

SECTION III

How Shall We Live? Applying Ethical and Religious Perspectives to the Biodiversity Crisis





KEY POINTS

There are three important types of value that people ascribe to the environment: utilitarian, intrinsic, and nonsubstitutable.

Utilitarian value is based on the idea that nature has value because it serves as a means to achieve some other end.

Intrinsic value recognizes the worth of something in itself, putting the burden of proof on anyone who would attempt to override that value to offer a compelling reason to do so.

Nonsubstitutable value takes into account the uniqueness of a place, thing, or experience being valued, but the value assigned to that unique characteristic is determined by the ends that the object can help achieve, rather than its intrinsic worth.

The Ways We Value Nature

by Michael P. Nelson

Introduction

In environmental debates, questions of value are sometimes the deciding factor upon which an issue is decided. But how do we ascribe value to a flycatcher or an oak savanna? For most biodiversity advocates, the natural world is rich in value and importance. But the practical conservationist understands that not all value is created equal, and not everyone values nature in the same ways. The more clearly we can articulate and defend nature's value, both in terms of what it does for us and its value for its own sake, the more successful we will be in protecting and restoring it.

We tend to value nature in three ways: utilitarian value, intrinsic value, and nonsubstitutable value.

Utilitarian Value

First, and most obvious, nature possesses what is often referred to as *Utilitarian Value*. Most generally stated, this means that nature has value because it serves as a means to achieve some other end.

The debate over oil exploration in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is an example of the way we understand nature based on utilitarian value. For drilling proponents—the oil industry, the state of Alaska, and its congressional delegation, among others—the Refuge is defined solely by its usefulness: the potential oil it may produce and the alleged economic and national security benefits that would flow from it. Yet drilling opponents have also cited utilitarian values in their opposition to oil exploration. The Gwich'in nation still depends on caribou for subsistence and

has opposed development of the Refuge because of the impact it would have on its people's ability to hunt food. Other opponents have cited the critical habitat the refuge provides and the challenging outdoor recreation it offers as reasons to protect it.

Utilitarian value is a kind of value that is wholly substitutable, meaning that it can potentially be met in other ways. For example, proponents of oil drilling in the Refuge have claimed that caribou and polar bear will move their calving and denning areas away from drilling rigs, pipelines, and waste sites; some have suggested that in the 21st century, no people need to depend on subsistence hunting for food. Therefore, because of the substitutability of utilitarian value, they argue, we cannot rest the case for something like wilderness preservation on purely utilitarian grounds.

However, if we are going to include utilitarian values in our assessment of an environmental decision, then we need to take into account the full range of useful values that a natural area or a species provides. For example, a forest provides more than two-by-fours; it offers a range of other goods and services, from water purification to erosion control to carbon-storage. If a developer wants to argue that the value of a forest tract should be reduced to its "bottom line" utilitarian value, then full-cost accounting of all the values the forest provides, including its recreational value and its value for wildlife habitat, is the only honest and acceptable way to proceed.

Intrinsic Value

The term *Intrinsic Value* is most commonly used to describe value inherent in something regardless of its usefulness or benefit.

Our feelings for certain things clearly go beyond their utilitarian value. For example, few of us would say that our loved-ones are important based on their usefulness (their utilitarian value). Instead, they are valuable because they are good, or have value, in themselves. Likewise, most ethical and religious traditions foster a belief that all of humanity possess a certain kind of worth or dignity that transcends any utilitarian purpose they may serve.

Of course, things can possess more than one type of value (intrinsic value is value *in addition to*, not value *apart from*, other values). For example, we can recognize that monarch butterflies have an intrinsic right to exist, while also appreciating their beauty and the important role they play as pollinators.

Can we define nature, or biodiversity, as intrinsically valuable? Many ethicists and philosophers have argued that nature has intrinsic value.¹ The following summary arguments make this case:

- We (human beings) value ourselves intrinsically.
- We assume that we possess intrinsic value because we are living beings that

have interests (conscious as well as nonconscious) that can be subverted or nurtured, we feel pain and pleasure, we are self-conscious, etc.

- In American history, we have not always extended intrinsic value to all people. But as our knowledge changed about the qualities of those whom we previously considered outside our moral realm (and not worthy of intrinsic value), we came to realize that for the same reasons that we believed that we had intrinsic value, we had to extend intrinsic value to others as well.
- An extension of intrinsic value to include all living things, then, seems inevitable. If we believe that all things that are alive have interests, and if we believe that all things with interests ought to be granted intrinsic value (since that is why we believe that we have intrinsic value), then we must believe that all living things have intrinsic value.
- As rational creatures, we are compelled by the force of logic to grant all living things intrinsic value.

Beyond granting intrinsic value to other

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How does the public value nature?

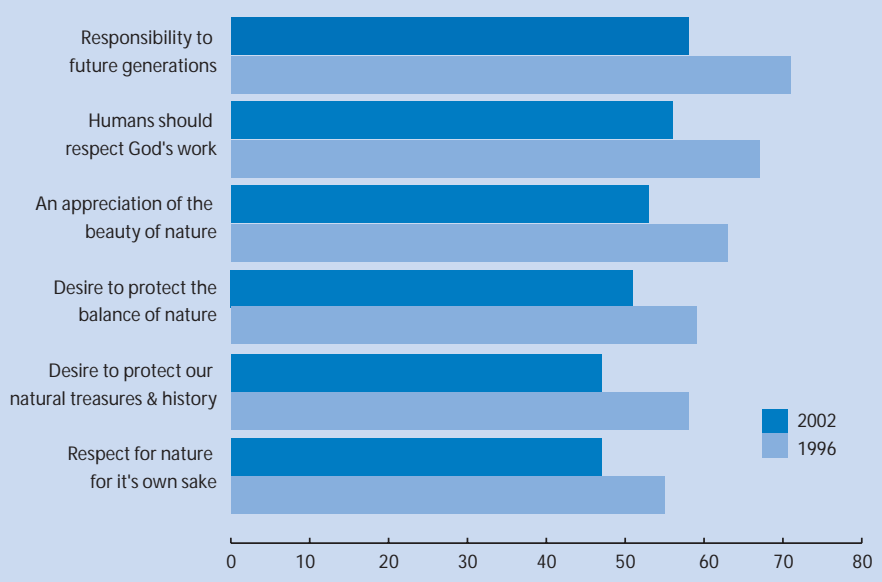
How does the American public value nature? On the Biodiversity Project's 2002 national biodiversity poll, respondents were asked to rate the importance of different values that underlie support for the environment (on a scale of 1-10, where 1 indicates "not at all important" and 10 indicates "very important"). While the poll did not test the appeal of utilitarian, nonsubstitutable, and intrinsic values per se, we did ask questions that could be roughly grouped within these categories.

In the poll, messages based on utilitarian value ("leave the earth in good shape" for people in the future and "protect nature for you and your family to enjoy a healthy life") and non-substitutable value ("appreciation of the beauty of nature") ranked higher than intrinsic value ("a respect for nature for its own sake").

