

Who's Protecting Whom?—Resolving Environmental Conflicts with Common Ethical Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

An expanding constellation of professions serves society's need to protect people from exposure to harmful toxins in the environment. The traditional triumvirate of regulators, environmental consultants, and site owners has been joined by two new axes of influence—lawyers and environmental activists—both now participating routinely with pivotal roles. The range of practice areas has become broader. The standard slate of technical experts now includes not only hydrogeologists and engineers, but toxicologists, microbiologists, and other disciplines. No longer are lawyers retained by site owners, insurers, or public interest groups only to advise in negotiations; today they increasingly act as project managers, driving the technical decision trees formerly controlled by environmental consultants. Environmental activist leaders increasingly influence environmental legislation. All of these professionals make decisions with underlying ethical implications where self-interest or publicity overshadows scientific impartiality. Ethical concerns among engineers and geoscientists focus on the conscientious application of current tools to identify contamination and implement measures to mitigate its effects. Regulators and lawyers are concerned with the fair and correct implementation of laws and regulations in the interest of their constituencies and clients. These professionals are called upon to make decisions that require adjudicating between conflicting values and interests. Technical or legal analysis can mislead professionals into believing their work is not burdened by value judgments, yet they are often caught between the demands of competing interests. A common moral perspective would help resolve controversy by providing an ethical framework, with clear goals for the ethical practice in the participating disciplines.