

Environmentalism

Are we obligated to help preserve ecosystems and species for their own sakes, or only when & because doing so is best for humans? What values should guide our interaction with the natural world?

I. Intro – BWCA & Twin Metals Minnesota

Twin Metals Minnesota said the rejection “will have a devastating impact on the future economy of the Iron Range and all of Northeast Minnesota, eliminating the promise of thousands of good-paying jobs and billions of dollars in investment in the region.”¹

II. Peter Wenz, “Ecology and Morality”

→ **We have a *prima facie* obligation to protect healthy ecosystems irrespective of all possible advantages to human beings.** (595)

“When soil loses fertility, or washes away faster than it forms, and when water systems exhibit abnormal floods and shortages, **the land is sick.**” (Leopold quoted at 596)

“A healthy ecosystem consists of a great diversity of flora and fauna...in a relatively stable balance, evolving slowly rather than changing rapidly, because its diversity enables it to respond to change in a flexible manner that respects the system’s integrity. In all of these respects a healthy ecosystem is very much like a healthy plant or animal.” (596)

“The obligation in question is not to preserve ecosystems from every and any threat to their health and existence. Rather, the obligation for which I am contending is to protect ecosystems from oneself.” [This is important: The negative duty not to cause harm seems stronger than the positive duty to bring aid.] (597)

Wenz seems to think that plants, animals, and ecosystems can be healthy or ill; their interests can be furthered or hindered; and in virtue of that, they are to be treated as ends rather than means.

The *prima facie* obligation to protect healthy ecosystems might come from the:

- Duty not to destroy needlessly
- Duty not to destroy things of aesthetic value
- Duty not to destroy things that are good of their kind (so long as good of its kind is not bad in itself)

- Need the concept of destruction apply here?
- Which of the three grounds for the duty seems most plausible?

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/15/us/boundary-waters-minnesota-mining.html>

II. William Baxter, “People or Penguins: The Case for Optimal Pollution”

→ **Plant life & animal life are valuable only as means to human ends.**

Conservationists often say things like the following: “The use of DDT in food production is causing damage to the penguin population.” “The scientific fact is often asserted as if the correct implication—that we must stop agricultural use of DDT—followed from the mere statement of the fact of penguin damage.”(481)

For Baxter, “Penguins are important because people enjoy seeing them walk about rocks; and furthermore, the well-being of people would be less impaired by halting use of DDT than by giving up penguins....[M]y observations about environmental problems will be people-oriented, as are my criteria. I have no interest in preserving penguins for their own sake.” (481)

Baxter says position is the “only tenable starting place for analysis” because (481-482):

1. Most people really think and act this way.
2. This attitude doesn’t portend any massive destruction of animal and plant life because people depend on them in obvious ways and they will be preserved because and to the degree that humans do depend on them.
3. What is good for humans is in many respects good for penguins and pine trees. Humans are surrogates.
4. I do not know how we could administer any other system; decisions are either private or collective. Plant & animal life cannot participate in decision-making processes. [What about e.g. infants & small children?]

Many of the more extreme assertions that one hears from some conservationists amount to tacit assertions that they are specially appointed representatives of sugar pines, and hence that their preferences should be weighted more heavily than the preferences of other humans who do not enjoy equal rapport with “nature.” The simplistic assertion that agricultural use of DDT must stop at once because it is harmful to penguins is of that type. (482)

[“I am the Lorax, I speak for the trees!”]
5. If animal & plant life are to be regarded as ends rather than means, someone must tell me how much each one counts and how these life forms are to be permitted to express their preferences.
6. Questions of *ought* are unique to the human mind and world—they are meaningless as applied to a nonhuman situation. I reject that we *ought* to respect the “balance of nature” unless the reason for doing so, express or implied, is the benefit of man. [Consider examples from Wenz paper]
 - Which of these seems most important?
 - Can we dismiss any of them?

Let's focus on #6. **There is no “right” or “morally correct” state of nature to which we should return.**

From the fact that there is no normative definition of the natural state, it follows that there is no normative definition of clean air or pure water—hence no definition of polluted air—or of pollution—except by reference to the needs of man. (483)

- Notice that Wenz and Leopold seem not to share this view.
- Is it not tragic or horrible *for animals and ecosystems* when natural disasters kill them? What effects on animals are morally relevant? [They suffer; they feel emotion; they go extinct...] Is it tragic that ecosystems are destroyed only because animals will suffer & go extinct, or for further reasons?

Baxter concludes that in making decisions that have environmental consequences we need to be at all times thinking in terms of the costs to humans, and whether resources are being used efficiently to meet various human needs.

(Questionable claims/concepts in bold!)

“[So o]ur objective is not pure air or water but rather some optimal state of pollution. [A level of pollution at which humans flourish—not none, because we are better off with some of the things that cause pollution.]...Low levels of pollution contribute to human satisfaction but so do food and shelter and education and music. **To attain ever lower levels of pollution, we must pay the cost of having less of these other things.**” (483)

Resources are limited. **“Even the most efficient use of them will yield less than our population, in the aggregate, would like to have.”** (484)

A new dam requires “x hours of labor, y tons of steel and concrete, and z amount of capital goods. If these resources are devoted to the dam, **then they cannot be used to build hospitals, fishing rods, schools, or electric can openers.** That is the meaningful sense in which the dam is costly.” (484)

“Trade-off by trade-off, we should divert our productive capacities from the production of existing goods and services to the production of a cleaner, quieter, more pastoral nation up to—and no further than—the point at which we value more highly the next washing machine or hospital that we would have to do without than we value the next **unit of environmental improvement** that the diverted resources would create.” (485)

- How much of the badness of the environmental destruction we're wreaking is a matter of the horrible effects it is having and will have on other humans [theft of resources as well as destruction of way of life] and how much is a matter of other reasons? [species extinction, destruction of beautiful landscapes, etc.]

Most important claims from this paper:

- (1) Ecosystems are valuable as means but not ends
- (2) Various natural states' being good or bad makes sense only by reference to human lives
- (3) [Therefore] environmental goals need to be balanced with other human needs

It's possible to *reject* claims (1) and (2) while *keeping* (3).

Further reading:

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*

Jonathan Franzen, "Carbon Capture: Has climate change made it harder for people to care about conservation?" < <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/06/carbon-capture> >

Aldo Leopold

John Muir

Edward Abbey

< <http://www.friends-bwca.org/issues/sulfide-mining/> >

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.03 Good Food: The Ethics and Politics of Food Choices
Spring 2017

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.