Of those surveyed, 47% said that "a respect for nature for its own sake" was extremely important to them personally (compared to 56% who said that responsibility to future generations, the highest ranked value, was extremely important to them). Women, African-Americans, Hispanics, and 40- to 59-year-olds tended to rank "intrinsic value" higher than other demographic groups.

Values Underlying Support for Protecting the Environment

% saying "extremely important"



Q. Please think of a 1 to 10 scale. This time 1 means something that is *not at all* a reason to you personally and 10 means it is an *extremely important* reason to you personally to care about protecting the environment: Here's the first one: How important is this to you personally as a reason to care about protecting the environment?

- a. A respect for nature for its own sake.
- b. A personal responsibility to leave the earth in good shape for future generations.
- c. An appreciation of the beauty of nature.
- d. A desire to protect the balance of nature for you and your family to enjoy a healthy life.
- e. A desire, as an American, to protect our country's natural treasures and natural history.

Source: Beldon, Russonello and Stewart, *Americans and Biodiversity: New Perspectives in 2002*, (The Biodiversity Project: Madison, WI, 2002), 14.

species, this argument has been extended to claim intrinsic value to ecosystems as well. The argument proceeds along the following lines. Recently ecology has shown us that we are parts of larger systems that themselves also possess those qualities that we have come to label as living. Therefore, it is rational to view these larger living systems (ecosystems, biotic communities, watersheds, etc.) as valuable in and of themselves or as intrinsically valuable. Some have even claimed that the Earth itself, which can be viewed as a self-regulating organism, is entitled to be considered as having intrinsic value.

What are the advantages of ascribing intrinsic value to nature? When something possesses intrinsic value, it becomes worthy of moral consideration *in its own right*—valuable in itself—not simply in relation to its benefit to something else. In other words, intrinsic value endows a thing with direct moral standing. Hence, a yellow-bellied flycatcher, a marsh marigold, and an alder swamp—as possessors of intrinsic value—can be said to occupy the same general moral space as a human being. Granting intrinsic values to nonhuman living things *shifts the burden of proof* on to those who would despoil the natural world and away from those who wish to preserve, protect, and defend it.

Of course the possession of intrinsic value is not regarded as an *absolute* moral trump. Intrinsic value can be legitimately overridden when there are compelling reasons. However, overriding someone's or something's intrinsic value is usually seen as a difficult task (the concern that granting intrinsic value to the natural world may compromise human interests is perhaps what drives some people to conclude that the nonhuman world cannot possess intrinsic value).

Non-Substitutable (Constitutive) Value

Utilitarian and intrinsic values are not the only ways people value things—there is another way, called constitutive (or in this essay) nonsubstitutable value. Something has nonsubstitutable value if it is a necessary and irreplaceable component of attaining some other desirable end.

To this extent, nonsubstitutable value is similar to utilitarian value in that an object has value because it is a means to an end. But nonsubstitutable value is different from utilitarian value because the object is valued due to its unique capacity to deliver that desired end. At the same time, however, the object is not valued intrinsically, or for its own sake. The object's value remains contingent upon the importance (perhaps usefulness) of the end that the person who is assigning value desires.

For example, in the debates over oil exploration in Alaska's Arctic Refuge discussed above, the Gwich'in nation opposes the destruction of the Refuge because its people see the land as inextricable from

* Non-substitutable value is important to keep in mind because it offers a way of capturing the powerful and complex emotional responses that people have toward nature that cannot be reduced to simple material usefulness.

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COMMUNICATIONS TIP

Here’s an example of a message that appeals to the utilitarian, intrinsic, and nonsubstitutable values of nature:

“The wetlands outside our town are valuable to us because they filter our water and control the spring floods. A lot of us enjoy them for canoeing, fishing, hunting, and bird watching (UTILITARIAN VALUE). These wetlands are a unique and special place in their own right—the hundreds of species of plants and animals that live there have as much a right to a home as we do (INTRINSIC VALUE). But the wetlands are also an irreplaceable part of our community. How many of us remember catching our first frogs there, or exploring it as kids? Can the mini-mall they want to build there replace the beauty and mystery of our wetlands (NONSUBSTITUTABLE VALUE)?”

their identity as a people. While other lands might meet their material needs, no other place can serve as their spiritual and cultural home. In a similar manner, drilling in the Refuge has been opposed by a majority of Americans, even though a tiny

fraction of the public will ever benefit directly from the Refuge by visiting it. However, for many of those who have expressed opposition, protecting the refuge is important because it embodies an ideal of undisturbed wilderness, natural beauty, or the last American frontier, which is important to them and cannot simply be replaced by something else.

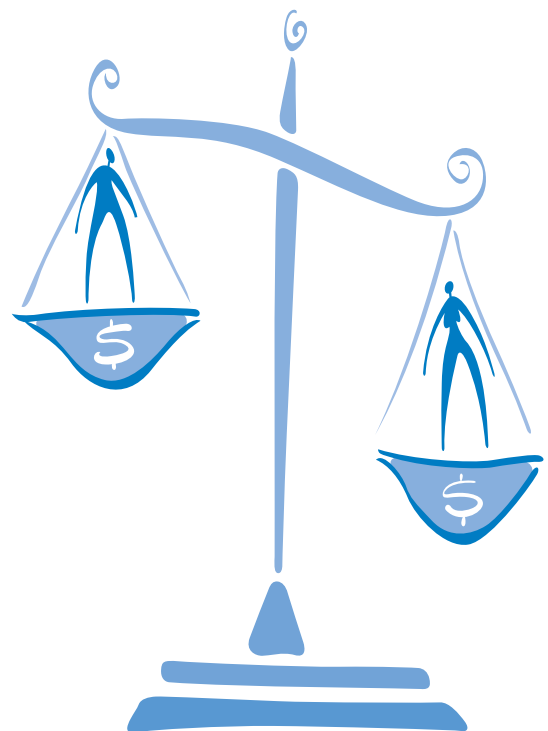
Nonsubstitutable value is important to keep in mind because it offers a way of capturing the powerful and complex emotional responses that people have toward nature that cannot be reduced to simple material usefulness. At the same time, nonsubstitutable value is “in the eye of the beholder.” If people decided, for example, that the psy-

chological importance of knowing that America still had wild places like the Arctic Refuge was no longer very important to them, then the Refuge would lose its value as a means to that end. Does this mean that the public as a whole is not receptive to arguments based on intrinsic value? No. First, even though intrinsic value ranked behind other human-centered messages, in the 1996 and 2002 Biodiversity Polls nearly a majority of Americans acknowledged

nature’s intrinsic right to exist. Second, as with any message, the appeal of an argument based on intrinsic value depends on to whom you are talking. But in the same way that intrinsic values are *in addition* to other values, an argument that invokes utilitarian, nonsubstitutable, and intrinsic values is likely to be more effective with more people than one that depends solely on intrinsic value.

