

Conservation in No-Man's-Land

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OUR MAIN PURPOSE in this essay is to invite the concerned community of conservationists, from a variety of disciplines, to address the questions of conservation and of environmental ethics in a new way, and as frankly as possible. In our view, the crisis of biodiversity, conservation, sustainability, and any number of iconic environmentalist concerns must be radically reconsidered. Our sense is that after all the struggles against the environmental crisis—well-meaning struggles, that have employed the best science, thinking, and activism available—we are in a kind of trench warfare that can produce at best temporary and unstable “victories,” many of which seem even to have backfired.

In response, our image is one of putting an armchair right on the battlefield—in no-man's-land—and, for all the risks involved, simply sitting down and thinking. At the very least, we can mourn, as we all do when we have lost something of incomparable and incomprehensible value, and when no words or deeds can quite express or mend the value of what has been lost, and continues to be lost. All other alternatives seem to us, at this point in time, to serve as mere distractions with deep negative consequences that the conservation movement does not seem to sufficiently reflect upon. These alternatives are sometimes offered in the spirit of reevaluation or of reforming environmentalism—as, for example, those we consider in the section immediately below, represented by their most famous contemporary proponents.

“Inconvenient” environmentalism: exposing the alleged myths, prejudices, and confusions of the traditional conservation movement

Environmentalist (American) heroes and their movement have been ostensibly exposed and disgraced. Their beloved, driving force—pristine and wild Nature¹—has been laid bare as fraudulent: There no longer are any places “untrammelled by Man.” Worse, there never were (!), or at least not in the last one thousand years;² moreover, national parks, supposedly intended to preserve wild Nature, have forcibly displaced native people from their homes (and continue to do so) for the sake of tourist attractions. Henry Thoreau and Edward Abbey, the high-brow and low-brow prophets of self-sufficient solitude and wildness, are exposed as hypocrites: Abbey for pining for companionship in his private journals while writing *Desert Solitaire*, and (worse) Thoreau for having his mom do his laundry, while he labored sublimely at Walden (only three miles from town, by the way).³ After all, and most sadly, John Muir—who often *did* live wildly and self-sufficiently—was racist.⁴

These men are heroes of the conservation movement generally. They were not scientists, but many scientists do what they do now because of them. And there has been disgrace even among these scientists of Nature: Things are supposedly not as bad as they had predicted, since Nature bounces back with remarkable resilience and new things thrive where old ones have been lost—the way of the world from time immemorial. If the environmental movement is not dead, as some have declared it is,⁵ then it ought to be.

These are the declarations of reformers and iconoclasts who have made such claims the basis of a manifesto for a new perspective—“conservation in the Anthropocene.” (In this essay we refer to it as “the Anthropocene perspective.”) This new perspective is considered by some as involving “new models for thinking and acting,” and their arguments are seen to “demolish mythologies built around the environment.” Here is their new, human-friendly vision: “The conservation we will get by embracing development and advancing human well-being will almost certainly not be the conservation that was imagined in its early days. But it will be more effective and far more broadly supported, in boardrooms and political chambers, as well as at kitchen tables.”⁶

First reactions

Some of our main objections to this “new” or “inconvenient”⁷ movement can be broken down into three basic categories:

- 1) *Ad hominem* arguments based on the characters of pioneers of the movement;
- 2) Factual arguments which contest the claims of the traditional environmental movement (pointing, for example, to bad predictions based on a lack of appreciation for the resilience of nature); and
- 3) Value arguments which oppose the idea of a “pristine wild” Nature, untrammelled by humans, and which show how unrealistic it would be to protect Nature in the way traditional conservationists want to.

Providing counterarguments to the vision of conservation in the Anthropocene involves adding to a controversy that has already generated much heat and many responses from the conservation community.⁸ We believe that adding to the controversy distracts from the things really worth thinking about, but some brief counterarguments are in line with our general purpose.

First, the *ad hominem* arguments are the easiest to counter. Thomas Jefferson held slaves; Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a lousy father; Gottlob Frege (the architect of modern logic) was a rabid anti-Semite—so much for the ideals of constitutional democracy, education under the social contract, and modern logic. We can add to the list some of the classics of music or literature or painting, if we poke around in the right closets there. What is missed by continuing in this vein is the key point worth making: that the value, meaning, and significance of Nature—unlike democracy, human dignity, and logic—is something that, in our view, no one has been able to articulate philosophically or politically yet, though everybody grasps it. All commonly used words and concepts are proxies at best, “similes” in the language of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “Lecture on Ethics”⁹ (which we will return to in a moment). Proxies for what you feel when, for example, you see an ancient forest razed by corporate lumber barons, a feeling that does not go away when someone points out that you, or those you love, enjoy the modern conveniences made from those trees. Examples abound: the carcasses of albatrosses with stomachs full of plastic; the fins of sharks in

the market and their bodies agonizing underwater; the head of the gorilla on a plate; the rotting elephant without a tusk.

