

## PERSPECTIVE

## Peer Pressure and Pure Power

Thomas R. Cuba

We all know what peer pressure is. It's the pressure on the unpopular high school kids to be like the popular ones. Does this end with graduation? Or does it just get more subtle? There are several ways that we have incorporated, and even institutionalized, peer pressure in our lives.

**Editors.** The editor, such as the editor for *Environmental Practice* reviewing this column, has a job to do. The editor must first decide if the ideas presented in the words submitted are worthy of printing. Second, the editor is to decide if the presentation is proper. The editor is to *suggest*, not *make* changes in word choices to the author. Most of the time this works well.

At some time in every editor's life there will be a submittal that presents ethical challenges. The idea submitted might be one to which the editor is philosophically opposed. The editor can turn the article down but will not be able to control publication elsewhere. In this case, the editor may be tempted to accept the article in order to retain control of its publication. Once accepted, the editor can use peer pressure to change it and perhaps weaken it. The editor may also print an "editor's response." Some may even go to a third party and solicit a second submittal to rebut the offending one. Not all these actions involve a breach of ethics. The latter may even represent an unethical situation if it were omitted as a step. It is also an interesting exercise to change the above scenario to one in which the editor strongly supports the concept presented and uses the peer pressure and power to assert the position instead of undermining it.

The yellow flag here is the same as in any ethical challenge. When the professional begins to feel a personal involvement in the issue at hand, it is time to assess the level of involvement and test it against the code of ethics.

With this as a backdrop, I want to explore other situations where the above relationship can lead to problems. The first is our time honored process of *Peer Review*. As you know, journals will take your scientific paper and send it to peers for review. The qualifications for peer are variable but all seem to revolve around being adequately credentialed and willing to do the review as a volunteer. Most of the time, an editor will try to send a submittal to a scientist who has already authored papers on the same subject. Therein arises the conflict.

Consider the situation where the new paper contradicts the papers of the established author. Even if that contradiction is superficial or is less of a contradiction than a redirection or expansion of thought, the established author is now challenged. The new publication of the new paper could be seen as a threat to the peer reviewer's reputation.

There are two challenges in this situation. One is in the reviewing author's position. The other has already been presented to the editor who sent it to the established scientist for review. Is there an ethical responsibility on the part of the editor to avoid this potential conflict through proper peer selection? Can the established author provide an unbiased review once he has become emotionally involved? We are taught that the stereotypical pure scientist is always open to new ideas and will be able to accept another's refinement of his work. That stereotype may not have either a job or an ego, and these lead to our challenges.

Consider the similar but less structured relationships in *Permit Review*. The applicant and the reviewing agent probably know each other. The reviewer may or may not be as qualified or experienced as the applicant. The reviewer may or may not be as educated or knowledgeable as is the applicant in the functions of the habitat being impacted. The reviewer also need not document the science behind the response, but may simply make a statement of a concern. These loose controls can result in situations where a reviewer may have a preference for one type of habitat over another. Consistent redirection of impacts from the favored to the less favored type can lead to an imbalance in resource protection. Threat-

ened habitats result, carrying concurrent threats to specialized flora, fauna, or functions.

In a best case scenario, the reviewer is supposed to test the submittal against the regulatory instrument and issue an approval or a denial based on uninvolved scientific analysis of impacts and compliance. In the worst case, an unethical reviewer can effectively destroy an application through nothing more than making unfounded or poorly founded generalized statements and requiring the applicant to refute them. When the money to pay for studies runs out, the application is withdrawn. Peer pressure has migrated toward pure power.

Whether in an academic or regulatory setting, whenever we find ourselves becoming personally involved while reviewing the work of others, it may be time to stand aside and avoid the conflict. Sometimes our jobs prohibit this option. It is for situations like these that we have our code of ethics in the first place. If we can prioritize our ethics over our egos, we will have achieved neutrality in our reviews.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## On the NAEP Code of Ethics

At the first session of the track at this year's Annual Conference, a paper prepared by a graduate class at Duke University proposed eliminating the opening paragraph of NAEP's Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for Environmental Professionals. The code is published in each issue of *Environmental Practice*. The class objected to this sentence: "Environmental Professionals should recognize such a standard, not in passive observance, but as a set of dynamic principles guiding their conduct and way of life." The basis for this objection was not entirely clear to this observer, but appeared

to be connected with application of this “standard” to “way of life.”

