Environmentalists engage many causes. They work on behalf human rights, poverty alleviation, and democracy as well as endangered species, a stable climate, and clean air, water, and soil. Amidst these diverse efforts, environmentalists maintain a fundamental commitment to nature. They see their job, to one degree or another, as standing up for the conservation, preservation, and sustainability of the nonhuman world. This dimension of environmentalism finds its roots in the West, especially Britain and the United States, but has since become part of almost every social expression of environmental concern. Today, even the most human-centered environmental organizations—those focused on, for example, environmental justice, sustainable development, and industrial ecology—concentrate on nature insofar as they see a healthy natural world as a prerequisite for human well-being or a medium through which injustices are perpetrated. Indeed, since environmentalism’s beginnings in the nineteenth century, when people began worrying about industrialization despoiling rural and wild landscapes, to contemporary efforts to address climate change, freshwater scarcity, and loss of biological diversity, a central strand of environmentalism has prized the natural world and worked to protect it.

The point of departure for this article is that the assumption behind the movement’s defense of nature is no longer valid and that continuing to subscribe to it compromises the promise of global environmentalism. The effort to defend or otherwise protect nature from humans assumes a distinction between the two. It supposes a domain that is essentially “human” and another that is fundamentally “nature.” Over the past few decades, ecological events and human understandings have proven this supposition erroneous. Today, humans draw so many resources from deep within and across the earth, and emit such incalculable amounts of waste into the air, water, and soil that, as McKibben famously...
argued, humanity’s signature is now everywhere.\footnote{McKibben 1989} There are no places devoid of human influence. One cannot draw an empirical line between the human and nonhuman spheres with any sort of certainty. Moreover, we are finally realizing that nature is not simply a material object that can be known in an unmediated fashion, but rather is always understood through interpretive lenses. Nature, like everything else, is a social construct, and thus its meaning changes across time and space. In this sense, one cannot consider (let alone defend) nature independent of human experience.

Many scholars have recognized the “end of nature” and sought to catalogue its empirical expression or explain its theoretical meaning.\footnote{See, e.g., Biro 2005; Cronon 1996; Ellis 2011; Glover 2006; McKibben 1989, 2010; Oelschlaeger 1995; Rosen 2008; Soper 1995; Vogel 2002; Whiteside 2002.} More recently this discussion has taken place within the literature on the Anthropocene, which emphasizes the geological influence humanity is having on the planet itself.\footnote{See, e.g., Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Steffen et al. 2011; Biermann et al. 2012; Griggs et al. 2013; Jensen 2013.} This article extends these considerations into the political arena by exploring the implications of the Anthropocene for global environmentalism. It asks: what kind of environmental politics is appropriate for the Anthropocene? That is, if a large slice of environmentalism has been about protecting, conserving, and preserving the nonhuman world, what happens when this world is indelibly inflected with a human signature or overlaid so thickly with human interpretation?

In this article, I answer this question using a combination of empirical observation and conceptual analysis. Empirically, we are already seeing the outlines of a post-nature environmental politics. Without explicitly dismissing the notion of nature, many environmentalists are pursuing goals that require an extensive, indelible human imprint on the more-than-human world. They welcome technological interventions, wide-ranging management schemes, a focus on human welfare, and concern about urban as well as rural landscapes. Subscribing to various renditions of sustainable development, ecological modernization, or human-centered ecology, many environmentalists these days do not see their work as protecting pristine nature from contaminating humanity but recognize that humans must be fundamentally folded into environmental protection efforts.

Despite such understanding, however, environmentalism still stands on weak intellectual footing, which compromises its political effectiveness. Concepts like sustainable development or human-centered ecology indicate the complementarities between human and more-than-human welfare. But they remain premised on the dichotomy itself. They see humans and nature as distinct realms and aim at tradeoffs or call for balancing different ends without fashioning a broader conceptualization of the hybrid world we now inhabit. Protecting
ecological health and fighting injustice in a hybrid world is not about cutting deals between human and nonhuman well-being but understanding the co-constitutive character of all life and working on its behalf. Fashioning such a politics can strengthen environmentalists’ efforts and make them more relevant in the Anthropocene. Below, I explain the character of human/nature hybridity and how environmentalists can understand this in a way that advances the movement’s efforts. This involves seeing that the end of nature dismantles not only environmentalism’s foundational ground but that of anti-environmentalism as well, and this opens new political possibilities for environmental debate.