What we do know is that Thoreau wrote masterpieces, and Muir and Abbey produced works that people love and which inspired and sustain a movement—all in the effort of drawing our attention to the intrinsic values of Nature. We are limiting the analysis to the American cadre of environmentalist icons, as those have been the focus of the attack. It is a good bet that people will continue to be driven by their works for a long, long time, and perhaps all the more likely if the ideals in them are lost to view. We need to understand why this is so; and we simply give up trying to understand it if we think it useful to resort to superficial *ad hominem* dismissals.

Second, factual arguments. Here the attack is on what might be described as the “failed metaphors” and hasty generalizations of the traditional movement. An example of a failed metaphor: *Nature is primeval, fragile, and at risk of collapse from too much human use and abuse*. In fact, states the counter-claim, Nature is so resilient that it can recover rapidly from even the most powerful human disturbances. But the crucial point in reply is that the claims, on either side, are *not* purely factual. For example, the human population has often bounced back after epidemics, genocide, and wars, but we do not take epidemics, genocide, and wars in stride because humanity has proven resilient to their onslaughts.

And third, regarding the value claims of the Anthropocene perspective, two central examples:

- 1) Traditional conservationists, in the Anthropocene view, are set for failure as they have an idealized notion of “pristine nature”—of untouched Nature as a source of solitary spiritual renewal, aesthetic appreciation, and support for diversity of life. The anathema of this unsupported nostalgia for wilderness is the “national park” or “wilderness park.” In contrast, for the Anthropocene perspective the concept of pristine Nature has no basis in reality, and it is anachronistic, counterproductive, and unfriendly to people, especially in the poor regions where the protected lands have forced people from their traditional homes and livelihood.
- 2) Traditional conservationists see people as the original sinners who caused our banishment from Eden. From the Anthropocene platform’s perspective, the traditional movement pits people against Nature, and it creates an atmosphere in which people see Nature

as the enemy. If people do not believe conservation is in their own best interests, then it will never be a societal priority.

In response to these claims, however, consider that the most numerous and brutal human displacements in the history of our species are unrelated to the creation of parks or any other conservation efforts. Wars and occupations have obviously played a more significant role than protecting land for wildlife; and, perhaps even more significantly, national development priorities have been, and continue to be, of utmost relevance in this context. Again, examples abound, a high-profile one being the Three Gorges dam on the Yangtze River, which displaced over a million people. Are these the salutary effects of self-interest? If not, then how much confidence can we put in self-interest? As for “pristine” Nature: In fact, nothing of comparable value and beauty that we try to preserve is “untouched.” Think of the masterpieces of art, of how they are housed and preserved, and of the injustices and astronomical costs incurred in our effort to preserve them. What should our attitude be to this? What in fact is our attitude? Complicated and thorny, because even as the ethical and other violations may be crystal clear, so is the value to us (to humanity) of what we are trying to preserve.

Finally, the notion that Nature is “the enemy” is an even older perspective than the nostalgia for pristine wilderness. And, of course, at some level it is *true*. Nature is often *not* friendly. Nature can be terrifying and wild and dangerous. This is the only realistic perspective. And yet, as Thoreau and Muir and many others have felt, Nature’s peculiar value lies in these untamed facts about it. Nature is about death as much as it is about life, about terrible sublimity as much as it is about soothing beauty. We all intuitively seek from Nature the opportunity to be intimate with both dark and light things, things we are normally busy running away from and that we often need solitude to experience properly, points made famous by Martin Heidegger as part of his philosophy¹⁰—if we dare cite another flawed genius.

The deepest issue

Analysis. In our view, the deepest issue—and real crisis—is that we do not have the concepts or language for expressing, or explicitly understanding, the intrinsic value of Nature; nor, therefore, for articulating its violation.

We cannot understand the full meaning of “extinction,” for example. We cannot overemphasize this point about language and about the conceptual or intellectual lacuna of the many crises we face. The economic and biological aspects we may grasp, but these are just the outward aspects of a deep phenomenon that we cannot even name. Nature has a supreme value that (we believe) everyone recognizes in some way, but one for which, when it comes to expressing it explicitly, the common terms and concepts available are inadequate, or at best proxies—or worse, the language of the “enemy,” inasmuch as what is commonly available to us is a language and philosophy of value that has been honed for centuries in an effort to clarify the value of *humanity*.

