

# **A Teacher's Guide to Ethics in Environmental Health**

## **What is ethics?**

Ethics is the study of the reasons why actions are good or bad, or right or wrong. It is the examination of the logic and reasoning behind beliefs and practices.

## **What is environmental health ethics?**

Environmental ethics applies ethical reasoning to environmental health concerns – the basis of decisions regarding environmental health issues and development, preservation, habitat restoration, and public health. It includes issues of environmental responsibility and awareness in regards to decision making.

## **What is environmental justice?**

Environmental justice examines the fairness in issues concerning the environment and the impact of decisions on health, habitat, and development. Environmental justice strives to eliminate favoritism and bias toward financial or corporate gain or toward short sited planning.

## **Why teach it?**

Environmental concerns will always be a controversial aspect of society. Educators have a responsibility to provide information about human health concerns, habitat relationships, development, earth resources, etc and their relationship to political and personal decision-making and laws. Generally, educators promote the ethics and values that have general societal consensus, but students will enter the process with their own judgments and ideas regarding environment. Environmental health ethics education involves the teaching of cause and effect in a far-reaching scope. Understanding environmental issues means understanding the long-term effects of decision-making. The ethics component involves examination of current beliefs, changing beliefs and their effect on environmental health values.

## **How is ethics taught?**

Philosophers have thought for years about the best ways to teach ethics. One of the most interesting and engaging ways to teach environmental ethics is to use real-life case studies to show how actual, practical consequences follow from the decisions we make in trying to balance values. Students are able to wrestle with the key concepts in real life practical situations so they are engaged with wanting to know more.

## **How are ethical decisions made?**

Very broadly speaking, there are two best-known ways to do “applied ethics.” One is to evaluate the consequences of decisions and see which actions will do the most good for the most people. This approach, called “utilitarianism” after the “principle of utility” developed by the philosophers John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, defines goodness or rightness itself as “the great good [or happiness] for the most people.” Of course, this approach requires that we be able to say what the consequences of various are or will be – and this can be very hard to do! Another approach requires not that we analyze consequences or outcomes but that we consider whether by our actions we are treating other people with respect and whether we could imagine everyone acting in accord with the course we have chosen to follow. This approach makes actions into duties independently of their consequences; it is therefore called “deontology,” from the Greek word meaning “duty.” It is a system of morality we associate with the philosopher Emanuel Kant. Other philosophers have tried to combine the best aspects of utilitarianism and deontology.

## What process is used for ethical reasoning?

<i>Veracity</i>	<i>What do you know about this situation? What do you believe to be true? Why do you believe it and not something else?</i>
<i>Transparency</i>	<i>What don't you know? What hasn't been asked? Is this the whole truth? What questions have not been answered?</i>
<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Who is responsible? For what? What could be done? What are the possible (not necessarily desirable) alternatives?</i>
<i>Justice</i>	<i>What should be done? By whom? Why is this the best ethical decision?</i>

## What are some key concepts in environmental health?

**Acceptable compromise:** The situations that give rise to environmental health issues are often complex and involve competing interests. An acceptable solution for one group of stakeholders does not meet the needs of another group or the best solution is not scientifically, economically, or physically viable. Between these “endpoints” is a compromise that meets some of the needs of some of the groups. It is almost an oxymoron to talk about a compromise as acceptable since in backs off from what has been determined to be ethically acceptable in the situation.

**Sustainable development:** Sustainable development is a compromise between the demands of economic development for the present and near future and the demands of sustaining the resources necessary to ensure future viability.

**Environmental justice:** EPA defines Environmental Justice (EJ) as the "fair treatment for people of all races, cultures, and incomes, regarding the development of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."

**Risk communication:** Environmental health concerns must be communicated to the public. Health risk communications reach the public through the mass media in advertisements, news programs, newspapers, and magazines. The medical community, the CDC, and the EPA are also responsible for communicating health risks as they become known. The ethical concerns of risk communication involve the complexity of severity assessments, public response, balancing informing the public and public panic.

**Cost/benefit analysis:** Cost/benefit analysis is a decision making tool for evaluating the effects of a decision over time. The value in the present is weighed against the environmental health cost to the future.

## Are ethics different for different people and different cultures?

Ethical relativism is the idea that ethics are specific to particular cultures. Not all philosophers believe in ethical relativism, thinking instead that ethics involve universal concepts and fundamental moral practices. Supporters of ethical relativism note that some cultures have practices that would be considered immoral or inconceivable by other cultures. These practices would include polygamy, sexism, female circumcision, genocide, and nudity. Most philosophers do believe that ethics are case and situation sensitive, in other words, ethics are applied relative to the people, culture, and morals involved. In environmental health issues, different ethics may apply to communities in which the most basic survival is dependent upon actions which deplete or damage natural resources and affect health, as opposed to communities where damaging resources is only for financial gain and not survival.