Notes

¹ Some of the leading thinkers have included Warwick Fox, “What Does the Recognition of Intrinsic Value Entail?” *The Trumpeter* 10, no. 3 (1993); Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (London, UK: Routledge, 1991), and Lawrence Johnson, *A Morally Deep World: An Essay on Moral Significance and Environmental Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).



Rights and Responsibilities: What Obligations Do We Owe to the Natural World (and Each Other)?

by Michael Nelson and Robb Cowie

Introduction

The idea of rights figures powerfully in our society, shaping our laws, our political vocabulary, and our actions. Over and over, advocates for species and habitat protection must contend with someone's assertion that his or her rights take precedence over preserving habitat. To address these claims, we need to understand the premises that support them. By doing so, we can also make the case that people have obligations to act ethically toward the natural world.

Rights and Obligations

Historically, rights (to freedom, property, expression, etc.) are thought to come from a sacred source (e.g., conferred by God), or a secular authority (e.g., defined by collective human agreement and then written into law). Either way, rights often serve as moral trumps. That is, in the absence of a strong justification for limiting or overriding a right, that right is presumed to take precedence. (Of course, rights claims are not absolute; they can be overridden in extreme circumstances: in the classic example, the right to free speech does not give someone the right to yell, "fire!" in a crowded cinema.)

But rights do not stand alone; they demand corresponding obligations from everyone else. One person cannot claim to possess a right if others do not possess an obligation to at least recognize and respect that claim. At the same time, traditional rights theories hold that when we assert our rights, we also acknowledge our moral obligation to ensure similar rights for others. Rights and obligations go hand in hand.

Leaving Nature Out of the Equation?

The prevailing theories of rights in our culture—including theories where rights are derived from both sacred and secular sources—tend to view each individual human being as an autonomous and independent entity who is seeking to maximize his or her rights and who is in competition with other people who are trying to maximize their rights, too. These rights theories also tend to regard people as fundamentally different and separate from nature.¹ They deny any inherent connection between humans and their environmental context and insist that inalienable rights apply only to those separate, independent, and autonomous humans.

These assumptions pose some dilemmas. First, we know that logically we cannot maximize for separate variables. In other words, the real world imposes physical and social limitations that will prevent some, if not all, people from fully exercising all of their rights and interests. For example, Americans generally claim that it is their right to own property and to make their home on it. At the same time, even before the pernicious environmental, economic, and social effects of sprawl began to emerge, most communities had established ordinances that prevented landowners from building whatever they wanted, wherever they chose.

Why? We know that what one landowner does on his or her land can have an impact on another's property. If a landowner fills a wetland, he might cause his downstream neighbor's property to flood, because he has diminished the land's capacity to absorb rainfall. Therefore, not only do we enjoy basic human rights, but

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KEY POINTS

Concepts of rights can have a profound influence on biodiversity debates, but rights do not stand alone—they are indivisible from responsibilities.

Evolutionary and ecological theories have challenged the basis of rights theories by emphasizing the connections between individuals and species.

Our connections to the larger ecological community require a responsibility to the natural world.

the social contract that guarantees our individual rights also demands of us a reciprocal moral obligation to acknowledge and ensure those same rights for others.

At a deeper level, many environmentalists reject the very premises of rights theory. Instead of seeing people as wholly autonomous individuals, separate from each other and from the natural world, they instead embrace a more holistic vision of our place in the world that is grounded in evolutionary theory and ecology. Evolution tells us that humans emerged from other life forms and that our environment has defined our physical (and some social) make-up. From an ecological perspective, all the species within the living world are interdependent and related within the “web of life.” Individual plants,



animals, species, and ecosystems are defined by and exist within a matrix of relationships. They owe their identity to, and they cannot be wholly separated out from, the complex web of relations that link them to the other members of the community of life. From this perspective, the claims of traditional rights theories make little sense, because no individual or species is autonomous from its connections to the biosphere.

This holistic perspective is not based simply on science. Many of the world’s religious and spiritual traditions reflect this view, including major strains of the Judeo-Christian tradition. How then, do we reconcile the apparent discontinuity between traditional notions of rights and the more holistic perspective contained in many scientific and spiritual worldviews?

ETHICS IN THE REAL WORLD

The Klamath Basin Controversy: A Case Study in the Limits of Rights

In the Klamath Basin, along the Oregon-California border, drought has exacerbated conflicting demands for water, putting farmers and ranchers, native tribes, the down-river fishing communities, and environmentalists in conflict. In April 2001, the federal government denied water diversions for irrigation to prevent water levels in the basin from further dropping and thereby jeopardizing endangered short-nosed and lost river sucker fish, coho salmon, and other wildlife in Klamath Lake and its surrounding rivers and wetlands. The decision enraged agriculture-dependent local communities, creating another “zero-sum” controversy where, in this case, the survival of sucker fish (described as “worthless” and “trash” by some) was portrayed as coming at the

expense of farmers’ water rights.⁴

The controversy reveals the limitations of our traditional notions of rights, whereby autonomous individuals all attempt to maximize their own rights and self-interest. In reality, natural limits (such as water scarcity) make it impossible for all of us to exercise our rights without constraint. While Klamath farmers objected to federal action to protect fish, they were not the only human communities that had suffered. Federal irrigation projects in the Klamath Basin had substantially altered the ecosystem, contributing to the decline of suckers and salmon and hurting the salmon-fishing-based economies of communities downstream. As a result, commercial salmon interests demanded federal action to protect spawning grounds for fish. In addition, federal policies that helped make the Basin suitable for large-scale agriculture (and opened the surrounding

forests to logging and mining) came at the direct expense of the Klamath tribes, who, under a 1954 law, lost over 21 million acres of their 22 million acre reservation lands to federal control.⁵

Missing in much of the discussion of the Klamath controversy is any mention of responsibility. From an ethical perspective, we have an obligation to acknowledge that others share the same rights that we assert: in this case, the right to a healthy environment and economic survival for all the Klamath communities—not just farmers or fishermen—from the headwaters of the Klamath River to the Pacific. This example also illustrates the connection between human rights and the environment: for the Klamath tribes, the suppression of their human rights (their right to self-determination) was the first step in their dispossession of the land and its conversion to unsustainable uses.

Leopold’s Land Ethic acknowledges the

Extending Our Sense of Responsibility

We cannot simply jettison the concept of rights or ignore the influence of rights theory on our legal, political, and economic systems and our culture. But there are ways we can argue that we should extend our moral community beyond the human realm to nature. One way to do this is by talking about responsibility.

Most of us recognize that, to the degree that our actions affect others, they can be judged on an ethical scale. But why is it that actions that affect others become subject to ethical judgment? It is because those others live with us in a social community and therefore an ethical community. That is, we grant moral consideration to those things that we feel are related to us. As the great conservationist Aldo Leopold argued,

right of both farmer and fisherman to use the Basin's natural resources, but it also insists on the land (and waters) of the Klamath as an entity with ethical standing as well. From this perspective, it is impossible to view the Klamath controversy as one that is simply about farmers versus fish. People do not stand apart from nature; our dependence on it requires us to acknowledge our obligations to the nonhuman world. Farmers and sucker fish are both members of the community of life in the Basin, and the interests of any one member of the community do not simply supersede the interests of the community as a whole. Instead, the human stewards of the Klamath Basin have a responsibility to ensure the health of both the human and natural communities of the Basin and to protect their ability to maintain and renew themselves.

