

I-A

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT:
NOTES TOWARDS AN ECOLOGY OF EXPERIENCE

John Rodman

Professor of Political Studies
Pitzer College and the Claremont Graduate School
Claremont, California

The Sixth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
San Francisco, November 25-27, 1977

Theory and Practice in the Environmental Movement:
Notes Towards an Ecology of Experience

John Rodman

Pitzer College and The Claremont Graduate School

Inquiries into the theories implicit in practice must be historical, since differences of principle tend to be overlaid by the stereotyped rationalizations that constitute the common rhetoric of any particular period. Differences within the environmental movement, traditionally confused by everyone's claim to be a Conservationist, are now obscured by the near-universality of the appeal to Survival.

Survival is one of those sloganistic arrests in the process of reflection, like Scarcity and Abundance, whereby a verb or an adjective is turned into an abstract noun and cast in the role of figure, while the real subject is relegated to the background of attention. When we try to make the subject of Survival explicit, we find that one writer seems to envisage the death of the biosphere, another the extinction of all organic life on the planet earth, another the passing of the human species, another the perishing of large numbers of humans and others in an ecological crash, and another the end of a form of civilization to which he has grown attached.

Why is the appeal to Survival so popular? It draws upon the popular Spencerian-Darwinian notion that life is "scientifically" seen to be a struggle for the survival of the fittest. It expresses an anxiety that our world-historical situation is extreme. And it revives the Hobbesian assumption that, whatever our varying notions of the good life, we all share some bedrock commitment to life itself, which makes possible such luxuries as arguing or fighting about the greatest good.

Yet it is one of the subtleties of the human condition that individuals and groups sometimes lose the will to live; sometimes commit suicide; and sometimes risk their lives to defend, or to try to establish, a particular way of life. Beneath Hobbes' own nightmare vision of the chaos brought on by warring fanatics lay a commitment to the ideal of

an orderly, secure, tolerant, prosperous, "civilized" way of life characterized by the flourishing of the arts and sciences and the amenities of commodious living. Now as then, the Hobbesian question of survival dissolves into the Aristotelian question of the good life or, as it is often phrased today, the quality of life. The basic proof of this is experimental: we can all imagine a world in which we should not care to live; some of us can even imagine risking our lives to prevent its coming to pass. Yet we suspect that it is easier to imagine this than to act when the time comes, especially since the time is apt to come upon us by degrees. Political events of this century have also brought home to us the extraordinary capacity of human beings in extreme situations to survive by adapting in unexpected ways. So the question becomes: when do adaptations amount to a significant change of character, or when does something survive by becoming something else?

This is not a linguistic or logical quibble, but a troubling existential question. Imagine a person whose honesty is fundamental both to his self-image and to his character as perceived by others, and suppose that conditions arise in which he can survive only by becoming an inveterate thief and liar, even to the point of self-deception. Imagine a hunting tribe that survives after being deprived of the land and the activity that were central to its way of life. Imagine a political system that has prided itself on its freedom and democracy surviving by gradually transforming itself into a totalitarian regime ruled by an elite of economic and ecological planners. Or imagine that humanity can survive only by practicing a ruthless "lifeboat ethics" that leaves the survivors thoroughly inhumane. The appeal to Survival seems to presuppose some tacit notion, if not of the good life, then at least of a minimally acceptable way of life in which a subject can retain a sense of essential continuity - for example, a way of life in which human beings can remain recognizably human to themselves.

The remainder of this paper explores the images of humanity implicit in the human/nature relationships posited by four currents of thought discernible in the history of the contemporary environmental movement. My primary purpose is to clarify the kind of self we

choose when we take up a particular posture towards the nonhuman environment. My secondary purpose is to suggest that the fourth of these alternatives may be the one most faithful to the integrity of experience. Throughout, the reader should keep in mind that I present ideal types which are seldom embodied in pure form; that limitations of space preclude any thorough discussion of the theoretical or practical problems entailed by any of the four views, as well as any documentation;* and that the present stage of analysis is based almost exclusively on American materials, so that the question of the typology's more general application is left open.

