

**Profess This:
Why the environment doesn't need a new profession.
Christopher Sheldon
Guest Editor GMI**

Picking a title for a GMI themed issue that communicates an appropriate sense of urgency in a discipline that is continually breathless from shouting the odds is no easy task. Environmentalists are, after all, used to being ignored by the mainstream, whether that exists in government, industry or plain old society. So used to this state of affairs are we, that we often become our own worst enemy. Instead of seeking different routes to get the message across, many of us inflate the urgency quotient or simply shout louder. This type of communication has successfully transmitted the size and complexity of ecological problems but in doing so has also convinced most non-environmentalists that those very same problems are too sprawling for them to engage with effectively. The result is inaction, or pretending that the subject has already been mainstreamed into the collective consciousness – either of which is not that different from being ignored.

With this background, one has to be careful about making claims as to the fundamental nature of an issue, particularly when it is so intimately concerned with the nature of environmentalism itself. In justice to the topic and whatever other risks there might be in overselling the issue, I finally decided that I could do no less than choose the title that it now carries. Whether environmental practitioners choose to see themselves as a profession and how they subsequently act on that self-image really is too important to get wrong.

Perhaps this does not seem relevant when compared to the spectre of imminent ecological collapse, yet the collection of papers that have been assembled between these covers will not only challenge accepted wisdom of professions in general, they may even change your mind about how you view the environment as a whole. The aim of this introduction is to lay out the mental landscape and perhaps indicate where the papers are important, sometimes for what they don't say as much as for what they do.

To do that, we have to re-engage with the whole idea of a 'profession'.

Whatever the differing details in our understanding, most would accept that a 'profession' can be distinguished from an 'occupation' by the larger amount of time taken in acquiring a level of knowledge that can then be used in the practice of that profession. Others might point to the fact that in order for a profession to exist, there must indeed be something to 'profess', a meaning shaded by the religious use of the word indicating a public avowal of faith or belief. In many ways, academic 'professors' are balanced neatly at the crux of the two usages.

Either way, a profession and its individual members should thus have something to profess. A justified true belief, as Plato put it. By this definition, what has been called 'the oldest profession' (prostitution) is more accurately an occupation. Yet the same challenge can be laid at the door of many of us working on an environmental agenda; can we name with any accuracy the justified true belief that finds expression in our work?

The word 'profession' also implies a level of exclusivity and external recognition. When George Bernard Shaw wrote that 'All professions are a conspiracy against the laity', he was not just thinking about the classical professions of Law, Medicine, the military and the clergy. Even though a body may exist solely to represent the common interests of members in the development and maintenance of their own defined sphere of knowledge, Society has a crucial role to play by extending recognition and even status to it. However, such a network (often erroneously labelled a 'community') relies on this social contract for its continued existence. In other words, if Society no longer thinks that the work of a particular profession is carried out as a public service and for public benefit, the recognition can be withdrawn – an example being the increasing willingness of patients to pursue damages against medical professionals.

Balanced precariously between the regulation of the state and the 'rules' of the open market, what used to be called vocations or callings are now constantly buffeted by a sceptical society, sophisticated in its understanding of commercial transactions to the point of cynicism. If another distinguishing characteristic of a profession is the swearing of an oath to a group of peers, as some suggest, this no longer holds much sway in a world where financial transactions and binding legal contracts have replaced mutual trust and respect as the basis of working relationships.

If you think that such a model could not apply to the environmental industry, that the common motivation of environmental protection and restoration alone is enough to lift the commercial aspects of environmental work out of such mundane considerations, it may help to consider a number of factors.

At the time of writing, a current news story involves a take over bid for a UK based international environmental consultancy. A private equity company has valued the consultancy at US\$535 million, making the potential transaction the biggest ever leveraged buy out of a UK professional service sector. There's no doubt that there's big money in environmental business.

Where there is money, there are bound to be questions relating to values and ethics. What is the balance between commercialism and altruism in environmental consultancy? When establishing a working relationship with a client, what is the role of confidentiality in relation to trust and how do both break down enough to lead either to 'whistle blowing' or to reactive litigation? What are the limits and responsibilities of a fiduciary relationship? Is the public sector by definition professionally altruistic? I suspect that many of these questions have not yet been asked in earnest of the industry as a whole. As a result, a series of assumptions have been or are in the process of being made about the structures and forms of organisation that are needed to support environmental practitioners.

Into the arena (perhaps more accurately described as a bear-pit) steps a loosely defined group of engineers, chemists, biologists, ecologists, climatologists accountants, auditors and academics amongst others and asks for recognition and status as an 'environmental profession'. It isn't hard to see from this perspective, that efforts to be acknowledged by governments and society as a homogenous entity have serious consequences for the future, consequences that are worth exploring in detail.

