

# Land Ethics for Bureau of Land Management Employees<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** With increased public concern for public lands resource stewardship, the Bureau of Land Management is more and more expected to make what is perceived as "right decisions." The ethical dimensions of often highly complex decision making processes have become more and more apparent. The baseline research presented here is designed to promote a land ethic awareness among a wide spectrum of bureau employees who contribute to the daily management of the public domain. Throughout history philosophers have made more profound changes in civilization than all of the conquering armies. Ideas in ethical standards of governing our relationships to land use generally and public land use specifically will not be an exception. At this point in time there are few definitive answers, although there is myriad profound thought. What is known is that as resources and wild lands become scarcer, land ethics will evolve into sharper focus; but, a personal land ethic to a bureau employee cannot now be identified with certainty. Rather, it must be a personal quest integrated into the prediction of a personal value system and the rigors of objective scientific or other types of training.

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Many ideas are presented in this research. Like vignettes, they are viewpoints from many perspectives. The sum of their combination is designed to be greater than the whole. The ultimate value of reflecting upon these viewpoints is a healthy awareness of the many possibilities guiding our professional relationships with public land, whether our tool is a pencil or a posthole digger.

Western philosophical thought has defined ethics as the science of conduct corresponding to logic. It is the quest to find the criteria for correct thinking. Ethics are based on judgments about what is good but usually not on self-evident and well-defined principles. Its conclusions, therefore, can never be definitive and certain. Ethical decision making involves critical reasoning skills necessary to make the right ethical choices. As caretakers of the public trust, Bureau of Land Management (BLM) employees must make ethical choices because the public does not expect or deserve anything less.

Environmental ethics had its origins in the natural history sciences and in the evolution of an aesthetic appreciation of nature beginning with the seventeenth century. Gifford Pinchot, one of the first leaders in the American conservation movement, once said that there are just two things on this material earth—people and natural resources. Conservation is a scientific movement with a historical role originating from science and technology in modern society. Environmental ethics binds humans in their relationships with each other as well as with all elements of the natural environment. Environmental thought has historically been holistic in outlook, thereby giving rise to the science of

ecology. Ecology is defined as the study of the relationships of organisms to one another and to the elemental environment. These relationships bind elements of land, animals, soils and water into a seamless fabric.

More than anyone else in recent times, Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac* (1970) has attempted to grapple with land use issues that are germane to contemporary public land management. Leopold's work has become the modern classic of environmental philosophy and land ethics theory. He reasoned that conservation is a state of harmony between humans and the land. It is a harmony that recognizes that people depend on the wealth of a healthy land-community, and that they have an ethical obligation to be wise stewards of that natural wealth. Leopold considered people as members of the land-community rather than as masters or conquerors of nature.

The concept of a land-community was a central idea of Leopold's. Out of this land-community concept developed a modern proactive land ethic that says that natural systems should not be disturbed beyond thresholds of stability, losing resilience and the ability to return to equilibrium. However, a land ethic only limited to ecological thresholds would be management by crisis, rather than management by planning. In summary, a proactive land ethic is good management under the concepts of sustained yield and multiple use.

A balanced land ethic accommodates both human and non-human members of the biotic community as well as the community as a whole. A land ethic should not compete with more familiar social ethics, but should be an integrated part of the social fabric. Land-community ethics are a new evolutionary interpretation of moral development of how land should be used. But earlier concepts still remain operative. An ideal land ethic, based on community, should not be regarded as unwelcome or a threat of a barely practical goal. It should instead be a realistic, eminently livable goal. The highest form of land ethics practiced by BLM employees is when a synergistic (win/win) situation occurs between public land users, the general public, and the affected public lands.

One of the most exciting new dimensions in land ethics is the concept of biodiversity. Biodiversity considers public lands resources from a regional and integrated management perspective. It is a good example showing that a personal land ethic should not be static but should be evolutionary as new paradigms in applied science appear. Land ethics are a holistic paradigmatic challenge that requires the ability to look outward from one's own disciplinary perspective toward contiguous fields of study. One of the major advantages that a multiple-use BLM enjoys under the mandates of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is that management decisions are made in a systems approach rather than a single-line, linear approach. This means that we usually understand the interrelatedness of environmental elements and the consequences of BLM's actions.

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In the last few years there has been much in the literature concerning the new land ethics on public lands. Indeed, both public and professional ethical perspectives of how natural landscapes and resources should be used or preserved are in a state of transformation. The "new land ethics" are philosophically questioning the long-term implications of the current paradigm of sustained yield and multiple use. The central issues under debate are the differences between the theory and practice in current integrated resource management. Too often, it is argued, sustained-yield management has in reality become single-use management. It is said that the promise of multiple use has not been realized. The difficulty arises in part because each land use specialty has a supporting professional association, agency, research base, journal or political special interest group advocating the primacy of a single resource and its preferential status over all others. Modern theorists claim that the solution is to manage public lands as a single interactive system of plants, animals, soil, water, topography, and climate. Under this integrated hypothesis, alteration of any one resource would impact all others. Sustained yield/multiple-use management, it is further argued, is

market oriented, an exercise in rationing determined by the economics of consumption. Multiple-resource management, by contrast, would be land-oriented husbandry determined by the ecology of production.

A healthy land ethic depends less on rules and regulation than on personal attitudes. Resource specialists can be aware of the ethical problems that lie hidden in situations they confront. At times it can seem to be more convenient or prudent to be value-neutral even when ethical dimensions seemingly cannot be ignored. Another risk is that resource specialists can place their program activities above stewardship. And still another peril is when resource personnel abrogate the stewardship role to provide immediate gratification to the expressed desires of an impatient, consumptive public or client.

Land ethics are a moral philosophical approach to the paradox of nonimpairment and commodity production. It is also the paradox of multiple use and sustained yield within a plethora of laws and regulations that critics say at times can transcend common sense and emotional response. Yet this is at the heart of the BLM's mission.