It frequently happens that people think they are engaged in a common action when they share only a common behavior. Their attention is still directed towards a common enemy, and the visions implicit in their acts have not yet become clearly differentiated. In the 1890's, for example, Theodore Roosevelt, Giffort Pinchot, and John Muir all supported the exercise of Presidential authority to set aside portions of the public domain as forest reserves. A shared hostility to the rapid destruction of land and trees by commercial interests aiming at short-term profits masked a diversity of visions. The principle of multiple-use made a good deal of accommodation possible, but disagreements first over the use of the forest reserves for grazing and then over the future of Hetch Hetchy Valley, eventually made it clear that Pinchot envisioned a system of public lands scientifically managed for a sustained yield of timber, forage, water, and power, while Muir envisioned a system of wilderness parks where overcivilized people could repair to regenerate body and spirit, and the expansive Roosevelt envisaged all of the above together with bird sanctuaries for the ornithologists and game preserves to assure a sustained yield of sport for the Boone and Crockett Club. Specifically, Pinchot thought in terms

* For partial documentation, see my "Four Stages of Ecological Consciousness. Part One: Resource Conservation - Economics and After" (a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Sept. 1976); "The Liberation of Nature?" (Inquiry, Vol. 20, Spring 1977); "Ecological Resistance: John Stuart Mill and the Case of the Kentish Orchid" (a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Sept. 1977).

of utilizing "natural resources" for "the greatest good of the greatest number over the long run", and he judged the damming and flooding of Hetch Hetchy (to make a reservoir to supply water for the growing population of San Francisco) to be the highest and best use of the valley. Muir, on the other hand, thought of Hetch Hetchy as a holy place to be preserved from desecration because there a person could get in touch with his deeper self, his primordial roots, and the divine force still active in creating the evolving universe.

Resource Conservation in America has been an aspect of resource development. Frank Smith has admirably written its history as a chronicle of the activities of the Forest Service, the Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Atomic Energy Commission. In the several years since the first "energy crisis" of 1973, the terms "conservation" and "development" have probably been more sharply distinguished than at any earlier time, as choices have been posed between conserving present energy resources and developing new ones. We are, of course, committed ^{to} both strategies, as is implied by agency titles such as the (California) Energy Conservation and Development Commission. Underlying the plurality of strategies is a common view of nonhuman nature as consisting of intrinsically worthless material which acquires instrumental value when appropriated for human use. (It is so evident to the Resource Conservationist that "the greatest number" refers only to humans that it seems superfluous to say it.) An important clue to the developmental ethos that underlies Resource Conservation can be found in the conception of Waste, which functions as an economic equivalent to Sin. Waste refers not only to excessive or inefficient utilization. It encompasses also John Wesley Powell's view of the arid lands of the American West as a wasteland until reclaimed by irrigation for agriculture, Lord Kelvin's view of Niagara Falls as a gigantic waste of water until harnessed to produce hydroelectric power, and a Southern California legislator's notion that the wild rivers of the North which flow into the ocean are wasted unless dammed and diverted to irrigate farmland, quench the thirst of cities, and support golf

courses in the desert. There are, then, two ways to sin by wasting: to utilize inefficiently and not to utilize at all. Within this frame of reference, the process by which natural things go through their biological cycles has no value unless and until harnessed for human use, transformed into colonial processes within the expanding empire of technology and economics.

The Preservationist gospel, by contrast, became flesh in the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, to a limited extent in the National Park Service, and more in the Wilderness System authorized by Congress in 1964. Many of its vicissitudes are implicit in the tension between the esoteric appeal of re-creation and the mass appeal of recreation, others in the tension between the underlying religious need and the esthetic through which the satisfaction of that need is mediated.

