

Gilbert White: progress in geography

Gilbert White was certainly a person who was concerned about progress. Although he rarely spoke explicitly about 'progress', much of his life in research and teaching and public service was directed towards human betterment. Gilbert's progress had at least two dimensions. It meant material progress towards greater human safety and security in harmony with nature and his fellow humans. But harmony required more than material security for Gilbert. It also meant moral progress expressed in terms of 'making a difference' and 'leaving the world a better place', and it meant an expanding circle of love and peace between peoples whether in the management of river basins or the reconciliation of conflicts over natural resources or in other realms of human endeavour.

I Hazards to human safety and security

Gilbert's search for harmony with nature got an early start with his work in the New Deal Administration in the 1930s. There he revolutionized the thinking about flood problems, and changed the entrenched 'flood control' philosophy of the US Army Corps of Engineers to a wider view which considered a long list of alternative ways of living with floods. His widely acclaimed PhD dissertation at the University of Chicago, *Human adjustment to floods* (White, 1945), is the landmark text in this transformation of public policy.

The ideas first formulated in 'human adjustment' were elaborated and disseminated over more than six decades of work with a worldwide network of students and colleagues engaged in many 'progress' enterprises (Kates and Burton, 2008). They

include the pragmatic concept of 'broadening the range of choice' described in the paper by Mitchell in this issue.

Towards the end of Gilbert's life, Bob Kates and I joined him in writing a review paper on the use of knowledge in natural hazards management (White *et al.*, 2001). In effect we asked 'what progress has been made?' The cautiously positive conclusions reflect Gilbert's optimism and unflinching persistence. Despite an enormous expansion in knowledge the losses from floods and other natural hazards continue to increase, in some places at a more rapid rate than before. There is without doubt a much better understanding of the causes of losses from natural hazards. Gilbert's aphorism reported in the *New York Times* obituary (7 October 2006) that 'Floods are "acts of god" but flood losses are largely acts of man', is now widely accepted. There remains an enormous gap between the knowledge and its effective application. One way of looking at this is that the necessary moral progress has not kept pace. Indeed a more critical interpretation would be that failures in the moral behaviour department have served to undermine and block the opportunities for progress that research has created.

Another of Gilbert's concerns for safety and security focused on water supply and its availability in quantity and quality. His first published paper (White, 1935) addressed the shortage of public water supplies in the drought years 1934. Forty years later he challenged the fashionable economic idea that water was a commodity like any other and should be paid for with the more progressive notion that basic minimum daily requirements should be regarded not as a 'good' but

as a human right (White, 1974). This was based in part on his work with David Bradley and his wife Anne on domestic water supplies in East African villages (White *et al.*, 1972).

As with floods so it is with water supplies. The translation of knowledge into action has fallen short of what Gilbert expected. Lofty Millennium Development Goals are promulgated at international conferences, but the delivery falls short. The moral underpinnings for the building of a more equitable world are apparently not strong enough to counter more self-serving or short-term interests.

II Peace and conflict resolution

Gilbert was acutely aware of the moral failings of humanity. He did not preach but sought to contribute by leadership and example. In his professional life he worked in various places to promote peace through the management of natural resources. Notably he sought to engage policy-makers in a cooperative arrangement for river basin development in the lower Mekong while serving as in the early 1960s as chair of a Ford Foundation advisory group to the United Nations Mekong River Committee (White, 1963; 1964). His advice against a Japanese plan for the construction of a series of major dams on the Mekong and tributaries met with some success, and today there is in place a plan for more effective water use to alleviate poverty. The events in the region from 1960 to today's achievements did not follow the vision of a peaceful path that Gilbert sought to promote.

Gilbert worked in similar fashion on water supplies in the Middle East in 1994, and in many other places in the USA and abroad. The ostensible purpose was often the use and development of natural resources in harmony with nature. The underlying and more compelling purpose was harmony among peoples. The stewardship of the earth was for Gilbert a worthwhile end in itself but it also served a moral cause dedicated to human peace, harmony and love.

III Pragmatism and public policy

Gilbert gave little time to the articulation of theory or philosophy. He is perhaps best described as a pragmatist. As a professor of geography at the University of Chicago and in his subsequent career at the University of Colorado, where he established the Natural Hazards Center, Gilbert always sought to translate research findings into public policy relevance and advocacy and urged his colleagues to do likewise. He avoided theoretical debates for their own sake and referred philosophical questions and questioners to John Dewey (Wescoat, 1992).

He was fond of challenging his fellow geographers to make a difference, not only in material and policy terms but also and especially in human relations. 'What shall it profit a profession', he famously asked, 'if it fabricates a nifty discipline about the world while that world and the humans spirit are degraded?' (White, 1972, in Kates and Burton, 1986: 321–22).

IV Measuring progress

Attempts to measure progress in material or moral terms are fraught with epistemological difficulties often fractiously debated. In the face of present world realities in environmental and natural resource management, in human adjustment to natural hazards and human-induced hazards such as climate change, in global equity, and in peace and security, it is practically impossible to provide a balance sheet or an accounting of the undoubted gains in some domains with appalling losses and retreats in others. All these issues were preoccupations of Gilbert White. Despite the fact that many of his ambitions to help improve the human condition show, over his professional lifetime, at best a mixed record, my sense is that he did not in the final analysis count progress like that. For Gilbert what mattered was the inner man, both his own self and those whose lives he touched. Is it possible eventually to say that I have done what I wanted to do, and needed to do, and had to do, and done it with energy

and conviction and love? I think that is clearly the case in the life of Gilbert White and in the lives of the many others on whom he had such profound influence. How else to explain his unflagging optimism and dogged tenacity? 'Each of us', he wrote, 'should ask what in his teaching and research is helping our fellow men strengthen their capacity to survive in a peaceful world.'

Ian Burton
University of Toronto

References

- Kates, R.W.** and **Burton, I.**, editors 1986: *Geography, resources, and environment. Volume I: Selected writings of Gilbert F. White. Volume II: Themes from the work of Gilbert F. White.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 2008: Gilbert White 1911–2006. Local legacies, national achievements, and global visions. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, in press.
- Wescoat, J.L. Jr** 1992: Common themes in the work of Gilbert White and John Dewey: a pragmatic appraisal. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82, 587–607.
- White, G.F.** 1935: Shortage of public water supplies in the United States during 1934. *Journal of the American Water Works Association* 27, 841–54.
- 1945: *Human adjustment to floods.* Research Paper 29, Department of Geography, University of Chicago.
- 1963: The Mekong River plan. *Scientific American* 208(4), 49–59.
- 1964: Vietnam: the fourth course. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 20(10), 6–10.
- 1974: Domestic water supply: right or good? In Proceedings of Ciba Foundation Symposium on Human Rights in Health, 4–6 July, Amsterdam: Associated Scientific Publishers, 35–59.
- White, G.F., Bradley, D.J.** and **White, A.U.** 1972: *Drawers of water: domestic water use in East Africa.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- White, G.F., Kates, R.W.** and **Burton, I.** 2001: Knowing better and losing even more: the use of knowledge in hazards management. *Global Environmental Change Part B: Environmental Hazards* 3, 81–92.