The following is quoted from an article by Linda Perlstein in the *Washington Post*:

To trust an institution, people must have faith that its members will be capable, consider their interests, share their values and act predictably. They must also be willing to give up some power to the institution. Today, though, citizens hold on to whatever power they can, and worry that the people who make up institutions are guided mostly by expediency and personal gain. Sociologist Max Weber talked about two kinds of trust—one based on the institutional role people inhabit and the other based on personal familiarity. The former is quickly vanishing; we are left with trust on a case-by-case basis. You deserve my confidence? Prove it.

Americans have been disappointed enough—think, for starters, Watergate, Vietnam, the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, the Rodney King videotape and the president who “did not have sexual relations with that woman.” “People are less inclined to take ‘trust us’ at face value,” says Temple University history professor William Cutler III. “They’re not as prepared as they once were to believe that expertise—whether law, education, medicine—comes packaged with the right values and ethical standards.”<sup>1</sup>

NAEP adopted a Code of Ethics at its beginning, because it was readily observable that there were many people in environmental work who were guided mostly by “expediency and personal gain.” The examples in the second paragraph quoted from Perlstein illustrate that trust can be degraded or lost by incidents in daily life that are not necessarily related to professional or job performance activities. Unethical actions by any member of an institution can reflect unfavorably upon all members.

We should not permit the opening statement in our Code to be degraded or eliminated.

## Note

1. L. Perlstein, 2001, “Suspicious Minds,” *The Washington Post*, July 22, p. 26.

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## A Reply to Norman Arnold’s Letter: On the NAEP Code of Ethics

Our proposed revisions to the NAEP Code (Macal et al., 2001) replace the original introductory paragraphs with a preamble that clarifies to whom the code applies and emphasizes the obligations of environmental professionals to environmental protection. Otherwise, the new preamble restates slightly the original purpose of the code and, as Mr. Arnold points out in his letter, omits a sentence that refers to the personal, as well as professional, lives and activities of environmental professionals. We considered it inappropriate for an ethical code promulgated by a professional society to attempt to regulate the behavior of its members in their personal lives. We certainly hope that NAEP members conduct themselves ethically in their personal lives, and we hope all citizens, environmental professionals or not, do too, but a professional code doesn’t seem like the right place to express this wish.

That said, we agree with Mr. Arnold that knowledge of unethical personal behavior by an environmental professional could diminish our confidence in that person’s professional integrity. However, we hope to resist the temptation to extrapolate from one person’s personal failings to an entire profession. We note that the thrust of the second paragraph quoted by Mr. Arnold is somewhat ambiguous since it appears to include both instances of trust (or lack of trust) derived from institutional roles and instances of trust (or lack thereof) derived from personal behavior.

We’re very glad that our proposed revisions have stimulated discussion of the NAEP Code among its membership, which was exactly what we hoped to accomplish.

## Reference

- Macal, J. M., L. A. Maguire, G. S. Moretti, J. M. Potter, P. Tomasi, and N. Tsurumi. 2001. The NAEP Code of Ethics—Some Proposals for Revision. *Environmental Practice* 3(1):4–6.

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and Naomi Tsurumi  
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## Response to Editorial: “America’s Terrible Mistake”

Thanks for your thoughts expressed in the Editorial of the recent issue of *Environmental Practice*. In light of September 11th’s events, it brings home even more to me that once we began tapping the “liquid black stuff” from beneath the earth’s surface, we unwittingly made a compact with hell in building our society.

Why are 6000+ people dead who were vibrantly alive on September 10th? Because there are terrorists, Middle Eastern and otherwise, who don’t care if they personally live or die and who have taken a twisted extremist approach to justifying any means to their ends. What is a major reason (I know not the only one) Middle Eastern terrorist organizations target the US? Because *some* portions of fundamentalist Islamic society see us as exploiters and desecrators of Islamic-based culture and as exporters of a culture they find repugnant.

And how/why are we so heavily involved as a country in the Middle East that we trigger these reactions? Largely because that’s where there is a lot of “black stuff” that allows us to keep “filling up the tank.” Unfortunately, I (a supposed “environmentalist”) am as guilty as the driver next to me in stalled traffic for continuing this oil addiction. We, as a society, and as individuals (especially as environmental professionals) need to reflect on our roles in helping to create such a dangerous world through our continuing petroleum addiction.