The need to move beyond a dualistic environmental politics has contemporary relevance. Today, much debate revolves around a tradeoff between economic and ecological ends. As the world’s economies are facing historic deficits and unemployment rates, policy-makers, interest groups, and ordinary citizens are scrutinizing the financial costs of environmental protection, and lines of disagreement turn partly on the place of nature in people’s analyses. Environmentalists tend to emphasize the near-ontological priority of nature. They argue that without clean air, water and soil or biological abundance, economic productivity means little to human welfare. Indeed, at the extreme, they contend that without a livable planet, there is no economic life. In contrast, their detractors maintain that economic productivity is the source of human well-being and that growing the economy is prerequisite to any ability humanity may have for addressing environmental problems. Many touting this position see environmental regulation as “job-killing.” The Anthropocene cuts through disagreements about the place of nature in environmental politics and, by extension, reorients the economy versus ecology debate. The economy and ecology are not independent realms over which one needs to argue priorities. Rather, like nature and artifice more generally, they constitute each other. Recognizing this opens a new chapter in environmental politics and enables the environmental movement to refashion its arguments and campaigns.

The article proceeds in the following way. First, I explain the end of nature or, put differently, what the Anthropocene means. Second, I discuss how environmentalists have, so far, responded and make the case for greater conceptual clarity on the part of the movement. Third, I explain how the Anthropocene undermines conventional environmental politics that revolve around the nature/human dichotomy. The next two sections demonstrate what an Anthropocene politics looks like in the context of wilderness and climate change protection. The concluding section summarizes the argument.

5. Daly and Farley 2010.
End of Nature

There are two dimensions to the end of nature: empirical and conceptual. Empirically, a growing human population,\(^8\) unparalleled technological prowess,\(^9\) increasing economic might,\(^10\) and a globalizing culture of consumerism\(^11\) are propelling humanity to dig deeper into, reach further across, and more intensely exploit the earth’s resources, sinks, and ecosystem services. To be sure, humans have always altered nature.\(^12\) However, over the past century or so the cumulative force of human numbers, power, and technological capability has swept people so deeply into and across all ecosystems that one can no longer draw a clean distinction between the human and nonhuman realms. Today, we mine the earth’s crust, release waste into the sky, reroute rivers, fish the oceans, and reformat the land. We now penetrate every realm of the earth: the lithosphere, pedosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere.\(^13\)

These penetrations are not simply flecks on the earth’s physiognomy, but signal humanity’s integration into the planet’s biophysical dynamics. Over the past century, our activity has spliced humanity so deeply into the earth’s biochemical and physical processes that we have become an essential ecological force in our own right. Indeed, there is no longer a dividing line between “earth systems” and “human systems.” We now live in a hybrid world, the “Anthropocene.”\(^14\) In the Anthropocene, there are no longer self-subsisting ecosystems but only anthropogenic biomes (“anthromes”), which possess ecological patterns and processes substantially different from those of the Holocene or any prior epoch.\(^15\)

As if the physical disappearance of nature were not enough, certain intellectual understandings have been declaring the conceptual end of nature, arguing that the boundary between humans and nature never really existed since we have never had—nor could we ever have—a clear understanding of “nature” or “humans” in and of themselves. Our notions of both are social constructions, and thus nature did not really disappear with climate change,\(^16\) or the arrival of the Anthropocene. If anything, certain understandings of nature have changed, and, as we realize this, we come to recognize that every idea of nature is sociohistorically contingent and subject to change. Nature, then, is not a separate realm, as many environmentalists assume but, because it is always interpreted through cultural lenses, is part and parcel of human affairs.

