



## **An Introduction to Teaching Angling Ethics<sup>1</sup>**

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This section contains a great deal of background information on angling ethics. It indicates both the importance of angling ethics and recognition that teaching ethics isn't easy. A thorough reading of this section should enable instructors to more effectively lead ethics education activities and help kids learn that it feels good to fish "right."

### **Why teach outdoor/angling ethics?**

There seems to be more of a problem with angling and outdoor behavior today than there was, say, twenty years ago. A number of factors are contributing to this. If we can understand these factors, we can address them in our club efforts and make a difference in the outcome.

First of all, there are lots of anglers, more fishermen and women than ever before. In addition, more people are participating in other natural resources based outdoor activities (e.g., biking, hiking, birding, canoeing etc.) which can lead to conflict over natural resource uses.

Unfortunately, crowding and differing values toward natural resources can cause an ethical breakdown in behavior. Inconsiderate behaviors--unacceptable and unthinkable in previous generations--can become the norm. Trespassing, vandalism, littering and disrespect for others, the law and nature itself become widespread. Selfishness, ignorance and greed all contribute to this ethical breakdown. Too often, people rationalize that "everybody else is doing it so why shouldn't I?" and further the problem of poor outdoor behavior.

In addition, many of us have become insulated from the natural world and its processes. Our increasingly urbanized lifestyle and ever-increasing reliance on technology contributes to a lack

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of connection with the natural world. This can result in a lack of understanding about aquatic resources and how people fit into the natural scheme of things.

Good outdoor ethics education can empower learners to extend ethical considerations to the natural world and to develop appropriate guidelines for outdoor behavior. When values such as those mentioned above come into conflict with each other, outdoor ethics education seeks to enable learners to resolve these conflicts. By helping outdoor users develop their ethics, the outdoor ethics educator helps them make choices that consistently reflect outcomes based on what they value most about the outdoors and the outdoor experience.

### **What is Ethics?**

Ethics is a system of guidelines for governing our behavior, guiding and enabling us to know and choose the most right thing to do. Ethics is like an internal navigational chart and compass, a means of finding and knowing the best course of action. Paul Quinnett, in his book *Pavlov's Trout* (1993), says:

“...ethics is what you do in the dark, before the game warden shows up...”

While some elements of angling ethics have been formalized in the form of laws or codes of conduct, ethics is driven internally. Laws, mandates, regulations and their enforcement are based upon ethics, rather than being the source of ethics. Ethics is obedience to the unenforceable. Quinnett suggests that many people today are governed more by shame than by guilt.

“Shame is what you feel when they *catch* you doing something wrong; guilt is what you feel when you do something *you* know is wrong, period. One requires law enforcers. The other requires only the presence of that still small voice...”

Ethics differ from laws because laws usually address the lowest common denominator of ethical bounds in society. Ethics is the set of guidelines you use even when nobody else is around. Sometimes ethics is a written code, and sometimes it is unwritten, but ethics always include that internal filter that judges each thought or action on its rightness or appropriateness. Ethics help you determine what the *most right* course of action will be.

### **Environmental Ethics**

Part of angler ethics involves environmental ethics. In essence, environmental ethics defines our ecological conscience. Environmental ethics is related to the degree to which we value nature, and why we do so as we make choices about how much we change habitats. Like many other creatures, humans alter their habitat to feed and shelter themselves, and to provide opportunities for reproducing and raising young. But, unlike other creatures, humans can make conscious choices about the size and scale of the differences made. As Wendell Berry suggests, if the choices we make involve too small a difference, we diminish our potential as humans. Too great a difference diminishes nature, and therefore impacts on our future and potentially our survival as a species. As we confront these difficult choices, environmental ethics help us choose the action most consistent with our environmental values. If we are developing good angling

behavior based on a strong ethical framework, environmental ethics and ethics-based stewardship will develop as an inherent and important part of that process.

### **Ethics Education Grounded in Community**

Ethics rests upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. Our instincts prompt us to compete for our place in that community, but our ethics prompt us also to cooperate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for). Aldo Leopold suggests that ethics is a kind of community instinct in-the-making because ethical behavior implies respect for fellow members and for the community. Leopold felt that ethics is limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence.

### **The Purpose of Angling Ethics Education**

The aim of angling ethics education is to enable anglers to develop as *ethically fit and competent outdoors people*. According to Paul Quinnett, an ethically competent individual has the:

“ethical skills and qualities necessary to operate at the highest levels of ethical behavior.”  
He states that these skills include:

- the sensitivity to recognize a situation as posing one or more ethical considerations;
- the knowledge of what responses are legal versus what responses might be ethical in that situation;
- the willingness to act;
- the judgment to weigh various considerations where there are no laws or guidelines, and
- the humility to seek consultation and additional knowledge to guide one’s action.

