WATER-CULTURE INSTITUTE

Handbook for

Crafting a Local Water Ethics Charter[1]

This Handbook provides a theoretical background to water ethics (Part 1), and then in Part 2 guides you through a participatory stakeholder process for establishing a "water ethics charter" for your watershed, river basin, city, business, or other organizational entity. By identifying and articulating the values you wish to advance through the way you manage water and water ecosystems, the decisions you make are more likely to be consistent with your values.

Introduction

Calls for more sustainable water management are familiar to all of us, and there are a great many good ideas for improvements, ranging from technical innovations to tax policies to more effective institutions and governance. This handbook is not about any one particular technology or institutions. Those specifics will still be important, but first and foremost, there needs to be some systematic process for deciding which potential improvements would be most useful, but even before that we need to know what our objectives are, and which ones are most important and which are less.

The premise of the Water Ethics approach is that some things are more useful ("good") and some things are less useful ("bad"). The concept of ethics is not only about morality; it's also about utility. In fact, the two concepts are connected because if it's useful but violates your sense (or someone else's) of what's right, then it's not actually as useful as it first appears.

The California drought provides a perfect object lesson on this point. Both urban residents and farms are cutting water use by 25% to protect supplies, and they are finding that it's not really so difficult. Neither quality of life nor the agricultural economy is being very much affected, though it has required many adjustments such as different (low water using) crops and landscaping. What's the ethical lesson here? California dammed and diverted most of its rivers (not to mention the rivers of others, e.g., the Colorado!) on the pretext that nature's health was less important than man's convenience.

The relative ease with which California has accommodated the drought reveals the lie of past water policies. There was always enough water for Nature. The justification given at the time, that rivers needed to be sacrificed (think Owens River and LA or Hetch-Hechy and San

---

[1] This Handbook was written by David Groenfeldt, Water-Culture Institute (www.waterculture.org), September 2015.

Francisco) was bogus and, in our 20-20 hindsight, unethical. It was easier to sacrifice rivers than to design water strategies that could meet the needs of nature as well as people. Clarifying the values we wish to live by is best done early in the decision-making process: "Look before you leap!" Imagine if California had staked out river health as a central objective of water policy fifty years ago. The implications of a "rivers first" policy would include managing groundwater to minimize adverse effects on river flow. With healthy groundwater aquifers, water users would be well positioned to buffer the current drought through managed withdrawals, incurring short-term deficits to be repaid when the drought subsides. The ethic of keeping rivers healthy would help keep California's economy healthy as well.

But commonly held water ethics don't happen spontaneously; they need to be deliberately discussed, debated, and documented before there is a crisis. The ethics we are talking about is less like religion and more like an insurance policy. We want to protect those assets that are most valuable. But first we need to identify what our assets are, and which ones have the greatest value/priority. The process for doing this needs to involve all the stakeholders; it is not a technical planning exercise. It is inherently political, and the central ethical principle of our political system is democracy.

The problem which this handbook addresses is how to design a democratic process for water stakeholders to identify their priority values about using water and managing water ecosystems, reach consensus about the value principles, and put those principles into a written document, a Water Ethics Charter. The Charter can then become a reference guide for approaching particular decisions about new investments, programs, policies, technologies, etc. Does the proposed course of action advance the ethical principles laid out in our Charter? Is there another option which might be more effective in supporting some or all of the principles? By basing decisions about alternatives on the principles which the community of stakeholders has already endorsed, we are more likely to end up with water management strategies which are both ethical and useful.

Part 1: Theory

From the Ten Commandments and Buddhism's Four Noble Truths to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, human societies have recognized the utility of giving public expression to core principles. The theoretical framework for a Water Ethics Charter (WEC) approach draws upon both the fields of ethics (particularly environmental ethics and human rights ethics??), management (decision-making), and political science (governance). But while the intellectual pedigree of the WEC approach might appear complicated, there is a very basic and intuitive underlying logic: First, determine what's good and important (ethics), and second, write it into a charter as a public reminder.