The social construction of nature is not philosophical idealism. Social constructivists agree that there is a material substratum to the world but that

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15. Ellis 2011.
its meaning is up for grabs. Nature is thus not simply a physical entity but a repository of meaning.¹⁷ Like everything else, humans endow nature with particular understandings that come to define nature’s essential character. We see this as people identify parts of nature in different ways. For instance, what some people take to be an endangered species, others see as a source of income or even dinner. Likewise, while some look upon trees as unique expressions of the earth’s manifold fertility or even as relatives, others look at them as future furniture or board feet. Such distinctions are more than semantic. They literally constitute what is being seen and how people act.¹⁸

End of Environmentalism?

The Anthropocene should not surprise environmentalists. They have long warned of human encroachment on the natural world and operated with a romanticized notion of nature for which they have received constant criticism. Nonetheless, the Anthropocene is hard to swallow, and many environmentalists have resisted shifting their politics accordingly. Some environmentalists argue that nature may be flecked with a human signature, but this does not mean that it no longer exists as a self-subsisting entity. Environmental policies can reverse human encroachment and may eventually be able to wrest nature from an abiding human presence.¹⁹ Likewise, many take issue with the conceptual end of nature, since it represents a type of extreme relativism that is hostile to scientific understanding and common sense. In this regard, there may be a social dimension to how people think about nature, but nature is still fundamentally a physical entity and understanding of it can be based on systematic observation and scientific explanation.²⁰

A second form of resistance is less about the ontological character of nature than the political consequences of end-of-nature arguments. Many worry that, without nature as a standard or political foundation, there is nothing to stop anti-environmentalists from running roughshod over any place on earth and utilizing every resource and sink.²¹ They fear that people may pave rainforests, force various creatures to extinction, or destroy old-growth forests since there is nothing sacred or otherwise ontologically significant deserving of moral consideration or respect.²²

Connected to this is the idea that the end of nature may encourage cynicism among environmentalists themselves, since, if we have already lost the promise of protecting nature from humans, any further efforts are futile. McKibben

²². Chase 2001; Silver 2006; Young 2006.
comes close to this when he worries about generating concern and excitement for the environmental movement when the movement’s ultimate aim is quixotic. He anxiously asks, “If nature were about to end, we might muster endless energy to stave it off; but if nature has already ended, what are we fighting for?”

Interestingly enough, environmentalists are still fighting. Some, to be sure, are still trying to bolster the barricades between humans and nature, and attempting to protect relatively pristine domains from even further human encroachment. Others, acting from a conceptually or philosophically ambiguous ground, simply want to stop injustice, unnecessary destruction, and violence. Unconcerned by theoretical understandings about humans or nature, they resist environmental degradation as a matter of moral indignation. Still others appreciate what it means to live in the Anthropocene and think of their efforts within a larger frame of reference wherein humans and nature are not distinct realms. However, even these latter thinkers and activists have yet to articulate a clear understanding of the political foundations for Anthropocene environmental engagement. In all cases we need greater conceptual clarity. Fully appreciating the ramifications of the end of nature and the realities of the Anthropocene can help advance such lucidity. One can move toward this by understanding how the end of nature scrambles traditional categories of analysis and grounds for action within environmental politics in general.

**End of the Dueling Natures of Environmental Politics**

Environmentalists and their critics argue about many things. They dispute the importance of and policy responses to air quality in China, water resources in India, carbon emissions in Germany, and hydraulic fracturing in the United States. Underneath such disputations, however, is a longstanding philosophical disagreement about the fundamental source of value and its relationship to human understanding and practice. That is to say, environmental politics has long involved ontological contestation. While some of this has dissipated in the last decade or so, such contestation still informs the outlines of much environmental politics.

