Charter is.... [a water-secure world for both people and nature]

C. General Issues about the Charter

- Environmental sustainability? Participation of stakeholders? Precautionary principle? Minimize water use? Other general principles?]

Part 2. Environmental Issues

A. General Concepts

- The healthy condition of water ecosystems is fundamental to the welfare of people, who ultimately depend on the water services of nature
- Freshwater ecosystems (rivers, lakes, springs, wetlands, aquifers, and estuaries) have an intrinsic value and [right to exist] in a healthy condition

B. Specific Operational Guidelines

- Classify basins by ecological status, and set guidelines to enhance ecological health.
- Commit to a policy of "no net loss from current conditions"?

Part 3. Economic Issues

A. General Concepts:

- Protect existing water stocks (e.g., aquifers, lakes and rivers)
- Principles of "reasonable use", "frugality", and "efficiency" in water use

B. Specific Operational Guidelines

- Identify, measure, and protect economically valuable ecosystem services;
- Minimize water use and maximize reuse

Part 4. Social Principles

A. General Concepts:

- Water should be treated as a common good; considerations of equity and fairness;
- Water governance should promote stakeholder participation and engagement.

B. Specific Operational Guidelines

- Promote universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation;
- Establish stakeholder bodies for water ecosystems and irrigation networks.

Part 5. Cultural and Spiritual Principles

A. General Concepts

- Comply with UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007
- Promote water development which supports local cultural values;

B. Specific Operational Guidelines

- Observe principle of "free, prior and informed consent" from WCD 2000.

Part 6. Other Issues

- Governance - principles of "subsidiarity", participation, transparency, accountability
- Water security, peace and conflict issues?
- Professional and financial integrity / anti-corruption?
- Other issues?