Hello everybody my name is Shane Wise. Welcome to this presentation on the assertion that the environmental manager’s role is to protect the health of ecosystems above all else. I will discuss other aspects of environmental management that are essential to success in this field. Failure to account for these will undermine any attempts at ecological protection.

The environmental manager is most often the person who makes decisions or provides specialist input into decision making processes involving the environment. He or she could be a public servant, a lawyer, a scientist, an engineer or from any profession involved in this process.

The environment is a broad concept, and while the health of ecosystems is integral, in Australia the definition of environment is informed by the anthropocentric approach. This sees the environment as being for the utility of humans. This is, therefore, an important factor when considering the health of ecosystems.

However, we must combine this view of the environment through sustainable development. Sustainable development will seek to meet the needs of the environment, societies and economics. Competing interests may be found when meeting these needs, for example, of the natural environment and the needs of particular societies.

All this equates for a complex and dynamic role for the environmental manager who must seek to protect the health of ecosystems, while also balancing other competing interests. For example, intergenerational equity can mean balancing competing needs between the current generation and future generations.

Environmental managers are engaged in the private and public sector, and regularly deal with political and lobby groups. They deal with resource-rich and resource poor stakeholders, whose interests may be in direct conflict with one another. Environmental managers will sometimes be a lobbyist, but will sometimes be the one who is lobbied.
All these factors mean that ethics, which I discuss later, is a central question for an environmental manager. Environmental managers must also often be an agent for change in that they need to influence other professionals such as accountants and public speakers to consider the full environmental economic costs.

The complex role of an environmental manager is clearly shown in this week’s case study of Gunn’s Pulp mill. It is also an example of a “wicked problem” because there are valid points on both sides. On one side, the community needs employment opportunities. While on the other side, the environment needs to be protected to ensure health to communities and the ecosystems.

At first glance, the development proposal in the Gunns Pulp Mill appeared to be a simple case of technology and pollution. However, conflicting perspectives on economic and social costs and benefits quickly emerged. Political interference, accountability issues, corporate influence and credibility/ethical issues also became problematic.

The Gunns Pulp mill was to be built in the Tamar Valley, Tasmania. It was to include the mill, landfill, water supply pipeline and outgoing pipeline from the mill to the ocean to transfer effluent. The mill was to use woodchips to produce up to 1.1 million air-dried tonnes (ADt) of pulp.

Gunns claimed that that project would provide $6.7 billion to the Australian economy and create 1,500 jobs through direct and indirect employment. Those opposing the project argued that this analysis failed to consider the costs of pollution impacts on human health and the overall impact on existing industries of fishing, wine and tourism.

Those opposing the project further claimed that it would drain $3.3 billion from business and government. One example they gave was that the Tasmanian government was to pay for a $60 million water pipeline for the project. This is an example where by not fully disclosing the costs associated with economic benefits of a project, public trust was lost.

This example shows that the environmental manager needs to provide a broad economic cost-benefit analysis that includes economic impacts on the environment. Not to mention an analysis of:
- ecological impacts,
- the effect on human health,
- alternative economic opportunities, and
- Additional expenditure to finance a project.

In addition to these more technical skills, the environmental manager must also be adept in dealing with the central question of ethics. In its simplest form, it means what people ought to do, in particular in relationships between people, between people and other living things, and between people and nature as a whole.

Ethics draws in the broad concept of sustainable development as being a balance between the natural environment, societies and economics. These factors can often conflict, and where ethics cannot play a role or does not play a role in
environmental decision making the costs can be dire.

16 Apart from the obvious damages to the environment, unethical behaviour can damage a company’s reputation and also that of individuals. It can also create a loss of trust between stakeholders. Repairing relationships from this situation will add to costs, and will also require strong conflict resolution, negotiation, public relations and mediation skills.

17 In relation to the Gunn’s pulp mill, two chairs of the resource, planning and development commission resigned due to political pressure and interference in the independent statutory body that oversees Tasmania’s planning system. This is an example of environmental managers protecting their reputations and removing themselves from potentially unethical situations.

18 On the other hand, there are examples where environmental managers have had a role in embedding the “what ought to be done” in the broader environmental considerations of a company. An example of is the Swedish association, Södra, one of the leading producers of market pulp.

19 Södra manages its environment responsibility in a holistic way, as it sees sustainability as a competitive advantage and a natural part of its business model. Södra claims its business model is based upon what it believes is right in the long-term, and the company is respected for its approach.

20 The Environmental manager above all needs to become a change agent. In managing the environment, people are at the centre of all processes. Skills of negotiation, mediation, public and government relations are vital. Ethical considerations must be at the core of everything an environmental manager does. Without these skills the health of ecosystems will not be achieved.

Questions for Student Discussions
1. How may an Environmental Manager’s role change depending on whether this position was employed by a company involved in exploiting natural resources or a government regulating / or private auditing body?
2. What action could an Environmental Manager take if she/he had environmental ethical concerns about their organisation? Describe possible concerns that may arise.
3. How could mediation and/or negotiation skills be useful for an Environmental Manager?
4. Is the scope of an Environmental Manager’s role too broad?
5. Provide an example from your experience or a case study where the change agent role has created benefits within Environmental Management.

References


References for Photos used in Presentation


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