

EDITORIAL

Big Issues, Big Challenges

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This issue of *Environmental Practice* brings together a number of contributions that highlight a daunting challenge to practitioners: how can one have confidence that hard work put in on a project actually ends up “improving the environment?” How can one hope that professional work really creates the kind of place in which we want to live, that will be available for our children, and that allows a good place for the other creatures with whom we share the earth?

Your editors were intrigued when Professor John Whitelegg’s review of this journal appeared in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*. We appreciated the kind words Whitelegg had to say about our first year’s effort. At the same time, we disagreed with his challenge that this journal and its contributors seemed to care nothing for the big-ticket environmental problems like sustainability, greenhouse gas emissions, and environmental justice.

While I think that Professor Whitelegg misreads the long-term aspirations and values of this journal, his critique nevertheless must be taken quite seriously by environmental practitioners. By permission, therefore, we include it in its entirety in this issue, and we also include responses from two of the contributors who were singled out by Professor Whitelegg. Additional letters to the editor are welcome.

Professor Whitelegg is on very solid ground when he reminds us that the minutiae of completing a project must not lead us to ignore the larger picture. It is not adequate, for example, to think you have done your job by ameliorating or mitigating the envi-

ronmental impacts of a new bridge, such as the one connecting Denmark to Sweden. You must also think beyond the project level to questions about, “And then what?” Will a new bridge encourage more automobile traffic with higher emissions of greenhouse gasses? Will a new bridge encourage suburban sprawl and the destruction of more wildlife habitat? Will people who lived where the bridge was built suffer disproportionate effects, and is that ethical?

Professor Whitelegg is reminding us that cumulative and indirect effects are important and must be comprehended. He also correctly reminds us that the United States is responsible for a very high proportion of global environmental impacts.

Despite the problems caused by the sheer size of the American economy and its associated technological processes, the United States has also been a plentiful source of thinking and innovation on how to grapple with these issues. Environmental impact assessment, through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), has been one such arena.

Recently I had an opportunity to participate in a training session on cumulative environmental assessment. This session, sponsored by the Council on Environmental Quality and organized by Environmental Impact Training, Inc., attracted a wide array of talented and experienced environmental practitioners, all of whom were struggling to meet the challenges of cumulative environmental assessment. They can tell you it is not easy to do a good job of assessing the larger issues that are due to cumulative and indirect effects.

Despite the problems, tools are available, and agencies already have substantial resources invested in the assessment process. The trick is to make those existing resources, primarily experienced people, able to “work smarter,” not more, and produce a better document to aid decision making.

ISO 14000 is another tool being adopted, albeit slowly. It is perhaps further behind in producing analyses that can help spot cumulative and indirect effects. In part, this lag may stem from the fact that ISO 14000 is newer than NEPA and aimed more squarely at the private sector. Although well run private companies want to do the right thing in their communities and be in full compliance with the law, the unrelenting pressure to show a profit can provide powerful blinders to managers wary of subtracting from the bottom line. However, if ISO 14000 is instrumental in promoting an internally generated environmental ethos within each company that embraces it, then it will have made a substantial contribution.

We hope the various contributions on NEPA and ISO 14000 in this issue will forward the developments in this important realm of environmental practice. Perhaps NAEP’s recommendation that the NEPA and ISO 14000 processes be brought closer together will help ISO 14000 absorb the now larger experience with cumulative effects analysis located in NEPA practitioners.

Fully embracing and perfecting the methods for cumulative environmental assessment may be the primary key to improving environmental practice in the next decade. We welcome all contributions on this subject. In particular, we’d like to invite Professor Whitelegg to revisit his review of *Environmental Practice*, say after the completion of the third volume in 2001. We would enjoy hearing what he thinks of us then!

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