For most of its history, environmentalism has tended to see the natural world as ontologically primary. That is, nature serves as the backdrop against which human activities take place and sets the biophysical parameters for life on earth. As such, humans need to accommodate their practices to nature’s laws, principles, and patterns rather than ignore or pervert them. We see this, for instance, in the kinds of arguments environmentalists advance when they warn that, while people can build houses in flood plains, pump excessive amounts of carbon dioxide into the air, or wipe out species at inordinate rates, at some point such actions will rub up against critical thresholds and ecosystem services will crash. When this happens, according to environmentalists, nature has “spoken.”

It has revealed its superior, ontological status.24 As the cliché says, “Nature bats last.”

One also sees a privileging of nature in the way many environmentalists have looked to the nonhuman world as a model for living. Known philosophically as naturam sequi, this orientation contends that nature not only sets limits but also instructively informs human life.25 It offers maxims for living well—through principles like interdependence, autopoiesis, and mutuality—and people should thus turn to nature when designing buildings, cultivating crops, organizing businesses, structuring social relations, and even constructing one’s individual life.26 This is an age-old notion captured succinctly by Cicero’s comment, “I follow the guidance of Nature...Not to stray far from Nature and to mold ourselves according to her law and pattern—this is true wisdom,”27 and much more recently Commoner’s dictum: “Nature knows best.”28

Some environmentalists have taken this normative sensibility even further and translated it into moral injunction insofar as they see the natural world as a realm deserving of ethical consideration in its own right. Activist groups like the Wildlands Project, EarthFirst!, and Earth Liberation Front subscribe to bio- or eco-centric orientations that see nature as intrinsically worthwhile. More generally, many animal rights groups, biodiversity activists, campaigners for dam-free rivers, and those who fight on behalf of the sheer existence of non-human creatures and ecosystems often express such a moral sentiment.29

Behind each of these environmental sensibilities is the idea that nature operates independently of human experience, and that humans should respect, preserve, live in tune with, or otherwise honor this. Put differently, many environmental groups assume that there is a nature to nature, and that humans would do best to harmonize their lives with rather than trying to outsmart, control, or ignore it. To put it in still other language, environmentalism subscribes to an ideal that could be called “naturalism.” It looks to nature as the most real, good, and right, and counsels conforming to its imperatives and character.

Environmental critics have historically subscribed to a different ontological orientation. Rather than seeing nature as representing a privileged realm with which humans must come into accord, they have seen humans as the exceptional species entitled to shape nature as they see fit. Environmental critics employ this orientation in political debates when they counter arguments about nature’s fragility and the need to honor nature’s biophysical imperatives. They acknowledge that nature operates according to laws, and that its patterned behavior is not subject to every human caprice. However, they also point out that nature’s laws

27. Cicero, quoted in Ferry 2005, 156.
are not inviolate; in fact, humans transgress them all the time and with much profit. Humans outwit, work around, or otherwise rise above nature’s constraints by employing reason, ingenuity, and technological capabilities.  

Critics also advance such a view when they argue against environmentalist calls for looking to nature for ethical instructions. For critics, nature is not a realm filled with harmony, goodness, and integrity—and thus a model for human life—but one constituted by brutality, nastiness, and a character simply unbecoming of civilized human beings. Nature, “red in tooth and claw,” is the realm in which praying mantises devour their mates, cats torture mice, and tsunamis and hurricanes ravage human homes and cities. As such, it is not a sphere to emulate, but, in the words of Francis Bacon, one to be “bound into service” and “put in constraint.”  

The principles of viable and meaningful living are to be found in humanity’s—not nature’s—affairs.

Finally, most environmental critics refuse to endow nature with moral worth because it operates according to necessity rather than freedom. Plants, animals, minerals, and bacteria lack rationality and thus are unable to make choices about life. Devoid of such, critics contend that they are indifferent to human design and thus people can treat them as they like. Because humans are uniquely rational and enjoy free will, can develop virtuous lives, and feel pain and pleasure, they are distinctively deserving of moral consideration, and thus environmentalists are mistaken when they invoke biocentric or eco-centric moral arguments on behalf of the other-than-human world.