“all ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.”²

Therefore, a key step in expanding our moral sphere to the natural world is to demonstrate our relationship to it. In his famous essay, “The Land Ethic,” Leopold argues that we need to begin to view the land as a community to which we belong and upon which we depend. The insights of evolution and ecology tell us that we are defined by, depend on, and are inseparable from the land, if not all of nature. As much as any king, queen, or president, the land itself has played a decisive role in the history of our civilizations and our nations. Therefore, we ought to realize that it is logically consistent to include the land and other species within our moral community as well.

Yet, as discussed above, important and influential strains in Western religion and philosophy have held that humans are separate from nature. If all ethics assume a feeling of shared community, then an ethical obligation to biodiversity is impossible if we insist on a fundamental separation of humans and nature. This is one reason why the idea of another species having “rights” (let alone entire natural communities) is so preposterous to many people.

However, Leopold was not bowed by the challenge of extending our ethical community—those to whom we have a moral obligation—to include the land. He recognized that, throughout human history, we have extended our ethical community many times. For example, as he points out in “The Land Ethic,” twentieth-century Americans view slavery very differently than the ancient Greeks did (or, for that matter, than some Americans did only a few generations ago). Unlike the Greeks, we no longer hold the view that slavery is acceptable and that slaves are property that can be killed on a whim; in our culture now, such practices are morally reprehensible.³

What does this mean for a biodiversity advocate today? Clearly, we are a long way



COMMUNICATIONS TIP

Talking about Rights and Responsibility

When an opponent brings up “rights” (property rights, individual rights), that is an opening to talk about responsibility—both the responsibility people feel to protect the earth for the future and the responsibility they have for their own actions. Responsibility is a primary American value. Across society, the value of responsibility is shared strongly by almost all demographic groups.

Keep in mind that a message that relies only on guilt—constantly reminding people that species are dying off—without providing the connections and benefits of saving species and habitats is ineffective with most audiences.

from the day when Leopold's land ethic prevails as the standard we use to judge our uses of the land and our actions toward other species. And while it may be hard to persuade a county planner, a congresswoman, or most of the public that other species, or even ecosystems, have rights, it may not be so unintelligible to assert that we have responsibilities to the land and its nonhuman inhabitants.

One reason may be because, as we have seen, the language of *rights* presupposes a theory in which the interests of isolated individuals are pitted against each other. But when we emphasize our *responsibilities*, we necessarily invoke the interrelationships among those individuals (the community) and all the benefits that such a community of interdependence provides. Communities are defined by shared interests among their members, even if those interests are limited to having a stake in the health and productivity of the same geographic area. Based on this connection, we can expand the boundaries of our community of ethical concern.

Opinion research suggests that the notion of responsibility based on shared interest is intuitive for many people. In the Biodiversity Project's 2002 national biodiversity poll, people were asked why humans should bear responsibility for habitat protection and loss. The messages that resonated with the greatest number of

people were those focusing on the connection between habitats and the services (clean air and water) and goods (medicines) they provide people, or those emphasizing that habitats are communities that include many species (habitats are home to "so many species of plants and animals"). The message that had the least impact was one that simply stated that people are killing dozens of species each day—in other words, a message that implied human culpability but did not emphasize the interdependence between people and the natural world.

The language of responsibility clearly resonates with the public. At a time when our culture seems preoccupied with individual rights and self-interest, talking about responsibility reminds us of our obligations to each other and offers a way to embrace the natural world that is our community too.

Notes

¹ For some good examples of traditional atomistic conceptions of human rights, see the following United Nations Declarations: "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>), "The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights" (http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ceschr.htm) and "The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" (http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm)

² Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1966), 239.

³ *Ibid.*, page 237.

⁴ Brad Knickerbocker, "Drought and a Western" *Christian Science Monitor* (May 24, 2001).

⁵ *Ibid.*



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

Obligations to the Future

by Daniel Swartz

Introduction

While the social contract may place obligations on us to acknowledge the rights of others in the present, what are our obligations to others in the future? Do we owe anything to people who have not even been born yet? Ancient religious teachings framed moral questions in the very long term. Today, these teachings can help us understand ways to think about our obligations to the future and the importance of a long time-frame for environmental decision making.

Covenantal Responsibilities

Perhaps no statement better captures the essence of our obligations to the future than Deuteronomy 30:19: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you [plural] this day. I have set before you [singular] life and death, blessing and curse. Choose

life, that you and your descendants might live.”¹ Our choices today can affect the very survival of those yet to come—or at least surround them with the bountiful blessings or countless curses. Heaven and earth are called to witness this covenant precisely because it is to be eternal and because, when considered in an eternal time frame, the consequences of our actions extend across the Earth unto the heavens above. Rabbinic commentaries have understood the transition from plural to singular to have significance as well: while this passage is addressed to the entire community, it is an obligation to each and every individual.

This passage, far from being an isolated example, is only one of many that lie at the core of a great deal of religious thinking. In the Hebrew Bible, God makes promises that extend “l’dor va-dor,” from generation to generation. Four hundred additional times, God speaks of covenantal responsibilities that extend to eternity (l’olam) or to eternity and beyond (l’olam va-ed).



KEY POINTS

Many ancient religious teachings call on us to consider the long-term consequences of our actions.

Our obligations to the future entail thinking preventively, not just for ourselves, and taking precautions against actions that raise the risk of likely, large-scale or irreversible dangers.

* Thinking long-term is seen as a fundamental part of being “good.” Proverbs teaches (13:22), “a good person bequeaths to their children’s children.”



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* Since God is also understood to be eternal, the future is just as imbued with presence, value, and meaning as the present—and so to discount the future is to deny the sovereignty of God. Living unsustainably then becomes a crime both against God and against generations yet to come.

Thinking long-term is seen as a fundamental part of being “good.” Proverbs (13:22) teaches, “a good person bequeaths to their children’s children.”

Long-Term Thinking in World Religions

Long-term thinking is an integral part of many religious traditions around the world. The Iroquois believe in making decisions based on consequences for seven generations. The prime goal of society, according to Confucianism, is the moral elevation of the generation to come. A Hadith, a teaching traditionally ascribed to Mohammed, puts this in concrete terms. It says, “upon death, a person’s good deeds will stop, except for three, a charitable fund, knowledge left for people to benefit from, and a righteous child.”² Thus, thinking long-term means not only raising righteous children, grandchildren, and generations to come, but also enabling them to live in a world filled with knowledge and possibility.

