

EDITORIAL

Sound Decisions and Environmental Outcomes

John H. Perkins

In the previous issue of this journal, Lynton Caldwell asked, "Can American Society Make Sound Environmental Decisions?" Caldwell was particularly well suited to provide this article, because he was heavily involved in drafting the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in the late 1960s.

NEPA, as readers of this journal well know, intended to put the agencies of the federal government on a sounder path of environmental decision making. But what, if anything, are we doing to measure outcomes, the real test of "soundness?"

Caldwell's question was seemingly simple, but the answer is complicated: It depends. He suggested four issues that had to be explored: the cohesion of American society; attitudes and beliefs; criteria for decisions; and institutions.

These four issues are important for environmental practitioners to understand as they work on individual projects. It is important to realize, however, that work on a project scale may not lead to "sound environmental decisions." It is also important to realize that NEPA, aimed at reforming federal decision making, is only one of several arenas in which the quest for sound environmental decisions occurs. A number of post-NEPA laws and treaties, each of which has heavy implications for private actions rather than federal agencies, may be the better place to look for evidence about whether or not American society can make "sound environmental decisions." In addition, one has to ask about outcomes.

Consider just a few examples:

- The Endangered Species Act, passed in 1973, affects land use, private and public, in a profound way, if the land is habitat for an endangered species. To be sure, responsible federal agencies may drag their heels, in the eyes of conservation biologists, in naming a species as "endangered." Nevertheless both public and private land managers all over the country have been or soon may be impacted by the need for habitat conservation planning if any economic activity is to continue. Yet consider outcomes: despite some apparent successes like bald eagles, biodiversity remains highly threatened, both in the US and in other countries.
- The Clean Water Act, through Congressional and court actions in the 1970s, firmly moved wetlands from landscapes of scorn to near sacrosanct loci of important ecosystem functions. A strong congressional movement in the mid-1990s to diminish protection of wetlands could not successfully pass a policy change. Yet consider outcomes: wetlands continue to disappear.
- The Food Quality Protection Act in 1996 substantially amended the laws governing pesticides, primarily in the interest of protecting children's health. The chemicals available for pest control in all aspects of land management may change. Yet consider outcomes: elements of Congress continue to hammer on USEPA and the Act in the name of economic efficiency, and pesticides are still the practice of first choice for pest control. In addition, insufficient research occurs on alternatives.
- The Kyoto Protocol to limit emissions of greenhouse gases would, if implemented, change the uses of many natural resources and affect all walks of environmental practice. Yet consider outcomes: despite the undisputed primacy of the US in per capita emissions of greenhouse

gases, the US Senate unanimously rejected any protocol to control these emissions that did not require less developed countries also to reduce emissions. Our emissions continue to rise. Is the reluctance of the Senate a "sound" environmental decision or not? Does the Senate's attitude reflect a leadership position on an important topic appropriate to the role of the United States in the global community?

This cursory examination of four contentious environmental issues illustrates each of Caldwell's points: we are a society divided along many lines, some insist upon individual rights perhaps to the exclusion of the common good, some demand scientific proof at a level beyond all reasonable doubt before even contemplating change, and some see no role for government beyond protection of individual property rights.

Life is even more complicated when you add, "And what are the outcomes?" Do the outcomes represent the kind of earth upon which we want to live? If you think your decisions were sound, but you still aren't headed towards a place you want to go, then isn't it necessary to revisit "soundness?" It is appropriate and important for environmental practitioners to keep the larger issues in mind and to bring their insights from the project level to bear on the big picture. This is what it takes for the profession to play a leadership role as America struggles and searches for "sound" decisions that lead to desirable outcomes.

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Address correspondence to John H. Perkins, The Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA 98505; (fax) 360-867-6553; (e-mail) perkinsj@evergreen.edu.