For critics, then, nature is not something that humans must respect or emulate. Rather, it is something to be brought under control. In contrast to an ideal of “naturalism,” environmental critics subscribe to an ideal of “mastery.” They envision the surest route to human survival and flourishing to involve humanity outmaneuvering and ultimately reshaping the natural world in the service of human betterment.

While environmental politics has involved an ongoing debate about the relative status of humans versus nature, the end of nature signals that this type of politics no longer makes sense. In the Anthropocene, neither nature nor humanity—empirically or conceptually—exists with any kind of independence or certitude. Neither can provide political ground or straightforward guidance on how to conduct our collective lives. The end of nature casts us not simply geologically but politically into the Anthropocene. Thus, justifications for certain actions and the philosophical grounds on which the environmental movement has long stood are no longer available, and anti-environmentalists also stand on uncertain ground. One cannot look to nature or humanity, in and of themselves, for reliable insight. Rather, one must cultivate political thought in the hybridization of the human/nature world. How does one go about doing this?

32. Young 2006; Silver 2006.
The short answer is that one looks for patterns in the co-constituting world of artifice and the more-than-human world, and cultivates meaningful relationships within that admixture. To be sure, this is difficult, and no hard-and-fast rules exist for how to do it, but this is the condition of post-nature environmental politics. This is what it means to act politically in the Anthropocene. Many environmentalists are already exploring this orientation.

The Nature of Wilderness

Throughout the world, environmentalists have tried to preserve certain regions, landscapes, or ecosystems from overly exploitative practices. Much of this has been in the service of wilderness protection. Such efforts involve cordoning off particular places and limiting or even forbidding an abiding human presence, with the idea of securing locations where the more-than-human world can flourish. One sees such initiatives in many parks and preserves around the world. The vision behind such efforts was articulated by Indian conservationist Valmik Thapar in his defense of creating exclusionary tiger reserves: “As far as I am concerned, tigers and forest dwellers cannot co-exist”; tigers can only be saved “in large undisturbed, inviolate landscapes” unoccupied by people.34 Many at the forefronts of wilderness protection share this view. Indeed, the United States Wilderness Act defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man [sic], where man [sic] is a visitor who does not remain.”35 The overall vision and its associated practices are part of what Adams and others call “reservation conservation” or “fortress conservation.”36 It is also readily observed in traditional practices such as the designation of “spirit forests” or “sacred mountains.”37

The distinction between people and nature in wilderness protection is particularly poignant to the degree that authorities often evict area residents to create sanctuaries, parks, reserves, and other instances of reservation conservation. Ridding areas of people often involves conflict and frequently violence.38 In many parts of the world, states use militaries to remove indigenous people, squatters, or others to create so-called “wilderness” areas.

As should be clear, when evictions are part of creating wilderness, one must question the meaning and vision of wilderness itself. What is wilderness when it is designed and executed by state and conservation authorities? One must also question it when recognizing the extreme amount of additional human manipulation that goes into establishing and maintaining wilderness preserves, sanctuaries, and the like. For instance, as Scott suggests, founding and preserving such areas is a byproduct of a broader effort by states to manage terrain according

34. Thapar, quoted in Dowie 2009, 129.
to schematic visions in which areas are mapped and spatially organized so as to become “legible.” Furthermore, people are perpetually involved with sustaining parks, forests, and sanctuaries insofar as officials monitor protected areas, reintroduce species, feed animals, and otherwise manipulate the landscape in the service of creating and reproducing “wilderness.”