In the academic tradition, "ethics" is a sub-field of Philosophy, with an illustrious history going back to Aristotle. Environmental ethics is a much more recent sub-field, which can be

traced to the writings of Aldo Leopold, and particularly his essay, The Land Ethic, published in 1949. Leopold showed how ethics, which had always been about people, could (and in his words, "must") be expanded to include our responsibilities to the natural world. Once Leopold had enlarged the frame, there were plenty of philosophers happy to jump in and fill in the details. But it was not until the environmental movement of the 1970s, inspired by the writings of Rachel Carson and others, that the field of environmental ethics emerged as a clearly distinct set of issues.

The concept of water ethics as a distinct type of environmental ethics is even younger, taking shape only in the 1990s with Sandra Postel's essay, "The Missing Piece: A Water Ethic" which comprised the final chapter of her book, Last Oasis (1993). UNESCO defined the new topic through a program from 1997-2004 on "Water and Ethics" which commissioned a series of 11 reports focusing on, for example, gender, environment, health, institutions, agriculture, etc. After the program closed, the Botin Foundation in Spain continued work on the theme of water ethics, publishing a book (Water Ethics, 2007) and a special issue of the journal, Water Policy (2012).[2]

In the past several years, there has been an upsurge of publications, including books, articles and social media posts, as well as the Water Ethics Network (waterethics.org), launched by Water-Culture Institute in 2011. Among the most important recent books are the following:

- *Water Ethics: Foundational readings for students and professionals*, by Peter Brown and Jeremy Schmidt (2010);[3]
- *Water Ethics and Water Resource Management*, by Jie Liu et al (2011), a UNESCO report;[4]
- *Water Ethics: A Values Approach to Solving the Water Crisis*, by David Groenfeldt (2013)[5]

Parallel to the development of water ethics as a body of theory and potential application, there have been advances in the role of values in decision making. Surprisingly, the bulk of this work has been by engineers, rather than social scientists. Ralph Keeney, an MIT engineer, wrote the 1992 book, *Value-based Thinking: A path to creative decisionmaking*, and a 1996 article summarizing this approach.[6] Since then, "values based decision making" has become popular in both industry and academia, but so far, not among water managers.[7]

---

[2] All the publications mentioned here, as well as additional sources on the topic of water ethics, can be downloaded from the Water Ethics Network website: http://waterethics.org/resources-2/publications/

[3] https://www.islandpress.org/book/water-ethics

[4] This report can be downloaded from UNESCO-Bangkok: http://www.unescobkk.org/rushsap/ethics-and-climate-change/energyethics/eetwg14/

[5] http://www.taylorandfrancis.com/books/details/9780415626453/

[6] http://www.fcmfmpep.org.br/disciplinas/turma1/MB-726/IMP%20value%20focused%20thinking%201996.pdf

[7] for an overview of the approach, see this article from MIT Sloan Management Review, 2008: http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-make-values-count-in-everyday-decisions/

A key feature of values-based decisions is the notion that the values we hold dear are not necessarily obvious even to ourselves. The first step in working with values is to discover what our values are and making them explicit. The business literature puts serious emphasis on this step, because each individual or company has to identify their particular values and decide which ones are core/fundamental values and which ones are less important. In the case of a company, or any collective organization (the analogy with water would be the water stakeholders) the group needs to arrive at a workable consensus about the values which the whole group can endorse.

In the business literature, the emphasis is on harmonizing everyone's values into a common "corporate culture" that everyone understands. The values are then written down in the form of a "Code of Ethics" which reminds the employees about their responsibility to act according to those values. This formula of identifying the values, hashing out a workable consensus among the group, and then recording those values into an ethical code, is common to both companies and to entire professions (e.g., the Hippocratic Oath of the medical profession).