The notion that "recreation" is a qualitatively differentiated and hierarchically structured experience of nonhuman otherness is accepted even by the Park Service and the Forest Service, although the variables they identify include only such items as the amount of skill required, the extent to which one must satisfy one's own "basic needs" (defined as food, shelter, and transport), the degree of administrative control, and the relative presence or absence of man-made "modifications for comfort and convenience". Just what it is that is supposed to happen in a condition of relative wilderness remains mysterious. A perusal of the literature of wilderness experience, however, yields the following model. Filtered through Muir's biblical/architectural imagery of Nature's cathedrals threatened with desecration are traces of the older notion of a sacred place where human beings can transcend the limitations of everyday experience and become renewed through contact with the power of creation. This process has two basic dimensions. On the level of depth psychology/mythology, the journey from the city or the farm into the wilderness is a journey out of the socialized self into the unconscious self, from which may emerge a new definition of personal identity, as when hitherto repressed traits become incorporated into the conscious self. On the cosmogonic level, Muir's imaginative reconstruction of

the process whereby the Sierra valleys were - and are still - formed by glacial action over the course of geologic time functions as a vicarious re-enactment (within an evolutionary paradigm) of the creation of the world that environs the self. While not every backpacker is born again, writers such as Muir articulate as well as guide the inchoate intuitions of larger numbers of people. The continuity of this tradition is demonstrated by Arthur St. George's sociological study of Sierra Club members in the early 1970's, which concluded that their values were (like those of their founder) primarily "religious and esthetic".

The relationship of the esthetic to the religious is essentially this: the experience of the holy is esthetically mediated. Nature experienced as beauty provides an external model of harmonious integration for the divided personality and arouses wonder at the "as if" possibility of an intelligent and benign cosmic order. Nature experienced as sublimity suggests depths and heights that transcend the flat landscape of everyday experience and evoke awe in the presence of overwhelming power or vastness. Hence a traditional commitment to saving the Sierras of life as the natural environments of peak experiences. It is not without some loss of intensity that this loyalty to special places is generalized to embrace the natural environment as a whole, as Sierra Club members become also Friends of the Earth.

Meanwhile, back at Yosemite, John Muir was complaining as early as 1912 about the crowds of people who came to fish and picnic, oblivious to the sermons sculptured in stone, as if they had not eyes with which to hear. The subsequent history of Wilderness Preservation has been an unending process of saving an area from private development by making it a National Park that gradually becomes administered for mass recreation, then further saving some special part of it by having it designated a Wilderness Area, to which access must eventually be limited by a system of bureaucratic permits. Wilderness Preservation and Resource Conservation thus tend to converge: wilderness becomes a type of land use, a scarce resource that can be conserved by being managed. For this convergence

to be seen as more than an historical accident, however, it must be viewed from some perspective located outside either of these two traditions, so that Resource Conservation and Wilderness Preservation appear variations on the theme of wise use, the former oriented to the production of commodities for human consumption, the latter to providing human amenities.

One such alternative perspective is provided by the tradition growing out of the humane movement, recently radicalized by animal liberationists, and sometimes generalized to embrace non-animal beings as well. In contrast to the economic ethos of Resource Conservation and the religious/esthetic character of Wilderness Preservation, this perspective is strikingly moral in style. Its notion of human virtue is not prudence or reverence, but justice. In contrast to the caste-bound universe of the Resource Conservationist, the Nature Moralist affirms the democratic principle that all natural entities (or, more narrowly, all forms of life) have intrinsic value, and that wild animals, plants, rivers, and whole ecosystems have a right to exist, flourish, and reproduce - or at least that human beings have no right to exploit or unnecessarily harm or destroy other members of the biotic community. In contrast to the aristocratic universe of Wilderness Preservation, where some places (and some forms of recreation) are holier than others and certain types of natural entities (lofty mountains, grand canyons, redwoods, and whales) are traditionally more worthy of being saved than others (swamps, chaparral, and insects), the world of the Nature Moralist is characterized by an apparent egalitarianism. Pinchot and Muir once went on a camping trip to Grand Canyon, where Pinchot saw a tarantula and was about to kill it when Muir stopped him, saying that the tarantula had as much right to be there as they did. Pinchot was so struck with this curious notion that he not only let the tarantula live (perhaps out of respect for Muir) but recalled the incident a half-century later in his autobiography. (As for Muir, let this story serve to illustrate how ideal types overlap in the complexity of flesh-and-blood persons. The "rights" theme is nevertheless faint in comparison to the religious/esthetic theme in Muir's life and

writings.)