For monotheistic religions, long-term thinking is rooted in both fundamental conceptions of God and commandments to pursue justice. God’s presence is understood to be both unifying and universal. In terms of space, this dictates a shift from a “not in my backyard” mentality to a “not anywhere” mode. (Not incidentally, this also blurs the line between the public and pri-

vate in many religious traditions. For example, in Judaism, humans are never considered to have true ownership, especially of land.³ God is the only owner, and so there is no distinction between “private property” and “the commons,” except that societies have greater obligations to institutionalize protection of common areas.) Since God is also understood to be eternal, the future is just as imbued with presence, value, and meaning as the present. Hence to discount the future is to deny the sovereignty of God. Living unsustainably then becomes a crime both against God and against generations yet to come. Since all people, in present and future generations, are considered equal under God, each generation should take care to use only its “fair share” of resources, in a sustainable fashion.

One of the most vivid teachings about the long-term consequences of our actions is found in early rabbinic commentaries (Genesis Rabbah) on the story of Cain’s murder of Abel. God admonishes Cain (Genesis 4:10), “What have you done? The voices of your brother’s bloods cry out to me.” These commentaries explain that the unusual plural form of *blood* should be understood to mean all the potential descendants of Abel, all murdered through one act of violence on one person. In this context, acts that reduce biodiversity deny God’s role as creator, kill countless generations of potential descendants of extirpated species, and rob the world and all who will inhabit it for generations of the presence of that species.

Taking the Future into Account: Precautionary Principle and Population

If societies took future generations into account, how might decisions and decision-making processes be different? First, truly valuing the future entails thinking preventively, with a good measure of precaution, for we can never fully know the long-term consequences of any action. In the Jewish

legal tradition, prevention and precaution are rooted in Deuteronomy 22:8: “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.” Because of lack of rainfall, roofs in the Middle East are typically flat, and they are used for gardens, laundry, or simply a place to feel the evening breeze. When one is on a roof, there is always a risk of accident—so homeowners have a responsibility to prevent accidents whenever possible. This not only marks a profound difference from a “buyer beware” philosophy, but also an acknowledgement that once accidents happen, it is often too late for healing or repairs. This “parapet principle,” by the Middle Ages, becomes expanded to “anything that is potentially dangerous.” (Shulchan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat, Hilchot Shmirat HaNefesh, #427)

Second, danger itself is measured according to three criteria (see Rabbi Jacob Ettinger, *Responsa Binyan Zion*, 137): how “unreasonable” the risk is (that is, its scope), how likely some form of damage is, and how irreversible that damage might be. Thus, species extinction, for example, would be strenuously avoided, because it is permanent. Similarly, even if one could determine that the likelihood of risk to human or ecosystem health from genetically modified organisms is low, the scope and potential irreversible nature of harm would lead to an extra measure of precaution.

How does consideration of future generations and long-term consequences play out as religious traditions consider population growth? While religious teachings in this area are nuanced and complex, we should note that the command to humans to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28) is by no means absolute; it comes, for example, after God has made identical proclamations to everything living in the waters or flying through the air (Gen. 1:22). Furthermore, many traditions look at the context surrounding population concerns. For exam-

ple, early rabbinic writings recommended against procreation during famines or other times of limited resources, basing themselves upon an interpretation of the Noah story. (See, for example, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta’anit 11a). In light of the way population growth, especially in high-consumption societies such as the U.S., affects the whole biosphere, we would not be fulfilling our obligations to the future if we did not further examine and make use of such traditions.

The contrast between religious timeframes that extend “from generation to generation” and present policies and actions in the U.S. and around the world is stark. When the future is considered at all—which is relatively infrequently—policy makers apply “discount rates” that assert that each succeeding year is worth less than the previous one. Within one generation, let alone across many, the future quickly becomes worthless. And in our day-to-day behaviors, ranging from automobile use to the waste of paper and resultant deforestation, we act, albeit often unwittingly, as if there literally will be no more tomorrow. Without deep changes in our behaviors, we are rapidly foreclosing options and passing on to generations to come a future that is devalued as we extinguish the tomorrows of countless species. May we hear the voices of their bloods crying out to us soon—and heed those voices to eternity and beyond.

Notes

¹ All biblical passages are taken from the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Standard Edition.

² Azzam Tamimi, “Reflections on Islamic Political Thought, Past and Present,” presented at Institut Catala de la Mediterrania, Barcelona, November 6, 2001.

³ For an extended discussion of this, see Daniel Swartz, “Jewish Environmental Values: The Dynamic Tension Between Nature and Human Needs,” in *To Till and To Tend: A Guide to Jewish Environmental Study and Action* (New York: Coalition on Jewish Life and the Environment, 1995).





KEY POINTS

Conflicts over biodiversity conservation often involve difficult choices between two or more “rights.”

Complex questions about biodiversity protection cannot be answered by science alone—we need to apply values and ethical judgments to help guide our decision making.

Murky Waters: When There’s No Clear Line between the Right and Wrong Choices

by Jane Elder

Introduction

One of the tragedies of being stuck in the midst of the sixth great extinction is that many of the decisions that individuals and societies must make to protect biodiversity don’t come with a simple “right” or “wrong” label. Science can inform these decisions, but often it can’t provide a clear prescription or simple answer, because the resolution requires difficult ethical choices where there is no easy “right” option. Our ethical and spiritual values can help guide us toward what we ought to do. Lasting biodiversity protection must remain responsive to people’s values.

Pitting Ethical Choices Against Each Other

Biodiversity conservation at the beginning of the 21st century is fraught with ethical

dilemmas and conundrums. This is happening in part because more flexible or desirable options have been foreclosed, or because the crisis is so dire that immediate action must be taken if there is any hope of a solution—such as those cases where not taking action has consequences that are more disastrous than the uncertain effects of taking action. Given the complexity of human values, the scale of some issues, and the unmovable fact that nature has no patience with human political decision-making timelines, we’re in a fine mess.

The lack of a right answer means that sometimes the choice is the lesser of two evils, and people hate those kinds of choices. Often, conservation issues pit compelling ethical choices against each other. For example:

- Is it right to protect a dwindling whale population at the expense of the loss of timeless cultural hunting traditions?
- Is it right to capture the last individuals



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- of a wild species in order to breed them in captivity so as to prevent extinction?
- Is it right to displace or exclude indigenous or local peoples from biodiversity conservation areas?
- Is it right to tell a frightened village that they can't kill the tiger or the rogue elephant that is threatening their safety?
- Is it right to prevent commercial fishermen from harvesting threatened species when their livelihoods depend on fishing?

These ethical dilemmas are self-imposed by human culture (all six billion of us) at the beginning of a new millennium, and by the thousands of years of history that have brought us to this point. Often, those forced to grapple with the solutions had little to do with creating the problems. One could argue that we didn't see them coming. But here they are, and our generation is the one that must make the choices, difficult or not.