Many indigenous people do not distinguish between humans and nature, and thus understand wilderness not as the absence of humans but as a set of relationships between humans and the more-than-human world. According to Martinez, many Native peoples understand that land left on its own is not “wild” per se, but is simply unkept and thus vulnerable to going fallow and becoming depleted of biological diversity and ecological abundance. Rather, preserving wilderness involves maintaining a relationship in which people clean salmon beds, selectively harvest wild plants, intentionally burn certain terrain, and outplant and prune particular vegetation. In parts of Kenya and Tanzania, for instance, Maasai rangeland practices have limited the growth of aggressive, damaging grasses and promoted fire resilience, and in Ethiopia the Mursi have kept their ranges productive and biologically diverse. This practice is not restricted, of course, to Native peoples. Rangers in the United States and Mexico, for instance, have been managing fire, securing conservation easements, and altering grazing practices to cultivate a “working wilderness” where economic productivity is part of a dynamic human/nature relationship. Indeed, many non-governmental organizations committed to protecting wilderness include extensive involvement of people. Recognizing the need to address both economic and ecological goals has become a touchstone for many conservation projects throughout the world and a core principle of sustainable development. Under this rubric, wilderness is not a state or condition from which people separate themselves, but something to be cultivated within a broader socio-biophysical context.

In many ways, contemporary conservationists already practice this understanding of wilderness but fail to recognize and take advantage of its pragmatic and philosophical insights. Wilderness protection can no longer be a matter of stepping aside and letting nature “do its thing,” as naturalism would suggest. Rather, it involves a good dose of intervention. Recognizing this, however, does not mean that wilderness protection should be about mastery. Mastery seeks to conquer and rid ourselves of wildness. In the case of wilderness protection, mastery would impose human control in all aspects of management and thus, in the name of creating a certain landscape, outsmarting nature and inducing predictability, it would squeeze out any remnants of otherness inhering in protected areas—and thus make a mockery of almost any idea of wilderness. Wilderness protection demands a fundamental commitment to preserving the

40. Glick 2006; Rawson 2003; Sayre 2005.
42. Dowie 2009, 135, 224.
wild dimension of protected areas even as it requires significant human intervention.\textsuperscript{43} Neither naturalism nor mastery is appropriate. What is needed is a middle way in which we relinquish our embrace of either ideal, and recognize that we are in a broader, more interdependent relationship with the more-than-human world. We are part of something larger than ourselves. A middle way includes everything from building wildlife corridors through human inhabited land and rehabilitating ecosystem health through landscape construction, to creating permeable urban and suburban surfaces to support wildlife and building green roofs on city structures to enhance biodiversity and ecological abundance.\textsuperscript{44} Behind all such endeavors is the recognition that wilderness is not a place or condition but a relationship, and that humans must be mindfully involved in cultivating it. In the Anthropocene, to put it differently, wilderness protection involves attuning ourselves to the hybrid character of ecosystems and helping to shape them in ways in which the human voice is deliberately one among others in fashioning socio-ecological arrangements.

The Nature of Climate

A similar orientation is required when confronting climate change. Naturalism understands climate change as the result of humans intervening too deeply into the earth’s carbon cycle and counsels shrinking humanity’s atmospheric footprint. This could involve taxing carbon, setting up a cap and trade system, or regulating certain industries or technologies in the service of replacing fossil fuel sources with clean renewable alternatives and reducing energy demand. Overall, the idea is to cut emissions so as to avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change and, in the long run, give the atmosphere a chance to cleanse itself of anthropogenic greenhouse gases. Environmentalists want societies to mitigate climate change: get out of the greenhouse gas business and leave the atmosphere alone.

Getting out of the greenhouse gas business, however, is a quixotic endeavor, and not necessarily the most promising one. This is especially the case since locating (to say nothing of staffing) the boundary between humanity and the atmosphere is impossible. Before the Industrial Revolution, carbon dioxide levels stood at roughly 270 parts per million (ppm). Today, they are over 400 ppm. Furthermore, they are growing globally at roughly 2 ppm per annum.\textsuperscript{45} This means, as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) makes clear, that we have already crossed too many thresholds to return to pre-industrial levels. As it states in its 2013 \textit{Summary for Policy Makers}, “A large fraction of anthropogenic climate change resulting from CO\(_2\) emissions is irreversible.”\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Abram 2010.
\textsuperscript{44} Adams 2006; Baldwin et al. 1994; Foreman 2002; McDonough and Braungart 2013; Rosenzweig 2003.
\textsuperscript{45} Tans and Keeling 2012.
\textsuperscript{46} IPCC 2013, 20.
Indeed, even the most ambitious proposals for reducing carbon emissions acknowledge that 270 ppm is a fantasy. Many identify an upper limit of 350 ppm or, at most, 500 ppm to ensure some semblance of climate security. Beyond these thresholds, scientists warn of planetary baking. Beyond 400 ppm—where we are presently—and certainly beyond 500 ppm, the earth faces runaway climate due to intensifying feedback loops. Even if we could reduce our CO$_2$ emissions to zero, ocean warming will continue for centuries. The dream of somehow returning to pre-industrial levels or even holding the line at the current 400 ppm seems chimerical. The whole idea of getting out of the greenhouse gas business and returning to an atmosphere devoid of humanity’s signature is nonsensical.

