

Perspectives

The Case for Environmental Moderation (or why people who live in recycled bottles shouldn't throw stones)

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I am an environmentalist. I turn off the water while I brush my teeth, and I only buy beer in returnable bottles. I started a paper-recycling system in my department at the university. And, as soon as I can afford it, I'm going to trade my roomy, comfortable station wagon for a car that gets conscience-soothing gas mileage.

Perhaps, though, I'm not an environmentalist at all. Perhaps I'm just overly conscientious. I use my turn signals when no one is around to notice. I always flush in public toilets, and I contribute a dime every time I get coffee from the departmental pot (well, almost every time).

Maybe it's even worse than just being conscientious—I may be attracted to environmental arguments because I am an unreasoning idealist. I've been a Chicago Cubs fan for thirty years (next year they will win the pennant). I believe most people would not deliberately harm other people or destroy others' property, and my confidence in the American way remains high despite an awareness of public life that began when John Kennedy was assassinated.

Considering why I act the way I do has convinced me that I am not much of an environmentalist at all. By profession I am a professor in a natural resources discipline, and I have been conditioned to restrain my

actions and thoughts based on an ecological overview. Nevertheless, other criteria affect my actions, and the environment, like money, isn't everything. I am no more of an environmentalist than I am a husband, or a sports fan, financier, and Christian; at times I am mostly one of these, at all times I am a bit of each.

Extending my conception of personal action to society has greatly pacified my fears about the environmental crisis. The question of who is or isn't an environmentalist has become irrelevant, and the illusion of bitter rivals battling to either destroy or preserve nature has evaporated like the steam from a power-plant cooling tower.

A friend once told me that where the environment was concerned, one could either be part of the problem or part of the solution. Nonsense. No one is totally devoted to preserving the environment. To paraphrase Descartes, "I am, therefore I pollute." The alternative to polluting the environment is to stop living; and then, as every Agatha Christie fan knows, someone still must dispose of the corpse. In practice, we all compromise environmental quality for the benefit of other desires—for wealth and convenience usually, but for other reasons as well, including the relief of human misery.

Consider the paper recycling program in my department. The idea was endorsed enthusiastically: collection boxes in all offices, weekly transfer to larger containers, and monthly trips to the recycling plant 40 miles away. The system worked fine for several months (except for a few professors who couldn't distinguish a collection box from a trash can and so used one or the other for everything). The students running the program, however, began to feel their own constraints. As research projects, exams, and graduation approached, collections became sporadic and eventually nonexistent. The price of paper fell, the price of gasoline rose, the containers were declared a fire hazard, and the recycling program died.

The example is insignificant, but the principle is universal. Within each of us there is a desire for environmental quality—Aldo Leopold (1966) called it a land ethic—but the strength of that desire varies from individual to individual, from time to time, and from circumstance to circumstance. When focused on any single issue, the wide range in the intensity of that ethic is the cause of most environmental antagonism. I believe, however, that if we accept this natural diversity of opinions, both the environmental movement and the environment will benefit.

Environmental Continuum

For every issue affecting the environment, there is a continuum of possible actions arrayed from total elimination of a natural environment to its preservation without human interference. If asked to choose a position on that continuum for any specific issue, each person would do so based on a unique set of considerations. We know, however, that out of these infinite possibilities, most people within a common cultural setting will react similarly. This idea is fundamental to social organization. Without it, we wouldn't know what was standard equipment on a new car or how many french fries make a regular order. Students in my courses are perfectly satisfied that their grades will be distributed in a bell-shaped curve—until the grades are posted, at least.

This same central tendency (as statisticians call it) holds for environmental opinions, also. For some issues, the tendency toward a common viewpoint will be strong. For example, hunting of whales and other marine mammals is considered outrageous in the minds of most Americans. This message is so clear that marine mammals in United States waters are protected by a specific Congressional Act exempting them from exploitation and typical resource management.

Most issues, however, affect many people directly; and the range of attitudes broadens accordingly. If a flood-control dam is proposed, the farmers who regularly suffer crop losses probably will find the environmental changes acceptable. The canoeist or fly fisherman who uses the stream for recreation probably will oppose the dam. Other farmers and other fishermen probably will support their respective factions. The alteration of a mountain valley for a ski-resort will be acceptable to the land developer and skier, but intolerable to an adjacent land owner or vacationer, both of whom like the spot because it isn't developed.