Within the water sector, codes of ethics have already become an important tool for promoting "integrity", a term defined by the Water Integrity Network (an offshoot of Transparency International) as having four dimensions: transparency, accountability, participation, and "integrity" (i.e., non-corruption).[8] Within the discipline of geology, including hydrology, there is a new initiative by the International Association for Promoting Geoethics to develop a professional ethical code.[9]

What has been missing from the water sector, so far, is a sense of water decisions (e.g., about whether to build a dam, or what rate-structure to introduce to promote water conservation, etc.) as inherently reflecting values and ethics. Without deliberate attention given to the tacit values influencing water decisions, we will be making decisions about water blindly, lacking a clear understanding of what we are doing or why we are doing it. Exposing the underlying values and holding them up to the light of day is the first step to improved decision-making.

But there is another reason for identifying the values, which is alluded to in the title of Keeney's book cited above: creativity. Once the values are known, rendered explicit, and subjected to open discussion and debate, those values function as design parameters for solution-making. There is a certain magic that happens when conflicting stakeholders use the language of values. They discover a shared concern for future generations and for the health of the rivers, lakes, aquifers, and wetlands that our descendants will also want to enjoy. They will not necessarily agree on the specifics of what water policies to adopt, but they can often agree on the desired long-term outcomes and then try to work backwards towards agreement.

---

8 http://www.waterintegritynetwork.net/code-of-conduct/individuals/

9 www.iapg.**geoethics**.org/

Part 2: Process

Practical application of water ethics can be at global or local levels. At the global level, a universal "Water Ethics Charter" is being developed which will serve as a prescriptive reference guide for ethical water policies and practices. Water-Culture Institute, UNESCO, and other international organizations and experts are drafting a set of ethical principles around five sub-themes: (1) environment and rights of nature; (2) Economy and the efficient use of natural resources; (3) society and issues of justice, equity and opportunity; (4) cultural rights and spirituality, and (5) transparent and just governance. The Water Ethics Charter is currently in Version 2.0 after an 18-month process, and we anticipate two more versions over the coming two years before it becomes finalized. The current version will be posted on waterethics.org and comments are welcome.

At the local level, a "Water Ethics Charter Process" can be applied to a river, watershed, city, or any organizational entity (e.g., a business). This is the topic of this Handbook. Through a series of facilitated workshops, discussed in the following section, local stakeholders can create their own Water Ethics Charter using the universal Charter document as a starting point. The aim is a "deliberated" set of value principles which local stakeholders wish to advance through their management of local water resources. The term, "deliberated" implies that the values proposed by all the stakeholders are not simply incorporated into the Charter document, but are discussed, debated, and subjected to ethical assessment by all the stakeholders together.

Action Steps for a Local Water Ethics Charter

The main activity involved in crafting a water ethics charter for a river, watershed, or city, is a series of facilitated stakeholder workshops where the local people do the hard work of figuring out what value principles they wish to advance in their management of local water resources. But just as a manufacturing facility requires both infrastructure and skilled workers, as well as a good design plan, the success of the stakeholder workshops depends on preparatory as well as follow-up activities, which are detailed below. The actual workshops comprise Step #5.

Step #1. Fundraising. The necessary task of raising funds can yield several co-benefits in addition to money. It provides a context for building strong partnerships among the lead organizations, and helps the partners clarify to themselves, to prospective donors, and to the local community exactly what the project is about. Fundraising can also be combined with outreach and awareness-raising (Step #2) through crowd-sourcing on social media, e.g., a Kickstarter or IndieGoGo campaign. The promotional video needed for the funding campaigns is a basic outreach tool that can be used in many contexts.

Step #2. Outreach and Awareness-raising. Before, during, and after the process of crafting a water ethics charter, there is a need for outreach and awareness-raising about the why, how, and who of the process. Public awareness and outreach activities ranging from social media, local talks and radio interviews, newspaper articles and op-eds, etc. to outdoor activities such as hiking or bicycling tours of local water sources. Specific outreach activities can include:

- 2-page flyer about the Water Ethics Charter concept, with the Global Charter text (summary) on one side and on the other side brief explanations of why its' important and how it can be applied locally.
- Dedicated webpage for each local initiative on the Water Ethics Network website (waterethics.org). This provides a bulletin board for the local initiative, and showcases the larger movement of which each local initiative is a part;
- Dedicated Facebook group for each local initiative, e.g. SAFE-Water (Santa Fe Ethic for Water).
- WordPress blog, linked to the Facebook group, for running commentary on relevant local issues.
- Email list for the local initiative
- Web networking: Ask all partners and allies in the local initiative to link to the webpage, blog, and Facebook group
- Other social media sites (e.g., Youtube channel? Twitter? etc).