If we cannot draw a steeper boundary between humans and the atmosphere, what can be done? Here is where a post-nature orientation provides insight. Untied from the dream of naturalism, environmentalists can productively and more self-consciously explore the promise of human ingenuity and technological prowess to address climate change. They can find conceptual support for advancing technologies like solar, wind, geothermal, and hydroelectric power systems—energy sources that require extreme human intervention into “natural” systems—and not be concerned with seeing the earth and atmosphere as sacrosanct and thus not to be manipulated. That is, by relaxing an implicit commitment to remaining on one side of a human/nature divide and letting nature do “its thing,” environmentalists can see the atmosphere—penetrated and constituted by sunlight, wind, and water as well by airplanes, satellites, and greenhouse gases—as something to work with. In the same way that wilderness is not a state or condition but a relationship, climate security can also be a relationship. It involves being present in the atmosphere.

Participating in the atmosphere may sound odd, but it starts with embracing Anthropocene realities. The atmosphere has no preferred level of carbon concentrations. There is no natural ideal toward which humans must tack. Rather, we need to agree upon our own targets and directions for policy. We can arrive at this by studying the patterns of hybridity expressed in the human/nature world, and collectively (and democratically) figuring out preferred conditions. In this sense, it is important to remember that the threshold of a temperature rise of 2 degrees Centigrade (the current consensus target) means little to the victims of Katrina and Sandy in the US or of the devastating monsoon rains in India and Nepal in the summers of 2013 and 2014 or the killing heat waves that swept across southwestern Asia in 2011. Nor can those thresholds console other species that have disappeared or had their numbers decimated by climate change. This does not mean humanity should not identify policy goals aimed at certain, preferred socio-biophysical states. Rather, it simply

47. IPCC 2013, 20.
49. IPCC 2013, 33.
suggests that setting such goals is a matter of understanding the complex and inextricable interplays between humans and the wider world within which people exist. These interplays make clear that humans influence atmospheric conditions, which in turn affect human understandings and practices, which in turn affect atmospheric conditions.\(^50\) In doing so, one recognizes that getting out of the greenhouse gas business is like trying to emancipate oneself from one’s skin. Participating in the atmosphere, then, is not a choice but a reality that demands political navigation and discernment.

Such navigation takes on particular significance in light of geoengineering efforts. Today, certain environmentalists see the consequences of climate change as so dire that they recommend not simply participating with the earth and atmosphere, but trying to control the climate itself. Geo-engineers are advancing a battery of schemes that would enable humans to keep emitting large amounts of CO\(_2\) into an engineered atmosphere that would mask the most dangerous effects of climate change. For example, some call for seeding the oceans with iron to grow more phytoplankton, which will absorb still more CO\(_2\). Others suggest sending sunshades into orbit to block sunlight. Still others call for pumping sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere to impede solar radiation.\(^51\) These proposals obviously depart from the ideal of naturalism in that they are less interested in harmonizing human life with the natural world and more motivated to change the atmosphere further to accommodate human actions. In this sense, they flirt with, and even embrace, the urge to mastery. In the Anthropocene, such atmospheric mastery appears both dangerous and inappropriate for the hybrid world we inhabit.

