

Environmental Ethics, Public Interest  
and Communication

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As we are faced with Love Canals, Three Mile Islands and James Watt, our awareness of environmental concerns is forced to increase. Though there does seem to be a trend of heightened environmental awareness, the attitudes towards the environment have a considerable range. This range in attitudes can lead to conflicts in setting policies to manage the environment. What we sorely need is to examine these attitudes and search for justification in advocating one over another. In the first chapter, I will look at different attitudes towards man and nature and choose the one that best upholds principles of equality, liberty and species survival. Consideration of the conflict between individual liberty and societal well-being is important here, as is a conception of the public interest when discussing a public and shared good like the environment. The development of this environmental ethic can also find rationale from classic and modern ethicists, and I will turn to them for further discussions of public goods and just societies.

In the second chapter, I will explore the implications of this environmental ethic and notion of public good for policy formulation, focusing on the policies of public interest groups. Policy formation is the stage where consideration of the ethic and of the public is most imperative. Any advocacy group must demonstrate this consideration to be justified in calling themselves a public interest group.

At this point, I will introduce three public interest groups to serve as case study examples. Rhode Island Lung Association, Audobon Society and Save The Bay are three of the most active agencies in Rhode Island and provide useful insights. Their environmental ethic and notion of the public will be examined, as well as how that translates into policy.

The third chapter will discuss communication, a vital part of any agency policy. Effective two-way communication is the only way in which a group can spread the environmental ethic as well as interact with the public. An understanding of rhetorical principles aids in making communication more potentially effective. The relationship between communication policies and public interest groups will be discussed and this will then be applied to the case study groups in an analysis of their communications policies and practices.

It is hoped that this paper will demonstrate the need to justify policies by forming an ethical base. In dealing with a public good, the public must be considered, and communication is necessary to include the public as well as promote the environmental ethic. This is the only way we can hope to prevent more Love Canals, Three Mile Islands and James Watts.