Taking Values into Account

These sorts of right v. right (or sometimes wrong v. wrong) choices often splinter traditional alliances when the debate is reduced to basic human rights v. long-term preservation of the biosphere. But of

course it is almost always more complicated than this. Because issues of this scale are rarely resolved solely on the basis of scientific information, it is easier to grapple with difficult choices if we understand both the values and ethical systems that are at play and the ethical consequences of the various decisions. If we fail to address the ethical concerns of the affected parties the resolution will be temporary and shallow at best. Increasingly, biodiversity conservation will succeed only if advocates address the multiple cultural values that determine a successful solution for those directly (and indirectly) affected. People are much more likely to support a new policy, or to change their behavior, if they believe in their heart it is right, than if it was simply imposed upon them by an outside force.

* People are much more likely to support a new policy, or change their behavior, if they believe in their heart it is right.

Right v. Right Conflicts: A Process for Ethical Decision Making

by Nancy J. Miaoulis

Introduction

Biodiversity is evidence of the ecological integrity of a place, and the continuing loss of species across the globe is a measure of the human impact on the biological world. If it is true that “ethics are central to our survival,”¹ we must at once take seriously the debate surrounding issues of biodiversity and humankind, assessing our responsibility toward the flora and fauna with which we were created.

Institute for Global Ethics—A New Paradigm

Often, the historical approach in many environmental debates is centered on the belief that there is one right answer to the ecological problems that plague our times. Both sides of an ethical equation cannot be correct, or so it is commonly thought. This approach, rather than providing solutions to environmental problems, has instead created impasses. As a result, many ecological debates end in stalemate.

The Institute for Global Ethics (IGE)—a nonsectarian, nonpartisan, global research and educational organization that promotes ethical behavior (www.globoethics.org)—asks us to consider the possibility that there are many “right” sides in the arena of environmental ethics, equally sound and deserving of consideration. IGE developed this “right v. right” paradigm (also called the Ethical Fitness™ process) “to help change the way we think about the world and to provide, through that change, a practical set of mental tools by means of which good people can make tough choices.”² We offer the following case study and IGE’s principles as an invitation to see how

the Ethical Fitness™ process can help the parties in a right versus right conflict to exercise their moral capacity for reason, seek middle ground, and envision and act upon practical solutions.

Examining the Ethical Dilemma

The first step to resolving an ethical dilemma is to understand the conflict. Right v. right ethical problems are those that pit one right value against another. For example, in the Maine fisheries dilemma, the value of responsibility (for the economy and/or one’s family) comes up against the value of respect (for biodiversity and the future of the marine species). To resolve these dilemmas, we need a framework to choose between the rights on both sides or to find the middle ground between them. The Institute for Global Ethics’ decision-making model helps to identify the values in conflict and apply principles for resolution. It is a tool we can use to approach the complex ethical issues that surround environmental decision making.

Framing the Dilemma

Finding a way to discuss a dilemma with all interested parties can be difficult without having the tools to develop a common language. By applying an ethical lens through which to view an issue, a dialogue can begin. In the Institute’s model, this process begins with framing the dilemma based on the values that are represented on all sides. The IGE has found that almost all ethical dilemmas tend to fit one or more ethical paradigms:

- *Truth v. Loyalty*—We learn as children that we should never tell a lie, but we also learn never to rat on a friend. Thus, we are taught the value of truth and the



KEY POINTS

There may be many “right”—or ethically legitimate—sides to conservation debate. Framing a conflict in a context of commonly understood ethical paradigms and principles can illuminate the values at the heart of the debate, clarify the perspectives and roles of the stakeholders involved, and point toward resolution.

value of loyalty. But what happens when a situation arises that asks us to be honest and loyal, and in choosing one, we compromise the other?

- *Justice v. Mercy*—Certainly the values of fairness and equity are essential in society, which is why we have rules and regulations that are meant to apply equally in every situation to every person. But what kind of world do we live in, if justice is applied so even-handedly that compassion and caring do not enter the equation? It is right to stick to the rules, but it is also right to be compassionate.

- *Individual v. Community*—This paradigm can also pit the needs of the small group against the needs of the large one. Is it always best to make the choice that respects you and your loved ones at the risk of the larger community? Or is it sometimes best to look at the bigger picture and try to assess the impact that your decision will make for others involved?

- *Long-term v. Short-term*—We know from operating our own household budgets that it is not always easy to determine whether we should pay for

something to meet a present need or save for a future endeavor. The value of meeting needs that are current versus the value of conserving for needs in the future is one of the most common conflicts in environmental debates.

Analyzing a dilemma according to these paradigms can reveal the values at the heart of an ethical conflict and can, therefore, inform and help pave the way for an acceptable and equitable solution. In the example of the fishing industry debate, it is important to identify whose dilemma this is. In this case, there are a number of players and each one has somewhat different interests. The judge faces the dilemma of whether to set further restrictions on the ground-fishing industry or not. It is right



ETHICS IN THE REAL WORLD

**A Clash of Values:
The Maine Fisheries Dilemma**

A recent federal court ruling has inflamed yet another classic conflict—this one between the economic needs of commercial fishermen in the Gulf of Maine and the future of rapidly diminishing groundfish stocks (such as cod and haddock, historically two of the most important fisheries in New England). Populations of cod, flounder, and other

fish have crashed precipitously in recent decades. In addition, these fishing industries take a heavy toll on other species harvested in their nets (including marine mammals such as harbor porpoises). Adding additional restrictions to an earlier mediated agreement, a federal judge closed most of the Gulf of Maine to fishing for the months of May and June and declared thousands of square miles of ocean off-limits to fishing year-round. The ruling also cut back on the number

of fishing days each boat is allocated, which reduced many fishermen’s allowable days at sea by 50% to 70% and denied those with latent permits the right to fish at all. Furthermore, the ruling requires fishermen to invest in new fishing gear and to fish in more confined areas. The fishing industry believes that the standards set by the court will make it difficult for the 200 boats of Maine’s groundfish fleet to stay in business.

* In the end, it comes down to the values we commit to and the lens of ethics we apply to situations. All the regulation in the world won't preserve biodiversity. It will have to be about something much more meaningful and lasting.

on the one hand to protect the ground-fish and allow them to regain their numbers, thereby promoting the health of the ecosystem to which these fish are integral. It is right on the other hand to allow fishing to continue with minimal restrictions for a small industry that has invested heavily in previous compliance efforts as a sole means of supporting its workers' families and

contributing to their communities.

Of the four dilemma paradigms explained above, the two that seem most appropriate to this situation are individual versus community and long-term versus short-term. If one sees the individual as the fisherman and the community as the marine ecosystem or the other humans on earth that rely on that system, the rights on

Communicating About Right v. Right Conflicts: An Interview with Abby Kidder, the Institute for Global Ethics

Abby Kidder, Senior Education Associate, has been with the Institute for Global Ethics since its inception in 1990. Among other interests, Abby has expanded the Institute's newly evolving environmental work. She has recently written a secondary school curriculum called "How Big is Your Backyard? An Ethics-Based Approach to Environmental Decision Making," published by the Institute for Global Ethics.