The outcome of your angling ethics education efforts should be a youngster who can consistently and logically think through an ethical situation, choose the most right course, and act on his or her convictions. You get the youngster to this point by giving them:

- the tools of critical thinking and moral reasoning;
- frequent opportunities to actively use these tools in a setting that is emotionally safe and respectful;
- experiences in seeing you and others behave ethically in numerous fishing settings, over time; and
- the social support of the group, family and community.

### **Teaching Ethics**

Remember... *Ethics can’t be taught...they can only be caught*

You can teach about ethics, ethical viewpoints, and the values that underlie ethics. You can teach how to teach ethics. The problem occurs when your teaching about ethics crosses the line to become advocating or an indoctrination of specific ethics and ethical positions. An educator enables and empowers learners to develop and evolve their own set of ethics by giving them the tools they need -- critical thinking skills and the knowledge, sensitivity and willingness to act --

for a lifetime of ethical development. Advocates merely dictate ethical standards -- usually their own. Which approach is more likely to build ethical anglers?

### **How Do You Teach Ethics?**

So how do you effectively teach angling ethics? What are the best ways to help youngsters develop and use good judgment when facing and making ethical decisions? Outdoor educators everywhere would love to have a quick and easy answer to these questions, but it just isn't that simple. In fact, we know more about what doesn't work than what does. Unfortunately most of what has gone on under the guise of outdoor ethics education falls into the doesn't work category.

### **Outdoor Ethics Strategies -- What Doesn't Work**

Why would we bother to tell you about teaching methods that don't work? Why not cut to the chase and tell you what methods the research says are most effective in teaching ethics education and influencing ethical behavior? Because unfortunately the methods which typically are not effective are those still most often in use -- and we'd like to change this! We've known for over 60 years that traditional, authoritarian approaches using codes of conduct and heavy-handed moralizing do not change behavior (*see coordinators section for more detailed information on changing and affecting behavior*). Yet, these still seem to be the methods of choice for many outdoor education programs. By describing both those approaches that researchers find do work and those that do not work effectively, we hope to make your ethics education efforts more effective. Most importantly, the strategies identified as most effective in teaching ethics education also help to develop an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within your group. That creates the type of mentoring program that really helps kids develop and grow toward their potential -- and not just in ethics education!

The methods listed below are typically NOT effective. They are based on imposing or "inoculating" knowledge or views upon or into students. As stand-alone strategies trying to achieve long-term ethics-based behavior, they simply are not supported by the research. You'll see that strategies more likely to be effective have much different approaches. Ineffective strategies commonly used in outdoor ethics education include:

- public awareness or promotional campaigns using catchy slogans,
- pre-established codes of behavior and techniques borrowed from the advertising sector;
- externally imposed codes of ethics;
- canned ethics lectures (like the 30 minute capsules in too many hunter or sportsman education courses);
- morality stories;
- authoritarian-style approaches to teaching;

### **What DOES Work**

Just as there were common characteristics of ineffective ethics education approaches, common characteristics appear throughout effective ethics education methods. Keep these in mind as you think about how you will approach angling ethics in your program. These key elements include:

- building a sense of community and family, and using this group identity to nurture positive behavior;
- guiding, not dictating, in your role as a teacher;
- developing a climate of mutual respect;
- building group consensus and ownership in group norms, including codes of moral behavior;
- using peer teaching, counseling and support;
- using interactive techniques (often centering around ethical dilemmas), including:
  - small group discussions, such as Adilemma@ discussions, involving more than one “right” choice using a decision-making process that identifies choices, outlines consequences and discusses the results
  - trigger films or slide shows that set the stage for ethical decision-making (discussion initiated at the critical points in the film sequence)
  - interactive videos using computerized video technology to realistically simulate the situation, with the computer matching the decision with the appropriate consequence
  - role-play and simulations requiring group members to adopt different roles and to play different scenarios
- building all these elements into a sustained, long-term effort over a significant period of time (i.e. the use of mentoring approaches like those offered by 4-H clubs, community clubs and organizations, family and friends).

Properly done, interactive techniques teach more effectively than lectures simply because they *engage* students in the learning process and require them to invest more of themselves. Students must think critically, reason morally and discuss, choose and defend the most right course of action. In the right context, within a moral community containing the key elements listed above, interactive approaches offer great possibilities.

