

Proudly P.Geol.



So What Does the P. Geo. Brand Mean Anyway? My Thoughts on Professionalism

David Hunt, P.Geol.

APGO Member and Council's Past President

During my year as President, a lot of members have told me what they think about APGO, and one thing that seems to really confuse people is how the role of being a professional meshes with the role of being a geoscientist.

For the first 30 years of my career I was a mere geologist. I was trained in university to be a scientist, not a professional. Students today are still trained to be scientists rather than professionals, and now that we are a regulated profession, I see this as a problem. But that's a different story.

The traditional "geologist" brand is well known by us and we regard it highly. We're rumped, disheveled, socially awkward types who like to drink beer, but mostly we just want to look at rocks and think about them, either in the bush or in our dingy basement offices in town.

We're prepared to live in primitive conditions in the middle of nowhere for long periods of time. We take pride in being frozen, roasted, rained and snowed upon, attacked by wild animals and blood-sucking insects, all for the joy of crawling through swamps and over outcrops to discover new things and solve geological problems.

It's a crazy way to make a living, but most of us wouldn't ever want to do anything else.

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During my career I've had a great deal of fun discovering new geological things, solving problems, enhancing mineral inventories, adding value to projects, and dealing with the constant series of crises that is field work, but I don't recall ever doing anything with the aim of making life work better (except perhaps with regard to my bank account).

Science is creativity. Science constantly asks questions, challenges existing viewpoints and doesn't accept theories unless they can be thoroughly replicated. To the scientist, the effect of scientific discoveries on the public is not considered relevant. The discovery is an end in itself and is its own reward.

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“In this environment all we can stand upon is our knowledge, our ethics and our professional record.”

The Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Manitoba has an elegantly worded slogan that says: “My life’s work makes life work better.” And then comes the punch line of that Manitoba slogan: “I’m a P. Eng.” Well, of course. Now it makes sense. Engineers take the discoveries scientists make and build safe and useful things from them, and their work usually does make life better.

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Many of us geologists prefer to work in the field or hide in our dingy basement office so we won’t have to deal with the public. The “public” is, more often than not, a pain in the “you-know-what”. We just want to play with our rocks, thank you, and be left alone.

But the government views things differently. They have deemed that we will be a regulated profession in order to protect the public and the environment.



Photo credit: Allan MacTavish, P.Geoscientist.

The Professional Geoscientist’s Act, 2000, defines the Practice of Professional Geoscience as such: “An individual practices professional geoscience when he or she performs an activity that requires the knowledge, understanding and application of the principles of geoscience and that concerns the safeguarding of the welfare of the public or the safeguarding of life, health or property including the natural environment.”

The intent of this definition is quite clear: professionalism begins where our science intersects with its effect on the public and the environment. The commercial actualization of what we do as scientists is where our professionalism comes into play.

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And so what, exactly, is this professionalism as it applies to the geoscientist? It is the knowledge of best practices, laws, rules, regulations and liabilities, and the commitment to adhere to them. It means we will be fair, honest and ethical. It also means that we have kept up-to-date on current knowledge and practices. A professional is knowledgeable, ethical, reliable and competent.

To a certain extent professionalism rubs against us as scientists. We study things about which we know very little. We make prognostications based on only minimal hard evidence. Our conclusions are awash in uncertainty, possibility and probability, whereas the public wants certainty. The successful scientist plays WITH the rules, whereas a professional is expected to play BY the rules.

There is a certain degree of conflict here. The Professional Geoscientist often feels like a round peg being hammered into a square hole; sort of (to use a mineral sector analogy) like a tree trunk that has had its top pointed and squared off, like a claim post, with a tag saying "professional" nailed onto it.

Professionalism also means maintaining one's best practices and ethics, no matter what. This is what the public expects of us, however doing so often puts us in conflict with our employers and clients, some of who do not like being told things that are not to their benefit. At various times in my career I've both walked away from, or been dumped by employers because of my professionalism.

Finally, our work is viewed unfavourably by most of the public. With regard to the mineral sector the public doesn't really know anything about what we do, but they are definitely suspicious or openly hostile to it. Mining is seriously disliked and mistrusted, even though everything in our lives depends on things that are mined. Similarly, in the environmental field the conclusions of any geoscientist who is paid by anyone are suspected to reflect only their employer's point of view, possibly to the detriment of the public. There is little trust in independent scientific thought these days.

In this environment all we can stand upon is our knowledge, our ethics and our professional record.

Many geoscientists feel that being a professional is an inconvenient and unnecessary imposition on their work. But much of what we do in the course of our business is not the pure, or even applied science of dealing with geology; it involves advising our employers and clients about the regulatory and social licence environment, and then steering them through it successfully.

I always take pride in doing that well. It's part of my job as a professional. And that's what the P. Geo. brand means to me.