



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

ENVIRONMENT POLICY EDUCATION

*Emery N. Castle, Head
Department of Agricultural Economics
Oregon State University*

The following four propositions are presented in the hope they will help provide focus to the discussion.

1. *There exist some general principles in a variety of disciplines that help us in our approach to problems.* The disciplines that are the most useful are biology, applied physical science (engineering), political science, economics, architecture, and geography. There are obviously others of value, but ready application can be found for the above. Interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary considerations are not new to this group. However, the particular combination of disciplines most useful in environment policy education is somewhat different than it is for most facets of agricultural policy. It becomes important to know something of the principal theoretical constructs of each field since these constructs frequently carry normative significance, both to specialists in the field and to lay people who may partially adopt and use the theory of a particular field without even being aware they are doing so. For example, the policy position of many conservation groups may be traced to certain ecological concepts advanced by biologists.

2. *The "best" social policy for a particular problem will usually emerge only after study of the facts pertaining to that situation.* In other words, it is difficult to determine a general policy and expect the actual decision to be the same in all cases. The reason is that our choices usually involve continuous rather than discrete variables. We cannot choose between complete degradation and pristine purity of our environment. Rather, we must decide on that level of quality which makes the most sense in a particular situation. The plea here is for considerable pragmatism. People tend to approach policy problems in this area with preconceived positions. The challenge of the educator is to search for openness and fluidity so that people can examine goals and ends somewhat rationally.

3. *Considerable information is available relevant to decisions about environmental choices. However, the information is fragmented and incomplete.* Biologists and engineers have been in the forefront of work on environmental quality. As a consequence, considerable information is available in those fields. It is not surprising that it is seldom in a form best suited for group decision making.

There is little in the theoretical constructs of biology or engineering that relates directly to group decision making. Although the constructs of economics are not without limitation, economics does provide a theory of choice which can contribute to social decision making.

4. *Emphasis needs to be placed on techniques for group decision making, relative to searching for general quantitative information.* I have great faith in the combined judgment of individuals who are actively searching for a solution to a social problem. They have the ability to judge the relevance of information, to assess problems of uncertainty, and to make decisions. The important consideration here is that all those affected by a decision should participate in some fashion in its making. The main reason decisions should not be left to the market is the existence of external economies and diseconomies. If issues are decided by the market, people will be affected by decisions in which they have had no part.

In developing group arrangements for deciding questions of environmental quality, we should avoid the errors which occur with an unregulated market. We are only beginning to do the necessary theoretical work on institutional design which will be most useful in this field. We recognize the inadequacies of local, state, and federal levels in problems of environmental management. We also recognize the inadequacies of single resource oriented units. Yet we know little about the design and adoption of new and superior institutions except as they arise in response to particular problem situations. The result is that decision making is highly fragmented, and many externalities result from decisions of these special groups. However, these externalities can be avoided only at unduly high costs of coordination.

It may well be that a public educator could do some highly original work in this connection. If he would use the tools of social analysis to identify his clientele, the process would be the same as for problems of institutional design. If this is done, the relevant clientele obviously will be quite different from that for traditional agricultural policy problems.