It is easier to find isolated and anecdotal, rather than systematic and institutional, embodiment of the standpoint of Nature Moralism. Yet some limited notion of nonhuman rights would appear to be implicit in a century and a half of humane legislation, since it is only by the most tortuous rationalizing that cruelty to nonhuman animals can be punished on the ground of its being indirectly detrimental to human well-being. The U.S. Animal Welfare Act embodies a typical compromise between Nature Moralism and Resource Conservation, between the principle that at least warm-blooded vertebrates ought not to be made to suffer pain by humans with the principle that the "lower" animals are resources to be exploited in research carried on for the benefit of "humanity". (The animal liberationists who have picketed the American Museum of Natural History to protest federally-funded research on the effects of physical mutilation on the sex life of cats have testified, in effect, to the impending dissolution of this compromise.)

We can also speculate that Endangered Species Acts imply some recognition of a right to life on the part of certain nonhuman species, and indeed this notion was given official expression by the recent Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, Mr. Nathaniel Reed. Yet any species on the endangered list that is protected well enough to become fairly abundant (such as the Alligator mississippiensis) is apt to discover that the human coalition that made possible its protection contained not only Nature Moralists who believe that killing alligators to make handbags is morally wrong, but also sustained-yield Conservationists who want to resume hunting or "harvesting" it, and Preservationists who seem preoccupied with protecting instances of Nature's grandeur.

The fact that Nature Moralism is still more a dissident than an establishment viewpoint is typified in the decision of certain individuals (now under indictment for theft of private property) to commit their own Marine Mammal Protection Act by liberating captive dolphins, claiming that human beings had no right to imprison and exploit (even for academic research) beings that are by nature intelligent, wild, and free. Yet Nature

Moralism may be in the process of being institutionalized in the Interior Department's Office of Endangered Species, as the movement to protect endangered species - initiated out of a variety of motives - gains momentum and becomes a kind of end in itself. Conflicts are inevitable, but as long as practical accommodations can be arranged - as in the case of the sandhill crane habitat that occasioned the redesign of some six miles of federally-funded interstate highway in Mississippi - a general confrontation between two fundamentally different standpoints can be avoided. However, the recent tendency to formulate issues in terms of protecting an endangered species versus completing some resource development project - the Furbish lousewort vs. the Dickey-Lincoln hydroelectric project in Maine, the snail darter vs. the Tellico Dam in Tennessee, a rare species of trailing pea plant vs. the Lafarge Dam project in Wisconsin - suggests the possibility of an emerging confrontation between Nature Moralism and Resource Conservation that is potentially as significant as the Hetch Hetchy conflict was for defining the difference between Conservation and Preservation.

There is probably something sound in our reluctance to let issues be defined in quite this way. It is not only that the theory of non-human rights is still inchoate both as to boundary (animals? plants? rocks?) and as to focus (individuals, populations, communities, species?); not only that if Congress intervenes to settle the Tellico Dam issue by amending the Endangered Species Act it will probably mean the end of the snail darter. Suppose only that TVA biologists succeed in breeding the snail darter in another river, so that the Little Tennessee can be dammed and the snail darter can be saved. At this point, it becomes evident that the preoccupation with saving species from extinction can become an absolute abstracted from the larger and more complex issue of defending a habitat that is shared by humans and nonhumans alike. To assume automatically that either snail darters or human beings can be artificially transplanted from one locale to another without being significantly changed presupposes a remarkably atomistic view of the world. Where this leads is shown by the proposal to "save" the California condor by breeding

it in captivity.

