

Christian Gamborg | University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Doing the Right Thing? Using Ethics to Deal with Dilemmas of Forestry

The agenda in forestry is expanding, as we want to do more things at the same time. Society is becoming more pluralistic, with more parties having a say. This leads to a situation where aims and functions are potentially conflicting, leading to dilemmas. Whatever solution we choose, we will do something which appears to be bad and prevent something which appears to be good or useful. How should we deal with these dilemmas and complex trade-offs? One way is to use ethics.

Foresters, by applying an increasing pool of scientific knowledge, have had considerable success in creating forested commons providing goods and services – renewable timber resources, unique reservoirs of plant and animal species, as well as maintaining important cultural values and much sought after places for recreation. However, to an increasing extent, today's question is not only about what is possible to do, but also about what is acceptable to do. Practices or objectives considered rational and valuable 50 or even 25 years ago, such as large clear cuts or spraying with chemicals, are no longer necessarily seen as prudent or acceptable today.

Forests and forestry have become under increasing public interest – and scrutiny. Critics have expressed concern about a number of issues, such as exploitation of private and public forests for timber

production at the expense of other uses and values, global deforestation and land conversion, and loss of habitats as well as wild animal and plant biodiversity. A way to address these and other emerging issues is to use ethics. 'Ethics', as the term is understood here, has as its main function to reflect and clarify, but not to 'moralise'.

Forty years ago, applied ethics was not considered a proper field in its own right. Philosophers were preoccupied with the refinement of ethical theories and with defining moral terms properly. In the meantime, however, much more specific, practical issues have been addressed. These include social implications of new technology and our relation with the natural environment. Ethics in forestry are part of applied ethics, thus dealing with any forest issue relating to what is considered good, right or fair.

Two sides to every coin

Take the use of genetically modified (GM) plants, a topic of discussion also within EFI. Are GM trees 'important tools' or 'Franken-trees'? Whether or not they will be commercially used depends on more than an environmental risk assessment and economic benefit analysis. It also depends on public acceptance, which – in its turn – concerns the way forests are embedded in our culture. Another example is hunting, closely associated with forests and often part of a traditional land use, as described by Sigrid Schwenk on page 6. In many countries hunting has become a much sought after pastime for which an increasing number of people are willing to pay a small fortune. However, a much larger (often urbanised) part of the population questions this type of leisure activity in relation to animal welfare concerns.

In general, we have witnessed a pronounced shift, especially in Europe and North America. This has led us away from mere resource conservation, stressing utilitarian economic aspects of forests, to more nature preservation and to reserving forests for their scenic, recreational and cultural benefits. To understand these shifts and to be able to enter into a dialogue, ethical skills are important for natural resource managers, who have the responsibility for the long-term care of the land, to the growing number of forest stakeholders, such as industry, scientists, environmentalists and consumers and citizen groups – all of whom are interested in doing the 'right' thing.