A positive social environment for ethics education plays a very significant role in the success of ethics education. Using small groups, guiding them as they assume and share responsibilities, emphasizing peer activities such as peer counseling and problem-solving, keeping the focus on ethical issues directly relevant to the group, and involving them with community service and action projects addressing these issues hold much promise, particularly when done over a significant period of time. Programs involving mentoring and continuing relationships within clubs or other neighborhood or community structures--building moral communities--appear to offer the best combination of strategies for successfully developing ethical fitness and competence. Developing the positive social environment for learning may be much more important than the specific teaching techniques used. Combining that positive, sustained social environment with interactive teaching techniques creates the most favorable environment for successfully teaching ethics.

It is important to recognize that simply providing learners with a knowledge base is not enough to cause long-lasting behavioral change. To change behavior, we must go beyond developing issue awareness we must focus on ownership and empowerment. Ownership of an issue is critical to responsible environmental behavior. If we can make it personal and pertinent and help students realize that their actions can make a difference in their world, we have a much better chance of affecting their attitude and behavior. Research has shown that the above factors can influence behavior changes, thereby building ethically fit and competent anglers and outdoors people.

### **Your Personal Comfort with Approach Is Important!**

There is no one perfect strategy for leading ethics education activities. The complexity and diversity of fishing and its deeply personal nature makes most standard codes far too general to make much sense, though they can offer a starting point. Youth need to have these guidelines directly and specifically applied in a relevant manner. We suggest you view each fishing situation in terms of the demands and needs for ethical behavior in that specific situation. Then give your members the tools they need to evaluate the rightness or wrongness of a course of action. From this, the members, as a group, will generalize a universal set of angling ethics, guided by your mentoring. In this way, we hope to develop a new generation of anglers who know how to behave ethically, because they understand how it feels to make the right choices. Using those methods with which you are most comfortable is often the best choice, as long as the methods are interactive and sustained in nature.

For each fishing trip or experience, the group should develop and/or review a set of behavioral expectations *as a group*. This need not be an ordeal or excessive in length. In fact many brief exposures may be better than fewer longer ones. As the behavioral expectations are developed, practiced and reviewed over time, patterns will become evident. Look for these patterns. Because youth themselves will participate in developing the ethical guidelines, they will have ownership in abiding by them. To maximize the value of your angling ethics education efforts, your example must be strong and consistent. That will help your kids to actualize their guidelines, fish right and feel good about it. This is done through:

1. observing others in ethical situations, and helping members see the ethical choices made;
2. demonstrating appropriate and inappropriate behavior through modeling and role-playing;
3. using scenarios suggested in the activities as a basis for discussing and practicing angling ethics;
4. small group discussions and role-play addressing ethics violations, giving members the critical thinking tools they need to deal effectively with these situations;
5. encouraging members in making the sometimes difficult choices where no single action is necessarily wrong or bad, all choices may be right, and they must choose what is most right;
6. reinforcing and rewarding positive ethical behaviors when your members demonstrate them. Let them know you know they've done right. Be sure to involve the rest of the group in this recognition process. Peer support is a very powerful thing.

## How Should YOU Teach Angling Ethics Education?

Ethics can be a heavy topic. We recommend that your ethics discussions be done in small doses (not in lengthy preaching, or lecturing)! Remember, real ethical education results in internally motivated actions. We want youth to learn to develop personal ethical codes, not because we impose them, but because they find that abiding by their ethical codes is satisfying and feels good to the spirit. Heavy-handed approaches are likely to lead to the opposite effect.

Everything we do in this program, both deliberate and inadvertent, will have an impact on ethical development in the young people involved; but several activities in the “People and Fish” section (see “Angling Ethics Lessons”) are focused around the effective ethics education strategies listed above -- small group discussions, role playing, and group consensus and ownership building. These lessons provide realistic activities to *engage* youth in thinking through ethical dilemmas and decisions. Many of these activities can be done while your group is out fishing or on other learning experiences. The best scenarios for learning are those that your group actually encounters! Remember to take the time to make good use of any “teachable” moment. You may find that when faced with real dilemmas with real consequences, youths may respond differently than when discussing a hypothetical situation. In addition, the reality of the situation can be more effective in encouraging critical thinking and moral reasoning.

Interested in Learning More ... Some Suggested Readings:

- Berry, W. 1989. *Home Economics*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giiroux, Inc.
- Kidder, R. 1995. *How Good People Make Tough Choices*. New York: William Morrow & Co.
- Leopold, A. 1966. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Matthews, B. E. and C. K. Riley. 1995. *Teaching and Evaluating Outdoor Ethics Education Programs*. Washington, DC: National Wildlife Federation.
- Posewitz, J. 1994. *Beyond Fair Chase*. Helena, MT: Falcon Press.
- Quinnett, P. 1994. *Pavlov's Trout*. Sandpoint, ID: Keopee Co.