As we begin to explore the notion of a shared habitat and the notion that an organism's relationship to its natural environment may be an important part of the organism's character, we drift away from the worlds adumbrated so far and enter a fourth world of perception and action that I call Ecological Resistance. This fourth world is implied by such considerations as the following. Ecologically disruptive projects (such as dams, highways, or power plants) are sometimes met with intense resistance on the ground that they would ruin a natural area, even though the area is relatively valueless as a material resource, contains no edifying scenery, is little used for recreation (in any sense), is no longer in virginal condition, and harbors no species known to be endangered. Such resistance nevertheless often involves a strong subjective identification between the persons resisting and the geographic area. Some of the persons resisting are also participants in campaigns of resistance to war, imperialism, racism, sexism, etc., and they feel that there is some link among their activities.

A tentative sketch of Ecological Resistance includes the following features. (1) Ecological Resistance is not ideological action. Rather, action tends to precede theory, and theory emerges retrospectively as actors try to make their experience intelligible. (2) The central principle of Ecological Resistance is the conviction that diversity is natural, good, and threatened by the forces of monoculture. (3) The struggle between diversity and monoculture is perceived to occur in different spheres of experience ranging from the human/nature interaction, through the relations between races, nationalities, sexes, political parties, and individual temperaments, to the interaction between components of the intrapsychic ecosystem. It is characteristic of Ecological Resistance that it manifests itself in more than one realm. A good historical example is provided by John Stuart Mill, who defended biological diversity against the threat of a wholly humanized planet, West Indian blacks against European racists, women against the tyranny of a patriarchal tradition, and the many-sided personality against the totalitarian claims of economic/technological

rationality. Thoreau, who once refused to pay taxes because the U. S. government made war on Mexico and required the return of fugitive slaves, would be a marginal case. John Muir, who ignored almost every social issue of his time, starting with slavery and the Civil War and ending with female suffrage, would not qualify at all.

(4) The different levels of experience - cosmos, polis, psyche - mirror one another. It is no mere coincidence that Hitler envisioned an Aryan Europe purged of Jews and a totally humanized planet from which all micro-organisms had been eliminated, or that he depicted Jews as a "bacillus." It is no accident that Mill was involved in the struggle against the subjection of women and in an effort to liberate the "feminine" element within his own personality. (5) The relationship between levels of experience is one of metaphoric mirroring rather than one of superstructure and base, or effect and cause. If there is a base model it is that of an ecosystem; but the characteristics of this model are not so much extracted from biology and then imposed upon polity and personality as they are perceived as a common Gestalt manifested in varying ways at different levels.

(8) Ecological Resistance involves a ritual affirmation of the Myth of Microcosm. Acts of Ecological Resistance are not undertaken primarily in the spirit of calculated, long-term self-interest (of the individual, the society, or the species), or in the spirit of obedience to a moral duty, or in the spirit of preventing profanation. One resists because the threat to the land, the river, or the biosphere is perceived also as a threat to the self, or rather to the principle of diversity and spontaneity that is the endangered side of the basic balance that defines and sustains the very nature of things. Purely humanistic accounts of resistance and rebellion postulate a human nature that mysteriously discovers its essential limits within an absurd or meaningless world. Ecological Resistance, by contrast, assumes a version of the theory of internal relations: the human personality discovers its structure through interaction with the nonhuman order. I am what I am at least partly in relation to my natural environment, and changes in that environment affect

my own identity. If I stand idly by and let it be destroyed, a part of me is also destroyed or seriously deranged. An act of Ecological Resistance, then, is an affirmation of the integrity of a naturally diverse self-and-world. Its meaning is not exhausted by its success or failure in the linear sequence of events, since its meaning lies also in the multi-dimensional depth of an act in one realm that simultaneously affirms a principle valid in many realms. Ecological Resistance thus has something of the character of a ritual action whereby one aligns the self with the ultimate order of things.

