

## **Water ethics: incorporating equity in water management**

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### **Abstract**

In Australia, water management has been described as one of the major natural resource management issues facing our rural industries, regional communities and our unique environment. Within this context, water ethics has emerged as a research area of great significance. However to date, the majority of research has clustered around environmental and economic themes and forays into the ethical management of water have been, for the most part, limited to a deliberative focus on the establishment of property rights and effective water pricing mechanisms. These narrow approaches fail to recognise the diversity and plurality of our water values or to adequately address broader values such as social justice and equity. For example, in the realm of water justice there are a myriad of competing equity claims. Water is highly valued for a range of uses but competition for the resource can create divisions among the community of users. Moreover some parts of the community are denied adequate access to water. This type of social exclusion can occur in a variety of ways, but for many, exclusion means they are denied basic choices about water due to a lack of ability to participate in decision making processes. Such equity claims cannot be readily solved by utilitarian formulas which seek to apply a simple metric to determine the highest economic value. Rather there are multiple values and realities which must be addressed including the social and institutional frameworks surrounding water governance. This paper aims to briefly outline the broader range of ethical and philosophical underpinnings relating to water management that exist both within environmental and economic concerns but also beyond them.

### **Introduction**

In the area of water management, there are a number of ethical issues to be considered and balancing these interests based on the diverse range of values or beliefs we associate with different forms of water use is highly complex. Our triple bottom line thinking is dominated by economic concerns, and to a lesser extent, environmental issues (Dovers 2005). Social values need a more clearly defined place in our decision making processes.

An ability to appreciate and understand the full range of water values is essential to refining our ethical approach to water management. This is critical to justifying our moral decisions about how we understand, use and manage this resource. In the realm of values, contractual ethics provides an approach that allows us to articulate what these values might be, and to establish our reasons for why this is the case.

### **Diversity of Values and Conflicting Demands**

Water is a valuable economic, social and cultural asset and the complexity of water values gives rise to a number of important and interrelated ethical issues. From a management perspective, there seem to be three critical points.

First, there are a range of competing interests for water resources. These broadly include water for ecology, water for agriculture, the provision and cost of infrastructure, pricing and trading, governance, and so on. This demonstrates that our values around water are diverse and sometimes in competition with each other. If ethical water management is not taken seriously in policy formation and planning, it risks becoming a set of ideals, sidelined in practice. Thus, what is important is not only what our values are, but also the social and institutional arrangements within which those values exist.

Second, there is the matter of defining access entitlements and prioritising use. Within the Australian context, the dominant forms of thinking about water management coalesce around economic and environmental concerns. These trends are reflected in the National Water Initiative (NWI), which has been described as:

“...a robust framework for water access entitlements that encourages investment and maximises the economic value created from water use, while ensuring that there is

sufficient water available to maintain healthy rivers and aquifers" (Council of Australian Governments 2003).

However the decisions being made in the economic and environmental contexts have far reaching social implications, some of which are not yet fully understood. For example, decisions to re-allocate water in the rural sector based on the value of commodities being produced and the efficiency of irrigation systems may also give rise to the creation of 'water-rich' and 'water-poor' classes of producers (Hussey 2007). This kind of restructuring may have long term social impacts on rural communities.

Third, there is the issue of how to define water property rights and their implementation. In Australia, water property rights have been identified as a core policy issue impacting on both environmental and market concerns (ACIL Tasman 2004; Wentworth Group 2003). The strong focus on water property rights has also been reflected in some significant conflict in this area, particularly in relation to the NWI's directive that Australian state and territory governments 'claw back' annual licences from farmers for environmental flows. While this move seeks to address environmental management issues, it has raised questions of social equity which have been described as a "disconnection between the goals of water management professionals and the communities they serve" (Hussey 2007, p.10).

Recent developments in water management reflect a move away from infrastructure based solutions to approaches based on social interaction that are focused on managing "ambiguous relationships with partners who have conflicting demands and needs" (Lach, Rayner & Ingram 2005, p.1). Increasing the dialogue or political deliberation around water management provides a way of better understanding and negotiating these conflicting demands.

### **Incorporating Equity**

Equity has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns with regard to matters of fairness and sustainability in water allocation (Boully, McCollum, Vanderbyl & Claydon 2005; Bowmer 2007; Syme, Nancarrow & McCreddin 1999). Lack of equity in current water resource management frameworks has contributed to significant conflicts and left many people disempowered and even denied their most basic human rights and freedoms. While concerns about efficiency have dominated recent water management decisions, there is a growing recognition that utilitarian-style economic thinking provides too narrow a view of this complex issue for two reasons (Ingram, Whitely & Perry 2008). First, it fails to include the non-economic values associated with water. Second, it fails to address issues of equity and distributive justice (Feldman 1991).

To more completely assess the diversity of human experience and the kinds of impacts that must be considered, we must include the social, political and institutional arrangements that also impact on our decisions about water. There is a need to recognise a broader range of values such as equity, justice and fairness as a way of responding to and balancing out the dominant focus on efficiency and markets. This is not to say that economic efficiency should have no place in discussions of water management; rather it is but one metric in the broader water management debate.

The act of understanding and embedding the broader range of values in debates about water management provides a realistic and more comprehensive alternative to utilitarian-efficiency and particularly, economic focused frameworks. Equity considerations call on us to recognise the complexity and diversity of our realities and our values surrounding water, including how our socio-political processes may even contribute to water scarcity and inequity.

Preserving equity in our social governance systems also requires our involvement in those systems. Citizen participation in water management decisions and instituting basic entitlements or rights to water are just two mechanisms for addressing the social exclusion and scarcity that is created when people are denied access to such social and political processes (Mehta 2006).

### **Conclusion**

Contractual ethics provides a strategy which allows us to navigate through the plurality of values, interests and demands that are reflected in the debate over water management. A contractual approach provides a framework for using reason to determine our ethical principles or values and for negotiating through the conflicts between those values using participatory and democratic political deliberation. The focus of the contractual approach is broader than justice in that it incorporates our social institutions and a sense of obligation in our negotiations; that is, it captures a sense of "what we

owe to each other" (Scanlon 1998, p.7). It is clear that there are multiple and conflicting values which must be evaluated and negotiated. However, while conflicts over values are likely to persist, processes that allow us to identify shared values can be used as the focus for moving forward.

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