Do the principles you've suggested for addressing right v. right conflicts have implications for an organization's approach to communications? Absolutely. The Institute's process provides a common language for all parties to use in communicating about the issues at hand. Instead of leading us down the path of who is right and who is wrong, it gives us a framework for constructive dialogue around what are often controversial issues. If we can begin to see the questions of biodiversity as right-versus-right instead of right-versus-

wrong, we have gained a platform for discussion that would not otherwise be there. If, as an organization, you can frame the ethical debate, outline the "rights" on both sides, and legitimately weigh various resolutions, you will draw support from all interested parties instead of alienating those whom you most need to reach.

What advice would you give to a group that is communicating to decision makers, the public, or even the other side in a right v. right controversy? Be sincere and do your homework. Find out what makes the particular issue an ethical dilemma, and do enough research to gather the pieces from all sides. Issues around biodiversity are complex and often involve many players. It's not about watering down the decision to black and white so you can prove the other side wrong. It's about understanding the ethical values that shape our culture and figuring out what to do when those values come into conflict with each other. There has to be a genuine interest in finding resolution that is honest and compassionate. This kind of sincerity and professionalism are part of putting values into action and move ethical decision making away from mere discussion to necessary practical action.

Does being in a conflict where the other side also has legitimate ethical claims affect the way you should communicate? Are there any added ethical responsibilities and considerations you should take into account when you are representing this kind of situation to the media? Again, the basis of the Ethical Fitness™ process is to identify the common values on all sides and move away from "right v. wrong" labeling to a respectful and constructive conversation. When communicating with the opposition or the media, you can begin by recognizing the ethical nature of the issue, stating the "rights" of each interest, and focusing on finding resolution based on shared moral values. In the end, it comes down to the values we commit to and the ethical lens we apply to situations. All the regulation in the world won't preserve biodiversity. It will have to be about something much more meaningful and lasting.

both sides are clear. Similarly, it is right to have fishermen support their families and their livelihood for the short-term but it is also right to preserve the future of the ground-fish stocks for the long-term.

Moving toward Resolution

After gathering the relevant information, clarifying the issues, and determining the paradigm(s) that the dilemma best fits, the next step is to apply a set of principles that point toward a resolution, a decision that will be based on choosing the highest right under the circumstances. The resolution principles put forth by the Institute for Global Ethics are based on philosophical traditions and provide a useful framework for determining an action to take:

- *Ends-based thinking (utilitarian)*: This is often thought of as a decision that considers the “greatest good for the greatest number.” What decision would the judge in this case make if she were doing what benefited the largest number? Probably she would decide to impose the restrictions, because even the fishermen and their families and their communities don’t add up to the number of living organisms affected when a system is over-fished.
- *Rule-based thinking (the categorical imperative)*: This decision considers the precedent that you would set by making a decision. If everyone who came behind you made the same decision you are about to make, would you be comfortable with the decision? What decision would the judge make if she were setting a precedent for generations to come? Again, she might set the restrictions to protect a limited and fragile resource.
- *Care-based thinking (Golden Rule)*: If you put yourself in the other person’s shoes, what would you do? What decision would the judge make if she were making a care-based decision—one where she had to consider what it would be like to be in the fishermen’s shoes?

She would probably choose to alleviate the restrictions and promote the stability of the industry and the health of the fishing communities.

Beyond these three decision-making principles, there is also the option of finding a third way out—a choice that doesn’t have to be “either/or” but can be a creative solution that finds middle ground. While not all dilemmas lend themselves to a third option, it is always worth searching for one.

No Easy Answers

The IGE process does not provide easy answers. Instead, it provides a common language to communicate about the complex issues that arise when our core values come into conflict. The framework offered here is a way for us to begin to make sense of environmental dilemmas as moral, self-reflecting agents. Our use of such a framework and the resolutions we arrive at will be determined by our capacity to understand all sides of an issue, communicate clearly, and make decisions based on the values we all share. As Rushworth M. Kidder writes:

The more we work with these principles, the more they help us understand the world around us and come to terms with it...In that act of coming to terms with the tough choices, we find answers that not only clarify the issues and satisfy our need for meaning but strike us as satisfactory resolutions...and little wonder that as we practice resolving dilemmas we find ethics to be less a goal than a pathway, less a destination than a trip, less an inoculation than a process.³

Notes

¹ Rushworth M. Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemma of Ethical Living* (New York: Fireside Books, 1995), 8.

² Ibid, page 9.

³ Ibid, page 176.

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* This process does not provide easy answers. Instead, it provides a common language to communicate about the complex issues that arise when our core values come into conflict.



KEY POINTS

Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other major religions declare that we have a duty to care for the poor and vulnerable, a message that underscores the need for just and sustainable solutions to the economic inequities that, in many cases, drive biodiversity exploitation.

Religious traditions warn about the dangers that over-consumption and environmental injustice pose not only to the poor, who are denied equity, but also to the powerful who perpetuate injustice and fall victim to the “idolatry” of materialism.

How Shall We Live? Environmental Equity and Justice

by Daniel Swartz

Introduction

How much we use—how we choose to live—has direct consequences on other species and the health of the environment. But lifestyle also has consequences for equity and justice, consequences that religious traditions have reflected on for thousands of years. We cannot effectively address the biodiversity crisis until we address disparities in wealth and power that drive human exploitation of the environment and other people. Acting justly toward nature and each other is not just good for other species or the poor and vulnerable. As the prophets and teachers of the Judeo-Christian tradition have warned, it is also the only way for the rich and powerful to save themselves.

Widows, Orphans, and Strangers: Prophetic Calls for Justice

People trying to promote sustainable living sometimes discuss the concept of the “ecological footprint.” Use fewer resources, and your footprint is smaller; use more, and it is larger. And because the earth is itself limited, only so many large footprints can fit on it.

The prophet Ezekiel used terms not far distant from modern notions of ecological footprints. He wrote, “Is it not enough for you to graze on choice pasture, but you must also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but you must also muddy with your feet what is left? And must My flock graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have muddied? Assuredly, thus said the Lord God to them, Here am I, I

am going to decide between the stout animals and the lean” (Ezekiel 34:18-20).¹

For millennia, prophetic voices in religious communities have been advocating on behalf of the “lean.” In the Hebrew Bible and the Koran, the lean or the vulnerable are personified as the widow, the orphan, or the stranger. All have little power in many traditional societies, and they may even be viewed as signs of ill fortune or the enemy. The Gospels add such social outcasts as prostitutes to the list of the “least of these.” Other traditions may speak less of justice, but they reach out to the vulnerable in other ways. For example, the Hindu tradition teaches “daya,” compassion toward all that is focused on those with the least power. Traditionally, prophetic justice has focused on ending oppression and economic injustice. Increasingly, however, the voices of Ezekiel and his compatriots are being heard in the realm of environmental issues, in what has become known as eco-justice or environmental justice.

Environmental Justice: A New Golden Rule?

