

## Introduction

Gilbert White's influence on floodplain management practice in the United States can hardly be overestimated. Even before his path-breaking 1942 dissertation, *Human Adjustment to Floods*, was accepted and subsequently published by the University of Chicago Department of Geography, he had begun raising questions about the effectiveness of structural devices such as levees and dams in flood prevention. Although humans have resorted to various protective edifices for centuries to control floods, White's work demonstrated that flood control structures not only occasionally fail the standards of reliability set by planners but can actually increase the damage done when unsuspecting people risk lives and money to develop the land supposedly protected. One flood, one break in the levee, could spell disaster. White advocated the use of nonstructural solutions, such as zoning restrictions and floodproofing, to complement or replace more traditional structural approaches.

While White's academic career is distinguished, it is his commitment to public policy that dramatically expands the significance of contributions. His essays and books shun abstract theory and speculation in favor of clear policy analysis. His goal is to influence the management of natural resources and to do it in a way that takes into account psychological and sociological phenomena as well as physical constraints. He is fascinated by the gap between our scientific and technological capability to manage water as good stewards and our actual willingness to do so. Central to the issue is the question of how hazards are perceived, whether they be droughts, floods, or pollution. In analyzing the problem, White employed interdisciplinary methods and insights long before such an approach became fashionable. Moreover, with one eye on lessons from the past, he has never lost sight of long-term objectives: sustaining life in all its forms and avoiding violent confrontation both with one another and with nature itself. These are responsibilities that require not only professional expertise but strong spiritual values.

White's work reflects a sensitivity to the human condition rooted both in his training as a geographer and his Quaker faith. His global studies of the interaction between humankind and water resources implicitly suggest that the choices humans make in one corner of the world may contain lessons for others elsewhere. For over fifty years he has studied the human environment, ever enlarging our understanding of the intricate relationship between social development and the natural world. In this, his legacy among twentieth century geographers is unrivaled.