

The Worshipful Company of Water Conservators.

Conservator perspectives, No. 4 January 2014



Where has all the trust in professional judgement gone?

By I G Richards, OBE Master, 2013-2014

The Perspective set out below represents the views of the author alone, and of no other person, and no liability whatsoever shall attach to the Worshipful Company of Water Conservators in connection with or arising out of the publication of this Perspective.

1. Introduction

Written procedures and tick boxes seem to dominate professional life in managing and providing many environmental services which are governed by a myriad of environmental laws and regulations. Does this approach provide our professional environmentalists with meaningful activities that enhance their professional practice and development? This Perspective suggests that a review of the way in which applications for approval of processes or activities are handled is needed.

2. Regulation of design and practice

As an engineer over this last 40 years I have grown to accept very readily in my engineering work that British Standards and Codes of Practice for example are necessary and vital parts of design and construction. These Standards and Codes of Practice have been subject to continuous review and revision over many years.

Change brought about by man's activities can result in huge environmental damage but this is not a typical situation that confronts those looking to make changes to local habitats. Large projects causing large environmental changes are relatively rare. Physical scale and timescales involving construction projects do vary from being small or local to extensive and global. In my view it is unacceptable to see this same adherence to Regulation happening every day in every environmental field irrespective of the overall consequences that the trained observer would regard as small or temporary. I believe that this risk-averse and legalistic approach to all environmental management blights the professional development of young scientists. On most days these people will be confronted with situations that lie at the small end of the spectrum where the application of a little common sense, acquired knowledge and free will can provide an appropriate decision. The benefit of this approach is that the parties will feel that they are making a positive contribution to the management of the project. The effect of this decision can be monitored and result in lessons being learned; all of which leads to the blending of experience with knowledge and the

dissemination of good practice. One can well imagine a sense of anticipation of the result being generated. Could one wish for more?

3. Protection of our physical environment

I agree wholeheartedly that our environment needs to be assessed, respected and enjoyed. It is the prescriptive approach that has been drawn up at a national level that dismays me.

To compound the injury, many of these 'prescriptions' carry the weight of legislation which introduces rigidity into infinitely variable situations where interpretation and flexibility would be more appropriate as an approach. Nature not only provides the variability which can cloud decisions made on the basis of a regulated approach, this variability can be compounded by human decisions and actions as well as the passage of time.

4. Are we guiding wise men rather than fools?

We choose to make great efforts to prepare scientists in their detailed understanding of nature; we also expect our educational establishments to turn-out people who are emotionally charged about their area of expertise, analytical and responsive to actual situations and to see nature as it is.

When young scientists enter certain fields, the world for which they have been prepared does not exist. Imagination is incompatible with regulation and I fear that young professionals will suffer, disillusion being a possible consequence. Resentment of an over-bearing bureaucratic structure controlling their professional decisions would be a response that I would expect to be a natural consequence.

Frederick Herzberg put things so succinctly "Idleness, indifference and irresponsibility are healthy responses to absurd work."

5. Conclusion

The introduction of a graduated scale of effort in making an application, reflecting the scope and consequence of a proposal/activity would introduce a significant improvement in the administration of projects. Estimating the scale of the effect of any project is a key challenge for the professionals involved.

At present it is often the case that a heavy duty regulation process is applied to the most modest and simplest of proposals. A review would be timely.

Precautionary approach + inexperienced regulators = exclusion of judgement → no professional development.