There is no justification for any act of terrorism, let alone the horrific acts committed September 11th. Justice must be and, I pray, will be served. There is also no justification for continuing our current domestic and foreign policies that foster so much dependence on oil from any source and the resulting ramifications—politically, militarily, and environmentally. Let’s get serious about tapping the sustainable resources of this magnificent country called the USA—the abundant sunshine that falls across the land, the wind that blows through the mountains and across the plains, the warmth beneath the soil, the

power of rivers and ocean currents, and most of all, the genius of our people.

The President indicates that “we will show them.” Let’s hope that some of “what we show them” is that we can begin to break our society’s deadly compact with petroleum fuels. As a Christian, I so often think of how some of the last words of Jesus on the cross echo across the ages not just about His crucifixion but also about much of all human life in the postmodern world. “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.”

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## A Response to the Current Editorial

As I sit on the train going from Sacramento to San Jose I am moved to respond to the draft editorial which you gave me the opportunity to read before it was to appear in print. While I certainly agree with your four points, I would like to comment on some of the specifics and add one idea that I believe is central to your four suggestions.

*First: regarding waste management experience:* Yes, some members of our profession are imminently qualified in waste management! NAEP should assemble a body of its experienced members and offer to provide technical assistance and oversight as advisors for debris management. After the initial clean-up there will be continuing need for technical experience.

*Second: regarding building design:* The “9–11” destruction provides a unique opportunity—albeit grossly unfortunate—to design and build green buildings. The opportunity exists to rethink the building envelopes, as well as the contents, so that not just the “period of service” is considered, but the full life cycle. As the first Chief of the Conservation Division of the California Energy Commission, it gave me an opportunity to consider the conservation aspects of architecture and engineering,

from siting to building removal and materials reuse. Our society has often been accused of “planned obsolescence;” now is the time to consider “planned reuse.”

*Third: regarding information sharing:* Your letter reminds me of an assignment to work with the Dutch State Mines for the expansion of a chemical manufacturing facility. The citizens of Limburg were more than anxious to get all the information they could about the potential effluents that might be expected from the proposed plant. The company was equally concerned that they did not want to divulge the information because they felt that their competitors would know what they were planning to produce. It seemed to be a stalemate. However a compromise was suggested and adopted (and, by the way, it worked). Both parties agreed that a “third party,” expert group, was to review the plans and provide the community with the evaluation of the potential effects while still protecting the industrial security. We, NAEP, might offer to establish and support a neutral body to provide the same service for the issue you raise. It might be wisest to compose the body of senior members who have experience, no axe to grind, and do not fear for their jobs.

*Fourth: regarding academic training:* We need professional educators with real experience. I found, and still see, too many professors who do not have practical government or business experience. That experience is needed in their backgrounds to give students a balanced perspective based on applied experience, not just from the written word. In the academic sector of our profession it is important—and will become increasingly more important—that our students learn from people who have both book- and applied-learning. Fifty years ago, when sitting at a drafting table in my senior year in college, a partner asked: “What the hell do we do with our degree?” It’s been quite some time since and I am still finding new and refreshing answers!

Referring to your “black goo”: it has been exciting (and a hands-on learning experience) to coordinate the writing of a successful proposal to manage the Alaskan Pipeline, to provide technical environmental management for a successful program

to redesign and engineer a major refinery to produce reformulated fuels, and to assist in the siting of petro-chemical processing facilities in Sweden. None of these assignments were based on book learning.

I agree with you: we don’t need to “turn out environmental professionals who don’t quite understand the whole picture.” We also don’t need to have professors who don’t understand the whole picture. We need balanced faculties who bring both the best academic information and the best of applied experience. Now might be just the time to see more of our academic community build, retain, and offer such faculties.

*Finally, I would like to add a fifth point:* We need to broaden, to internationalize, the experience of our profession and our professionals. It is high time that we listen to and learn from members of our professional community who can break us out of our all-too-often-insular perspectives of what the world needs. Our meetings, our publications, our academic environments must be reshaped to give all of us, our nationals as well as fellow internationals, opportunities to learn from each other. It is high time for us to consider meetings in other countries, to seek and publish more articles and environmental news from other countries, and to invite visiting faculty who can bring both academic and applied experience to teach at our institutions. Only then can we really move from our insular perspective to a worldview.

I agree with you that we must do everything we can to honor and memorialize those “who so tragically and unnecessarily perished on that dreadful day”! Let us work together as environmental professionals, as human beings, to respond appropriately and to find solutions to the root causes.

Thank you for your insightful editorial.

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