The escape from these apparent

stand-offs is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is a shorthand expression for the fact that in their daily lives people make decisions within a shifting set of values. Professional decision-makers would say, in their technical jargon, that people have multiple objectives that are weighted differently for each decision. My students were totally committed to paper recycling last fall, but I predict their response would be anti-environmental if I attempted to revive the program now. The farmer who wants flood control and the vacationer who wants untainted mountain views may be the same person, and the ski-resort developer is likely to demand quality fly-fishing when s/he can't ski. All are hypocrites to be sure, but justifiably so within the total context of their lives.

This natural variability in the intensity of environmental feelings means that the overall environmental position of any individual is more moderate than the image projected when s/he chooses to campaign for or against some environmental issue. When those "more-moderate" averages are combined with the average values of people who seldom feel strongly enough to support any special-interest groups, we form a conglomerate of environmental values that is inevitably centralized.

Looking at environmental topics this way should eliminate the inaccurate caricatures of back-to-nature freaks on one hand and profit-blinded exploiters on the other; and it should encourage us to reconsider our attitudes toward environmental affairs. Some would argue that holding an extreme position is the best way to get action, much as sitting on the end of the see-saw maximizes the force of your weight. It also maximizes the risk of falling off the see-saw. When every group from bass fishermen to billboard owners has a so-called "powerful lobby," I wonder whether decision-makers would be foolish enough to listen to anyone. An attitude of tolerance and compromise is the only rational mode for the successful resolution of environmental problems and provides for

the most efficient and effective allocation of resources for society as a whole. Almost twenty years ago, Garrett Hardin (1963) wrote that the self-regulating features of nature, which allow for much variation within certain limits, are also the logical bases for organizing society. Environmental affairs, as a subset of society, are constrained in the same way: there is a point at which the benefits of demanding environmental quality are exceeded by the social and environmental costs of the process.

Environmental Mythology

On the premise that understanding and rationality are the constructive approaches to improving environmental quality, the field must first be cleared of several misconceptions. Like environmental toxicants, there are some common myths that can be fatal to understanding if absorbed in large quantities.

The first myth is that exploitation of nature for human use is wrong. The basis of all life and all quality of life is the transformation of natural goods into those which nourish, clothe, shelter, and please us. The conservation movement developed within the forestry and fisheries industries, both of which exploit natural resources for human benefit. Before 1900 these industries recognized that efficient and profitable exploitation could continue only with strict attention to the renewal of forest, soil, and water resources. Such resources are called *renewable* because they annually produce a surplus that can be removed without affecting next year's production. The much-used analogy to the interest earned on a savings account is apropos, except that the interest doesn't accumulate in nature as it does in a bank. If not used, this surplus goes into other forms, much like a 100% tax rate on unspent interest. We must exploit our natural resources, and it is only judgment of how much to exploit that is subject to debate. As accepted by natural resource professionals in recent years,

that judgment necessarily incorporates social, political, economic, institutional, and other concerns.

Corollary to the exploitation myth is the misconception that human actions that indirectly affect environmental quality are criminal. Legislation such as the National Environmental Policy Act, which created the need for environmental impact statements, seems to justify that myth. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the intent of environmental laws is to inject environmental considerations explicitly into the planning when alteration of natural areas is proposed. It is not necessary to avoid environmental degradation; in fact, it is necessary to weigh effects on the natural environment only as heavily as social or economic factors. The only exception was the Endangered Species Act, which absolutely forbade changes that would destroy a species. Recently the Act has been altered to include an evaluation process permitting exceptions in some cases.

The reality is that 210 million people cannot do anything without causing some environmental changes. A nation of spray can users conceivably could affect the intensity of ultra-violet radiation on the earth. A nation of backpackers surely would destroy the best backpacking sites within a few months; and if wood-burning stoves became commonplace, available wood would become scarce within a few years. The task, and the opportunity, is not to avoid environmental changes—they are inevitable—but to choose as wisely as possible among the range of alternative changes. A professor of ecology once boasted to me that he saved the nation thirty million dollars because his testimony stopped two large power-development projects. Though he may have delayed the spending until new projects had been found, the benefits of his actions were temporary. The public interest would have been better served had he applied his expertise towards the planning of future projects that must

be built somewhere.

The third myth contends that it is morally wrong for humans to alter the environment. This myth arises, I believe, only because humans can remember the past and project the effect of their actions into the future. We can imagine the negative impacts of some proposed action, and we conclude that negative impacts are unnatural and immoral.