Each of the four perspectives has theoretical problems. Resource Conservation provides no justification for its speciesism, its limitation of "the greatest number" to humans; and its notion of "the long run" appears quaint in the perspective of evolutionary time. Wilderness Preservation links the primordial experience of the encounter with the holy to a transient esthetic that is sometimes ecologically pernicious. Nature Moralism, in trying to give nonhumans their due, imposes upon interspecies relations an all too species-specific morality of rights and duties. Ecological Resistance has unresolved problems about the nature and status of the basic balance of which diversity is an essential aspect; and the implications of diversity as an organizing principle for society are unclear. The first three perspectives offer what are all too clearly abridgements of experience: an economic treatment of nature as resource, an esthetic view of nature as inspiring scenery, and a moralistic stance towards nature as something to which we have duties. The fourth perspective seems more comprehensive but needs exploration to see whether its comprehension is offset by vagueness.

Each perspective on nonhuman nature implies also a vision of humanity. We define ourselves in part by our choice of how to treat "nature". The image of humanity suggested by the stance of the Resource Conservationist is, in the first instance, a "masculine" image of Man the Master who maximizes value by managing and manipulating matter; man is the god-like creator of value. Seen through the lens of social history,

Resource Conservation suggests a rather modern and very economic view of life in terms of trade-offs, costs, and benefits, and of character in terms of bourgeois avarice tempered by aristocratic self-restraint. From the Boone and Crockett Club to the Club of Rome, Resource Conservation is the creed of greed moderated by statesmanlike foresight and prudence. Finally, if we follow the hypothesis that our image of nonhuman nature mirrors our secret image of ourselves, we arrive at the paradoxical possibility that we feel ourselves not to be gods, and not even to embody intrinsic value, but to be so much raw material out of which value can be created through transformative labor. The counterpart of the natural resource is the human resource - material first for the self-made man, then for the socially useful person. It is a world in which none are saved by grace but some by work, a world in which the phrase "internal improvements" expresses not only a long-standing policy on public works but also an ethos of personal life.

The image of humanity implied in the vision of the Wilderness Preservationist is drawn like a landscape composed of valleys and mountains, where the valleys are wombs for rebirthing and the mountains are so many breasts through which a benevolent Mother Nature graciously dispenses nourishment to her wide-eyed children, though in the frustratingly insubstantial form of a sublime view. In this world wilderness is gentled by anthropomorphic metaphor, inhabited by symbols of spiritual transcendence rather than by frightful demons or even by beasts of prey. We journey like pilgrims in search of we know not what, across a landscape whose depth is - like Walden Pond - all too measurable. In this sunlit realm of higher laws, ugly things like slavery, civil war, genocide, even predation, have no proper place. They occur outside the park.

The image of humanity implied in the vision of the Nature Moralism embodies all the ambiguity of the liberal civil rights worker who thinks that "we" can liberate "them". All beings (or animals, or whatever) have equal rights, except that only we humans have

duties. By analogy, all parts of the self are equal, but some are more equal than others. The human/nature dichotomy is denied, only to be redrawn within the self as subjection to moral duty is pronounced "liberation".

The image of humanity implied in Ecological Resistance is more holistic and participatory. "Man" does not stand over against "his environment" as manager, sight-seer, or do-gooder; he is an integral part of the food chain, both predator and, if no longer prey, at least host to millions; an integral part of the organic cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death that unites all things; a microcosm of the cosmos who takes very personally the wounds inflicted on his/her androgynous body. By making the principle of diversity central, Ecological Resistance can incorporate the other three perspectives as moments within the dialectic of a larger whole. Economics, morality, and esthetic religiosity have niches in the ecology of our experience of nature, and each has its limits. Prudence, justice, and reverence may be essential parts of a good life, but a good life has also a kind of integrity by virtue of which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