Herein lies the deepest issue for the conservation and environmental movements (old or new), because until this point is absorbed, all well-meaning efforts will have lost touch with the values supposedly driving them, and their accomplishments will tend to be pyrrhic. The critical concern here is not only our inability to articulate a shared understanding of the intrinsic value of Nature but also a confusion in language, reflected in how the conservation crisis is depicted, thought about, understood, and related to in our attempts to solve it.

This can be illustrated clearly, with the example of the language of “rights.” The most thorough philosophical development of the concept of rights for Nature has been in the “animal rights” movement. Of course, this is because the concept is being extended to beings who are, relatively speaking, closest to the human, where the concept gets its rationale and paradigmatic application. But then, as many have objected: What of the rest of Nature? Was not the whole point to get away from man as the measure of all things? And even when we remain within the animal kingdom, we find (from one of the most distinguished philosophers working out a theory in this direction) the idea entertained that perhaps prey (deer, for example) ought to be protected from the predator (for example mountain lion), like victim from violent attacker.¹¹

We should be grateful for any intelligent attempt to theorize the intrinsic value of Nature, but we believe that entertaining such conclusions likely signals that we lack the conceptual tools or the language adequate to the task of a theory, or properly articulated knowledge, in this area. We believe that, so far as the value of Nature goes—an “ethics of Nature” (if even this is not already a misapplication of language)—we are in a position closest to that described by Wittgenstein in his 1929 lecture on ethics more generally.

An unsolved issue of values. Without defending everything Wittgenstein says in this lecture about science and ethical value, we think that the thoughts he expresses are a sound starting point for environmental ethics. Wittgenstein says, for example, that “my whole tendency and, I believe, the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language.” Earlier, he states that “there are no propositions, which in any absolute sense, are sublime, important or trivial,” and “ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts.”¹²

We will comment on the other quoted remarks in a moment, but when Wittgenstein contrasts relative and absolute value he echoes a well-known distinction in ethical theory, one that is useful for understanding the fundamental distinction between so-called consequentialists and non-consequentialists—a distinction quite germane to our discussion. The vision of conservation in the Anthropocene movement is best understood as a *consequentialist* view of value, where the point is always to bring about the on-balance best state-of-affairs, after weighing costs and benefits—with nothing absolutely or intrinsically valuable other than that. Accordingly, essentially no effort is put into grappling with the question of the intrinsic value of Nature. If species are being lost and decimated in one place, we may need to make trade-offs to save more in another place, or to trade off with some urban human-centered concern, or etc. Consequentialists are famous for being impatient with the non-consequentialist’s idea of a value that transcends and constrains the best state of affairs on balance. The only value that seems to make any sense for the consequentialist view is one relative to some given end. Wittgenstein illustrates the idea with the example of the right road. To speak of a right road makes sense only in relation to an end, like a desired destination. There are many ends in life. Get clear about the ones you want and do your best to satisfy them, with the necessary and available means. This is a schema for thinking about value in a way that fits comfortably when considering questions of conservation policy in light of an array of other issues: issues that could fall under the rubric of one science or another; values that are in effect just conditional facts.

This is how the vast majority of conservation questions and other environmental issues are approached today by governments and the biggest conservation societies in the world, where there is little or no discussion of the intrinsic value of Nature, or its absolute value or sacred value,

as some put it. The attitude is that there is no time for such (semantic) things; trade-offs and compromises need to be made. And the issue is made all the more difficult by the fact that whatever we say about the relevant values must involve aesthetic values (as Wittgenstein also suggests more generally about ethics.). Aesthetic values always have had a troubled relationship to the ethical, being putatively only subjective (“in the eye of the beholder”). We ourselves do not endorse this purely subjective view of aesthetic value;¹³ we mean only to draw attention, again, to common obstacles to our understanding in this area. In fact, one obstacle lurking here, in the distinction between aesthetic and ethical value, is that we overlook the relevance of the expressions of emotions in connection with the values we *do* understand and can articulate philosophically.

We have words and moral systems to articulate the worst that has been done to humanity. But it took a long time, indeed many centuries, even for the worst cases (such as slavery) to find and build them. Words and moral systems were found and built, to begin with, on a relatively inarticulate, emotionally *felt* reaction to the evil involved, and they were laid down amidst all manner of contradictions. As a consequence, we can be ethically articulate about what it is to enslave a human being, or to kill one unjustly. We even have a deep understanding of the mind-boggling evil of mass murder and genocide, beyond mere statistics. But who understands what is lost in the loss of a whole species? It is not satisfactory to say that species have been lost from time immemorial or that forests may grow back and that life goes on, probably no matter what we do. Think of how we would react to someone saying something like this in response to human genocide. It would be unspeakable. And we believe something like the same reaction is a clue to understanding our experience of the destruction of Nature, even though at the same time we also know that talk of equal “rights,” or the like, for Nature does not really illuminate anything, and, on the contrary, can lead to absurdities. For example, there is a sense in which it seems obvious that if our values are not human-centered, then the preventable and regular loss of whole species from the face of the Earth is worse than genocide. But it is as yet impossible to express an understanding that makes such a point without involving oneself in seemingly callous and reprehensible implications from the point of view of our most humane values. Are we really forced to choose either the one or the other? Our point is that the dilemma is false, or better, meaningless, because the only way to assess or resolve it is with a language equal to the task—which is to

say, a language for the value of Nature that is not shot through and through with language meant to express the value of humanity.¹⁴