The reasoning ability that has allowed us to develop theories of evolution and ecology, however, makes us no less a part of nature than any other animal, plant, or mineral. The way we necessarily affect the rest of the world by being alive is neither immoral or moral—it is amoral. The clearest illustration of this point is that virtually all convincing arguments for environmental quality are made in terms of human benefits. Wild organisms may yield domesticated strains or medical products, wild areas heal the psyche and give us information to manage developed areas. The basis for this argument is that human survival is enhanced by a high-quality environment, not that other parts of the earth deserve recognition for their own sakes. The choice of which kind of environment or which rate and direction of change in environment is best for humans is a social, not a moral, dilemma.

Solving the Environmental Problem

Given that a centralized environmental ethic exists in the United States, the question naturally arises whether the intensity of that ethic will assure us and our descendents of environmental quality as good as or better than we have now.

The question cannot be answered. It appears that a further injection of ecological awareness would improve the health of present society, but we must take care that an accidental overdose is not fatal. What are gains and what are losses in environmental affairs depends in part on biological

constraints, but also on the state of society and the abundance of its perceived resources. Considerations of environmental quality cannot be made in a vacuum; they must be incorporated into the normal operation of society.

Despite many opinions to the contrary, the political process is the most suitable system for the integration of environmental thought into the American system. The government is willingly handed the complex job of apportioning scarce resources of other kinds—tax benefits, health care, foreign aid, business subsidies, educational opportunities. It can incorporate (and is incorporating) environmental factors in the same way.

Some argue that environmental issues are too complex to be trusted to politicians, but others contend that it is precisely because of the complexity that the political process must be allowed to operate. Technical complexities are relatively simple to address. The scientific community has the knowledge and experience to advise politicians and citizens on technical matters; daily it is becoming more sophisticated and sensitive to the ways in which this knowledge can be translated into useful messages. Though scientists will truthfully claim that more knowledge is needed, most would readily offer their present understanding of an environmental situation rather than have a decision made on the basis of no scientific information at all.

Social complexities are the difficult problems, and it is here that neither scientists nor technicians are appropriate advisors and decision-makers. Preferences on environmental issues are incorporated by each person into the totality of his/her life, and the government functions as the representative of our collected individual preferences. As imperfect as the process may be in operation, the political institutions that we trust to oversee other aspects of our public life remain the most appropriate for assuring that environmental con-

(Concluded on p. 224)

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Letters

...from p. 207

Does Professor McReynolds realize that any major piece of verifiable information of the incompleteness or inaccuracy of the data of evolutionary biology would bring acclaim to the discoverer? (Remember the discovery of *Latimeria*?)

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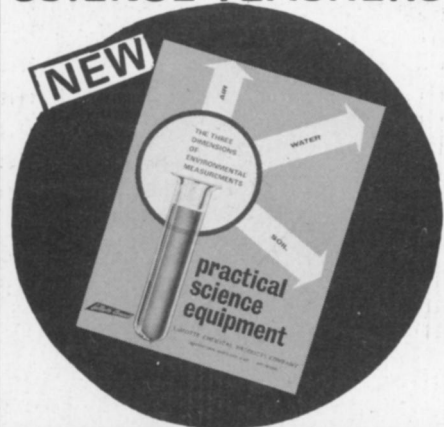
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that aids our understanding of the natural world.

The scientists of the Creation Research Society are not incompetent—though there is no evidence

that their competence includes evolutionary biology. But let me give them their due: I would feel much safer in an airplane or a rocket designed by the scientists of the CRS than in one designed by a committee of paleontologists.

John A. Moore
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Call for a State Meeting

After the National Convention, I became cognizant of the necessity for a meeting of biologists in my state. To ensure the preservation of life on earth and the respect and dignity that all life forms deserve, we must not only become knowledgeable of the issues facing our society, but also develop strategies and a value system in the use of potentially beneficial and yet awesome discoveries, such as recombinant DNA and nuclear energy. We, as educators, are in a most opportune position to truly create an enlightened ethical citizenry. The pupils we educate are our future. They need and deserve our best teaching abilities.

I would appreciate replies from other people interested in such a meeting, and would welcome any assistance.

Denise "Chip" Black
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siderations are incorporated into the real goal of Americans—the improvement of the quality of life for all humanity.

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