

apb advisory practice bulletin #1

Professional Behaviour

What does it mean – this concept of acting like a professional?

In today's world, being an active professional biologist means that you will inevitably be evaluating and commenting on human induced changes to our environment – be the goal of those changes development or stewardship. In many cases, the issues being addressed will be emotionally loaded – i.e. the long term survival of mountain caribou or grizzly bears in the face of forest harvest, or a salmon run in the face of fish farm operations, or the use of commercial development to finance shoreline restoration, or The list is lengthy and getting longer everyday.

There will be professional biologists on both sides of some issues. How we present ourselves and how we behave has a great impact on how we are perceived, and on how our science and our messages are received. At an individual level, if we are perceived to be coming from a place of environmental emotionalism or speaking as an industrial mercenary then we have placed a HUGE communications barrier in front of our biological science. When our members are vociferously in either camp it reflects badly on our profession as a whole and on the science of biology in particular - and makes it that much more difficult to make the biological voice heard when dealing with professionals in other fields.

It does no one any good in the long run to overstate your case and launch into flights of hyperbole for the sake of getting your story on the front page, or to make a political impact on a specific issue. Invariably, you will simply slot yourself into one or the other of the aforementioned camps – to the detriment of your personal credibility, the credibility of other applied biologists and to the science of biology itself.

So what to do? Be value neutral, and ensure your conclusions derive clearly from the scientific basis of your argument. ALWAYS speak in terms of the biology and don't make personal or inflammatory comments. When presenting your case in opposition to another biologist's work, speak to the biological and science content of the arguments. It is not only possible, but imperative, that you present your case clearly without being negative, derogatory or dismissive of the other biologist.

There are a number of communication principles to keep in mind (and here the APB acknowledges a great debt to an excellent talk that Alton Harestad¹ gave at our 2005 AGM). First off: most people don't lie, but they do have different value systems; secondly, everybody deals with risks differently and finally, everyone has an ego - including you. The first principle is self-evident. The differing value systems, how people deal with risk and what they see as risky are more problematic – especially when political hyperbole comes into play. Often, what is viewed as high risk by one side is not seen as

a high risk (or perhaps not a risk at all) by the other and accepting that risk becomes an act of faith.

It becomes important to maintain your sense of decorum when dealing with these situations. Alton Harestad² had a number of tips for civil discourse:

- Agree on a protocol up front and stick to it.
- Understand that different people can form different opinions from the same evidence.
- Respect that difference.
- Be open minded - there are many trails that lead to the top of the mountain.
- Listen without judging and don't judge without listening.
- Separate the issues from the person - data may be gathered by a person but those data are not that person.
- You may have to change your mind (in front of people, shudder!).
- Things won't always go your way.

In matters of communication, your obligations and responsibilities under the Code of Ethics fall within the purview of “conduct unbecoming a practicing member”. This is defined in the College Act as conduct which brings the college or its members into disrepute, undermines the scientific methods and principles or undermines the principles of stewardship. Examples of this would be using inappropriate language in emails or when speaking, or engaging in libel and/or slander – i.e. making dismissive comments in public towards another biologist, their work, or questioning their credentials to undertake the work. The proper avenue to voice these concerns is first to discuss them with the member and if not satisfied send a complaint to the College – again, using appropriate language. This is an important aspect of our Code of Ethics (A, v; B, v and vi).

Also, realize that we are all professional biologists (and responsible to the Code of Ethics) in all aspects of our lives and in all of our actions – not just when we're writing a report or speaking in a public meeting. This means that referring to another professional as an “industrial consultant” in the bar after hours or on the side of the soccer pitch to another parent is equal to doing so in a public meeting. You may be less likely to get called on it but if you are, the consequences are the same.

“What you are” speaks louder than “what you say”, and what you do is part and parcel of what you are. The corollary is that it doesn't take long to get a reputation but it takes forever to live one down. Professional behaviour is an important part of being a professional biologist.

¹ Harestad, Alton: *Emily Post or the Last Post – Civil Discourse in Charged Situations*. A presentation to a joint APB/College AGM, 2005

² *ibid*