What is environmental justice? In the broadest sense, environmental justice examines how issues of power, equity, and opportunity play out in the realm of the environment. That is, do the powerful consume more resources? How does such consumption affect the poor, the voiceless, and the vulnerable? Who—and what—suffers most from environmental degradation and health hazards? Who benefits and who pays the cost from human activities that affect the health of the environment? And what does the practice of environmental injustice do to one’s well-being, one’s soul?

According to the World Resources Institute, the United States and 23 other

industrial nations, with just 16% of the world’s population, generate 40% of its greenhouse gases and 68% of its industrial waste.² And within the industrialized world, people in the U.S. rank at or near the top in almost every category of natural resource consumption—using, for example, twice as much fossil fuel as the average resident of Great Britain, and producing three times as much waste as the typical Western European. Despite having just 5% of the world’s population, the U.S. consumes one-third of the world’s paper, leading to loss of vital forest habitats not only here but also across the globe.³

What guidance can religious traditions give us in the pursuit of justice and equity, and how might a vision of environmental justice change how we live, not only as “grazers,” or consumers, but also as human beings living in relationship to a complex, diverse biosphere? While the links between the consumption of the powerful, the poverty of the vulnerable, and the destruction of the environment may be more or less obvious, this much is clear: Ezekiel’s admonition would be directed against us today. The coffee we drink, in most cases, is a product of deforested habitats and industrial plantations; the hamburger we eat comes via trampled lands. At the other end of the spectrum of wealth and power, poverty and environmental degradation are often linked in an escalating spiral. The poor are driven to marginally arable lands, where, out of desperate attempts to survive, they degrade the land further, leading to more poverty, and so on.

In this country, a number of studies, from such diverse sources as U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the United Church of Christ, have found that disproportionate numbers of landfills, incinerators, chemical plants, and hazardous waste sites are situated in low-income communities and/or communities of color.⁴ Lead poisoning affects African Americans and the poor at rates almost an order of

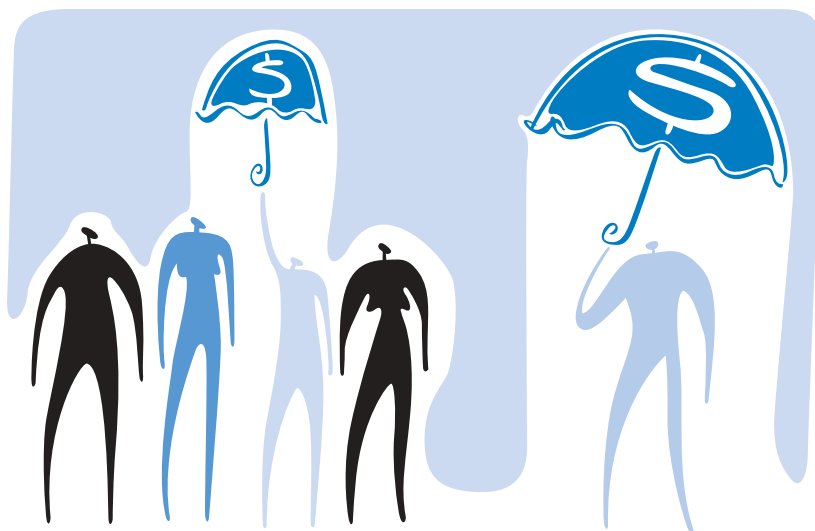
magnitude higher than those of middle-class whites.⁵ Obviously, chemicals themselves do not discriminate, but communities with less power to protect themselves have disproportionate environmental risks thrust upon them.

Environmental injustice does not occur only between different parts of society or different nations. If the “field mark” of injustice is might becoming right—the powerful getting benefits at the expense of the vulnerable simply because the vulnerable are less likely to fight back—then all of our relationships with the world around us need to be examined through the lens of environmental justice. Who, or what, are the “widow, orphan, and stranger” today? Are they trees that have no legal standing? Are they species whose existence stands as a roadblock to profits?

* We cannot effectively address the biodiversity crisis until we address disparities in wealth and power that drive human exploitation of the environment and other people.

Results from the Biodiversity Project’s 2002 national biodiversity survey suggest that more people in the U.S. are willing to take action in their own lives to protect the environment, but many still don’t make the connection.

- **Approximately six in ten (59%) Americans say that in the past year they have changed what they do as a consumer by paying a little more for products that are friendlier to the environment.**





COMMUNICATIONS TIP

Americans often do not make the connection between their lifestyle choices and the impact those choices have on biodiversity, but advocates can help them see this connection by pointing out the implications of our choices and by promoting personal actions directly linked to protecting the environment and human health.

Here's an example of a message that helps make the connection between personal actions (reducing consumption), the environment, and social justice:

“The traditional American Dream once focused on greater security, opportunity, and happiness. Increasingly, that dream has been supplanted by an extraordinary emphasis on acquisition. The recent commercial definition of the American Dream has hidden costs for the environment, our quality of life, and our efforts to create a just and equitable society. . . . If we wish to reverse this trend and preserve necessary resources for our children and future generations, we must shift and reduce our consumption of resources.” —Center for a New American Dream (www.cnad.org)

In a variation on the “Golden Rule,” Rabbi Hillel wrote, “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow creatures.” The ambiguity in Hillel’s use of the word creature suggests how we can turn this rule into an ethics- or faith-based environmental impact assessment of a particular environmental question: are you doing something “hateful” to your fellow creatures; and, are you including non-humans when you consider “fellow creatures”?

Coins Before Our Eyes

Finally, religious traditions can also help us realize the cost to the powerful of environmental injustice. Most faiths teach about “moderation” in one form or another, about the importance of spiritual discipline and self-limitation. For example, Christianity speaks of the virtues of humility

and generosity and the vices of greed and covetousness. As we consume more and more, we aggrandize ourselves at the cost of our relationships with others, at the cost of the lonely fate of the narcissist. We even, in one sense, lapse into idolatry, worshipping the “stuff” we have made with our own hands or bought with our labors. The words of Isaiah ring as true today as ever, especially if we replace “chariot” with “SUV.” Isaiah wrote, “Their land is full of silver and gold, there is no limit to their treasure. Their land is full of horses; there

is no limit to their chariots. Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have wrought” (2:7-9). This materialistic idolatry, this worshipping of wealth and power, not only distances us from God and from the less powerful, it also dims our eyes to wonder. As Nachman of Bratzlav taught, “the smallest coin held before the eyes can hide the grandest mountain.”⁶ To pursue environmental justice and to preserve biodiversity, we need to cast coins out from before our eyes and open them wide.

Notes

¹ All biblical passages are taken from the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Standard Edition.

² World Resources Institute, “Earthtrends 2001,” <http://www.earthtrends.wri.org>.

³ World Resources Institute, “Earthtrends 2001,” <http://www.earthtrends.wri.org>.

⁴ United Church of Christ, Commission on Racial Justice, “Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites” (New York: United Church of Christ, 1987).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, “Likkute Mohoran” (Lessons of Rabbi Nachman), #35, section 5.