The dangers are readily apparent. They involve risks to ecosystems, questions of liability as certain actors assume geoengineering responsibility, political perils as power structures form around geoengineering research and implementation, and the moral hazard of distracting attention from mitigation and adaptation.\(^52\) But equally problematic is the mismatch between mastery and Anthropocenic realities. The end of nature does not simply erase the boundary between humans and nature, but fundamentally changes the identities of the two spheres as they co-constitute each other. In this context, mastery makes no sense since environmental action is no longer a matter of humanity simply expressing its innate capabilities—understood in the guise of human ingenuity, technological prowess and reason—but the admixture of human and more-than-human dynamics. Put differently, the end of nature de-essentializes both humans and nature, and therewith removes faith in the free expression of human nature or any other notion of a distinctive human essence as a response to climate change or other environmental dangers. Furthermore, the Anthropocene makes clear that human management of socio-ecological actualities is an impossible aspiration. The Anthropocene may signify that humans have a hegemonic

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\(^{50}\) Latour 2013; Whiteside 2002.  
\(^{51}\) See, generally, Launder and Thompson 2010; Specter 2012.  
\(^{52}\) Nicholson 2013.
influence on ecosystems; it does not mean that humans reign supreme. In the Anthropocene, there may no longer be any “nature” independent of a human presence, but all is still not human. There is still an otherness that is part of socio-ecological hybridity that eludes complete human capture. The aspiration to snuff this out is to ignore the co-constitutive quality of the contemporary world.

Unable to leave the atmosphere and yet incapable of mastering it, environmental politics must walk a middle path between naturalism and mastery, formulating policies and choosing goals that emerge out of the amalgamation of a humanized but not completely human colonized world. Thus, addressing climate change in the Anthropocene is a pragmatic endeavor involving significant intervention into ecosystem dynamics—including technological innovations in non-carbon energy systems—and a type of humility in the face of living within a wider more-than-human world.

Conclusion

Increasing human activity and new understandings of social thought place us on a new planet. McKibben tries to emphasize this by labeling the world “Eaarth.” 53 Others prefer to invoke the idea of the Anthropocene or simply to point out the variability of our understandings of the world. 54 Above, I explain what this new reality means for the environmental movement, arguing that the end of nature represents an opportunity to rethink and politically reposition the movement. The end of nature undermines traditional categories of environmental politics and thus offers the chance to alter the terrain on which debates about our ecological and social futures take place.

For too long, environmental politics has been an argument about ontological supremacy. On one side, environmentalists held nature in high esteem and argued that humans should harmonize their lives with, rather than lord over, the natural world (naturalism). In contrast, anti-environmentalists or environmental skeptics understood humanity to be the fundamental fact of existence and have counseled using humanity’s innate gifts to rise above and outsmart the more-than-human realm (mastery). The end of nature signals that neither of these orientations makes sense anymore. Without nature, we can have confidence in neither our understandings of nature’s nature or humanity’s.

I argue for a middle way through the dual ideals of naturalism and mastery, and thus for a politics beyond dualistic categories. In doing so, I suggest that such a path places environmentalism in an ambiguous state. Yes, there is no such thing as nature unto itself. We have physically inflected ourselves too deeply into the more-than-human world and have conceptually recognized nature’s social construction. And yet there is still something “other” than

humanity. There is more to existence than our practices and understandings. To be sure, we may not know the character of this otherness (akin to Kant’s noumenal world) and our collective lives may fundamentally shape it, but this does not deny its existence. Environmentalism must operate in this ontologically indefinite world.

Post-nature orientations to wilderness and climate protection illustrate what this looks like. In doing so, I argue that environmentalists need not resist the post-nature age but can embrace it in ways that can advance their efforts. We are not in the Holocene anymore. Environmental advocates can no longer try to protect nature from humans, and anti-environmentalists must stop insisting that humanity trumps nature. The human-nature divide has broken down. Environmental politics, then, involves bringing power to bear in the service of a livable future. This calls for an environmentalism that does not lament human action but directs it in more sustainable, just, and ecologically healthy directions.

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