In order to be recognised as such, a profession must hang about itself the trappings of office and be willing to grasp the levers of control. It will need to define criteria for membership, seek influence in the wider world, extend honorary fellowships, mark out the boundary of its knowledge and protect this territory with all the tenacity of a mating species during the rutting season. In doing so, it will perforce recognise the rights of other professions to do the same. In essence, professional institutions codify, systematise and ultimately control the development and transmission of knowledge within identified confines. On the one hand, the control they exercise is for the sake of improving overall quality and to ensure minimum standards, but on the other, such control can limit, deny and even 'outlaw' various strands of knowledge.

Without thought and careful management, professional bodies may do untold damage to the field of knowledge they were set up to protect. At their worst, they do not have new ideas, they have continuous professional development. They do not engender trust between expert and client in recognition of a common cause, they write codes of ethical conduct. They do not provide solutions but control access to them. They do not create. They assess.

Key influencers and thought leaders in an industry may or may not be members of a professional body. Those that lead will often not have much time for matters of status or external recognition. It is not a giant leap in logic to contend that the preservation of ecological sustainability is such a pressing series of interrelated problems that leaders are more relevant than followers, creators more than aspirants.

And there we have it. The problem with the creation of a profession is that at heart, it is conservative by nature. It works against finding solutions for the complex riddles of maintaining ecological sustainability, solutions that need to be innovative and of a different tenor from that which has gone before. As Einstein said "Problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them."

Could a professional body for example, capture something so elusive that it can only be articulated by the word 'magic'? Academic, educationalist and Sustainability Commissioner Peter Newman considers the possibilities in his paper submitted for this special issue of GMI. He views it in terms of an emerging 'sustainability profession' and what effect this might have on environmentalists. When something is greater than the sum of its parts, when an output can only be linked to the process that produced it by the thinnest of conceptual threads (as in the phrase 'emergent property'), the only way to preserve it is to investigate but not dissect as this paper does so ably. Using numerous case studies and examples drawn from both the personal and professional fields, the author argues that all modernist professions can suffer from mental sclerosis, but that there are ways for environmentalists to re-invent themselves.

Perhaps one self-reinvention lies in being recognised as a profession, but acting as only one player in a game; a game that involves dense layers of trans-disciplinarity. In their paper, Hens Runhaar, Peter Driessen and Walter Vermeulen look at the competencies that environmental professionals might need in the field of environmental policy making in general and draw some interesting conclusions from their in-depth study. These conclusions have important messages for those attempting to design and deliver appropriate education for the next generation of policy makers,

but they also put into sharp relief attempts to define existing 'professional' competencies. Retaining flexibility in arriving at agreed policies is one thing; driving the policy making agenda itself quite another.

Another element of education draws the eye of Yoram Krozer, whose statistically based study on the lifecycle of the environmental professional links the rise and fall of the labour markets demands with the rise and fall of educational supply. The paper establishes a statistically significant link between policy shifts, which drive in turn technological development and managerial demands. These demands create a 'pull' factor on educational responses in the form of course development and student throughput. More interestingly, Dr Krozer also looks at what happens when this niche labour market becomes saturated and begins to decline. The life cycle model seems to point to two possibilities; namely re-invention or re-alignment with other labour market niches. Both of these have serious repercussions for anyone attempting to define an environmental profession.

Ulrik Jørgensen and Erik Lauridsen take another related but differing perspective on the development of environmental practitioners. In producing a model of the style of learning used by such potential professionals, the authors draw an interesting distinction between communities, networks and other groupings, discovering that the boundaries of an academic or even vocational discipline are regularly ignored by those focused on a subject like environmental sustainability. Trans-disciplinary is certainly a word that is often used in conjunction with such people, but the paper goes beyond this observation and explores why the link between a reflexive learning approach and an informal community of practice is so important.

All these observations draw from the large pool of competency based studies that underpin any field of knowledge. There are alternative approaches to professionalism that start from a different type of question altogether. For example, if we all accept and acknowledge that something exists, something we can label and identify as an 'environmental profession', does it not therefore exist? Are we already taking the attitude that if we build it, will they not come? Not according to Tom Abeles, who argues persuasively that we honour myths as reality all the time, but that this does not perforce make it real. One of the conclusions the paper reaches is that the compromises that we may make, individually and collectively, in order to make the mirror image real lead us to a position further from, rather than closer to, our true goal.