Step #3. Supporting Events. River festivals and activities where local residents can experience their water sources directly and in new ways, can perhaps facilitate the expression of latent ethical impulses. In Europe an annual "Big Jump" event in mid-July invites everyone to jump into their local stream or lake, with associated festivities and media coverage. This event can be adapted to any location, even where the local river (as in Santa Fe) is too small for swimming. Other types of events might include guided tours of local water infrastructure (e.g., well fields, diversion structures, water and wastewater treatment plants), kayak tours in, or guided hikes along, the river, or guided "river overlook" tours by car or bicycle, to forge a big-picture understanding of the watershed.

Ste*p #4. Building Networks and Alliances*. Explaining the concept of water ethics, and the role of a Water Ethics Charter, is a potentially very time-consuming task that needs to be addressed strategically: Who is most important to reach and what approach can best reach them? Meeting with water-related agencies (city and state) and organizations (environmental groups, well owner associations) and water-dependent businesses (e.g., hotels) and farmers/ranchers is an obvious priority. But since water affects the whole economy, everyone is a water stakeholder. The networking strategy should identify potential key allies and target them especially. City officials, church groups, youth organizations, Chamber of Commerce, and neighborhood associations are all potentially important.

Step #5. Gather Information from Stakeholders through Interviews and focus groups. Whereas Step 4 is about educating (briefing stakeholders and allies what you're doing and why), Step 5 is about learning: Asking the stakeholders about their water values and sense of ethics. Often the two steps can be combined, e.g., talking to a group about the concept of a water ethics charter, and then asking them about their water values, but information gathering

is so important for designing the workshops (Step 6) that it warrants a dedicated strategy, and if necessary, distinct activities. Particularly for ethnic minorities, women, and the Pueblos who are not well represented in urban-based organizations, a concerted effort needs to be made to understand their ideas about water through special meetings (focus groups) and individual interviews.

Step #6. Workshops to identify values and start writing the charter. The heart of the Water Ethics Charter process is a series of three half-day or all-day facilitated workshops. Participants from all key stakeholder groups should be represented. [And if they are not, their views will need to be incorporated through proxy representatives.]. The series of workshops might be structured this way:

- One or two workshops to identify the main important values about water from the perspective of each stakeholder group. This exercise will be applied to five value categories: environmental, economic, social, cultural, and governance values. Through a facilitation process, participants will prioritize their values and work to find consensus on what the values are. Next the participants will evaluate the values from an ethics perspective (Are they the right values?) and then see if some can be conbined, or if any new ones need to be added.
- From these workshops, a small task team of volunteers will be formed to translate the group discussions into a written draft of a charter, in several rounds of drafts, if necessary until consensus is reached. Drafts would be circulated by email to all workshop participants, for their comments or revisions.

Step #7. Deciding how to use the Charter, and monitor compliance. Once the Charter is drafted and endorsed by the key stakeholders (who were involved in developing it), then what? As a statement of ethics, the Charter will have no legal status. Its effectiveness rests on moral persuasion, delivered through peer pressure. The Charter will need to be well publicized, and should appear in the websites of all the partnering and allied organizations involved in its development. The social media sites set up to promote the Charter will continue to play an important role in monitoring compliance, and reporting on ethical issues that will certainly arise. One useful approach is to initiate an annual "State of the Watershed" symposium where the community can join together to reflect on whether the Water Ethics Charter is being followed, and to make adjustments, either in their behavior or to the Charter.