The dilemma which *is* clear and real, especially in light of the practically minded conservationist is this: When all we can say of something valuable is that it is intrinsically valuable, or sacred and inviolable, we paradoxically seem to disqualify ourselves from the wide and complex questions of public policy. Issues of public policy, often mixed up with scientific claims (as they so intimately are in questions about conservation), tend to leave no place for intrinsic values. By invoking such values we therefore seem to remove ourselves from a language game that is suited to questions of the form “What do you want?” and to answers having to do with the most realistic means for obtaining one’s end. Then, it appears we must choose between effectiveness and an obscure conception of value. But our contention is that we *must* remove ourselves from that language game if we are to have any hope of understanding why Nature is deeply valuable to us. In his lecture, Wittgenstein thinks we violate the boundaries of sense *whenever* we speak of intrinsic value. However that may be, the point is important for talk of the intrinsic value of Nature. The language and conceptual tools available for illuminating, theorizing, instituting such talk are forged from ethical theories and thinking that were developed with humanity in mind. And in the rare cases where the language is fresh and free of such human-centered constraints—as in talk of the wild, sublime, and beautiful in Nature—a profound clash between the two language games is everywhere evident. One is for civilized society, the other not. Either way, we find language of one kind being pushed into directions it was not made to go, into ways that lead to absurdities. Language may fabricate problems, but it may also hide them.

And yet as Wittgenstein says at the end of the lecture, the tendency to do this is not to be ridiculed or dismissed as ordinary useless nonsense. It points to something of the greatest importance. But how to begin to unravel it, if indeed it can be unraveled?

In summary

We conclude with this observation, all too briefly. Our deepest evaluations begin in the more inarticulate and intuitively felt values. This is true of our sense of the value of humanity. The environmental ethic likewise begins in deep reactions (hard to distinguish from our deepest aesthetic

evaluations) like, say, those to slavery (and sexual slavery perhaps most poignantly). The evaluation lies in a place deeper than words or concepts, even if later we find some that seem up to the task of moral theory. But it can take a long time to theorize or judge properly about such things explicitly and discursively (as is clear in the case of slavery, accepted everywhere for centuries, for all that we take for granted now about the rights of all human beings). And for a long time one can be made to feel romantically unrealistic and counterproductive for clinging to the unspeakable nature of the evil involved.

In our view, it is not clear how if ever we will articulate properly the value of Nature, or the evil of its destruction. Wittgenstein famously says, in another place, that whereof we cannot speak thereof we must be silent. And however that is to be interpreted in the broader context of Wittgenstein's writings, we think it fitting and instructive here. The concepts and language of the conservation movement and environmental ethic more broadly need a proper burial, which of course is a form of respect. Who knows what will happen then, or what will happen from sitting in the middle of no-man's-land and simply contemplating what has happened so far (perhaps a renewal of certain terms). We are early in this thinking, even earlier than the equivalent of displaying a white flag to gain time before being swirled by the confrontation. Consequentialists may receive with horror this proposition of halting action until we understand the play better—after all, they are anxious to monopolize Nature through facts that rarely change the path of destruction. They are the first who need to recognize the failure of their propositions. Given that the original spiritual sources, at least in English, of the conservation and environmental movements today include Thoreau and Muir, and activists like David Brower, we submit that one constraint to place on future thinking about the value of Nature is for it to not proceed along consequentialist lines.

We proclaim the need for *intellectual* activism, a form of paradigmatic change that starts at the theoretical roots of the movement and refounds it on new conceptual ground. Intellectual activism is about reformulating the discourse by creating a new language game that is not played by those on either side of the trench. We may not yet have the rules or tools for this activism; it lies in no man's land and may not ever happen. But precedents exist, even for the environmentalists. The 1987 Brundtland Report, (*Our Common Future*, published by the World Commission on Environment and Development), catapulted the concept of "sustainable

development” into the established discourse—an example of intellectual activism by consequentialists—and channeled the movement in a new direction (a wrong one in our perspective) by creating a new relative value: sustainability. While the discourse remains the same, we have no solutions to offer, no actions besides pointing at the demise of this concept,¹⁵ and remain in hopeful silence for a radical new beginning.

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