Pondering motives can be just as revealing as any mental realignment and Emma Fieldhouse's contribution takes the first steps down a road that begins to do just this. She asks a question fundamental to the problem of any profession – how does one balance public service with self-interest? Her paper, based on her recent PhD thesis, draws from a survey of UK organisations and attempts to find the links between the individual and the organisation when it comes to 'green' behaviours. The conclusions make interesting reading and alert us all to the need for further research in the area.

Positioned firmly at the more institutional end of the spectrum, Andrew Dlugolecki and Nick Silver provide a case history of startling relevance, though its title might not at first suggest so. Actuaries and insurance are not a subject that makes many environmentalists' hearts beat faster, yet the case study provided here is a story that

has a valuable perspective for other professions at whatever stage of development they find themselves. The authors outline an apparent lack of engagement with the outputs of environmental upheaval has left actuaries voluntarily stranded outside the areas of a debate where they could have vital influence. Having read the paper, it is tempting to ask whether this is the curse of a profession that defines itself by its past not its future.

Yet if some disciplines are incapable or unwilling to engage in the process of seeking solutions, where does that leave the rest of those that are engaged? Kevin Clarke and Sharron O'Neill turn a case study of accountancy to rich and rewarding use as a detailed examination of professional potentiality and development. If one accepts that environmental sustainability is a trans-disciplinary issue, such acceptance poses further questions – which disciplines are involved and to what extent? Again, it is a paper that peels away layers of a problem to reveal yet more uncertainty, but the conclusions and further reflections provided make salutary reading for any member of a nascent profession such as that suggested for environmental practitioners. .

As you can already see, the papers in this special issue range from thought pieces to case studies, from integrationist solutions to separatist arguments. Yet all are joined in their determination to shed light on the future of environmental practice. Not one of the many authors who submitted papers (and there were many more for which we did not have room) used trans-disciplinarity as an end point for their studies, but rather their starting point. This in itself is revealing but this introduction would not be fulfilling its role unless it offered a further series of reflections to bring the multiple perspectives into a single focal point.

What adds even more urgency to the debate about professionalism and its role in environmental discourse is a simple fact. Approaching sustainability from any other angle other than that of putting the environment first carries enormous risk. In essence, to do anything less than concentrate on the eco-systems that underpin our societies and our economies is to miss the point. The debate about sustainability and its definition is an irrelevant waste of valuable time. If we don't find solutions to the problems presented by ecological sustainability, the problems of social or economic sustainability won't need solutions.

When you want to build a future, it pays to look at the foundations as honestly as one can, even if it brings accusations of 'doomsday visioning' and scaremongering. When societies collapse, anarchy is still a form of organisation, even if it is defined by the lack of it. It is messy, uncontrolled and many people would not survive. But not everyone would die. When economies collapse (think of Occupied Germany following WW2 or the Great Depression in 1930's economies) something else comes in its place. Barter or its equivalent is localised not globalised. It is again messy and uncontrolled. It could not possibly support the social institutions that we have today, nor our sheer numbers in terms of population. Many people would not survive. But not everyone would die. When an environment collapses for a specific species, there is no alternative to take its place. Ergo, no-one survives.

Pointing to the epistemological roots of our ecological knowledge, stating that our whole concept of 'environment' is itself a social construction does not take into account the basic empirical facts above. From what we already know, linked to a

precautionary principle, the environment comes first and everything else comes in second.

This is not an argument that denies that the three pillars of sustainability are not interlinked, nor is it an argument for a return to mediaevalism. It is, however, an argument for the problems to be confronted in the way that most befits their fundamental nature. The primacy of environmental sustainability needs to be acknowledged through policies and actions not rhetoric. Allow anything else to lead or even be given equal billing (such as maintaining current social and economic constructs) and you run the risk of not achieving your aim, especially if that aim is continued survival.

Where then are the leaders who will use their influence in this direction? We already acknowledge that such leaders are not to be found in large enough numbers amongst politicians or industrialists. In these two groups, the best that can be managed is a degree of action that many of their own number recognise as too little too late. Both are increasingly driven by the need for short term success (whether defined by the next election or the next annual report) that allows them to maintain their current positions and their potential for influencing the future. Yet this influence is bought at the cost of investing resources and effort in long term change.

My concern is that the leaders that are so badly needed will not be found in the ranks of organisations that are involved in the professionalisation of their work. To be concerned about creating a profession is a distraction from the urgency of the job that needs to be done. The narrowing of an ethical debate to focus on client relationships and social acknowledgement takes attention away from the wider discourse of ensuring that sustainability addresses basic environmental needs while transforming the social and economic expectations of all of us.

After all, matters of status and recognition do not weigh up highly when fighting for continued survival. It's been a long time since we have allowed class systems in lifeboats.