

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

on

M. Salar Khan's

**PRESERVATION OF FLORA AND FAUNA:  
A MORAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MANKIND**

by

**Andrew J. Reck**  
Professor and Chairman  
Department of Philosophy  
Tulane University  
New Orleans, Louisiana

The Seventeenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences  
Los Angeles, California      November 24-27, 1988

© 1988, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences

ANDREW J. RECK  
TULANE UNIVERSITY

Discussion, Committee III: Comments on Professor M. Salar Khan's "Preservation of Flora and Fauna - A Moral Responsibility of Mankind"

Professor M. Salar Khan of the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh has presented an extraordinarily rich essay, dense with facts and punctuated by a keen appreciation of universal values. Professor Salar Khan is a botanist with a sure mastery of the empirical data and conceptions relevant to a correct, scientific understanding of all natural kinds and the conditions necessary for their survival. As a student of philosophy I can humbly admire and applaud his scientific attainments, and perforce restrict my own remarks to considerations of the values he expresses so far as they indicate the presence in his thought of differing moral philosophies, sometimes compatible, sometimes not. Each of these philosophies locates the source of man's responsibility, his obligation to preserve flora and fauna, in a different principle.

The essay divides into three main parts: first, an introduction, in which Professor Salar Khan's ultimate philosophy finds expression; second, the body of the paper in which the perils of not preserving, of damaging, and of destroying flora and fauna are delineated; and third, recommendations for international and national public policies for conservation, with particular proposals suggested throughout the body of the paper.

The metaphysico-theological foundation of Professor Salar Khan's cogently demonstrated thesis that the preservation of flora and fauna is a moral responsibility of mankind is enunciated in his brief introduction. Here he articulates what he esteems to be the message of all great religions in what I will demarcate as four propositions. First, God created man and all other creatures and the entire physical world. Second, God appointed man steward of

all creatures. Third, man and all other creatures, including the physical, inanimate environment, constitute an ecosystem in which all mutually depend upon each other. Fourth to ignore or damage this ecosystem is perilous for all, including man. These four propositions locate the source of man's obligation to preserve flora and fauna in God's command, a command enforced by the detrimental effects upon man himself for his disobedience.

The body of the essay is taken up with the delineation of the dwindling of the resources of nature and the expression of why this diminution should cause serious concern. The degeneration of estuaries and mangroves, and the destruction of coral reefs, of marine life, of wild animals, of birds, are discussed with illuminating illustrations. The decline of forest ecosystems, and of what they contain and sustain, is treated. The reduction of reservoirs of genetic diversities, along with the cases involved, is considered. The undesirable effects of the traffic in wild life and the plight of endangered species are explored. In the elaboration of the argument, punctuated often by citations of poignant cases of ruin for species of flora and fauna, Professor Salar Khan appeals to three principles of man's obligation or moral responsibility for the preservation of flora and fauna -- first, utility; second, the natural rights of natural kinds; and third, aesthetic values.

The principle of utility, on which in moral philosophy utilitarianism rests, surfaces on many occasions in the essay. Thus, for example, the importance of conserving birds is explained on page 5 as partly springing from the fact that birds may serve us by warning us of dangerous levels of chemicals and radioactive materials in our environment and food supply. And on pages 9 and 10 the reduction in numbers of species of flora adversely affects not only our food supply, but also our pharmaceutical supplies.

Second, there are appeals to a sort of natural rights principle for natural

kinds when, on page 4 "the intense physical, social, and psychological discomfort" that captive individual animals suffer in zoos and aquaria is deplored. Of dolphins and whales it is remarked that it is their personality which produces "affection and sympathy" in us, so that their extinction would become a serious loss. Similarly wildcats are described as "magnificent" on page 5. These descriptions and attributions suggest that these animals, as representative of all flora and fauna, contain in their very natures qualities and values which are so excellent as to oblige mankind to preserve them.

Third, the aesthetic values of different species are cited. Birds are described on page 5 as stimulating a double interest -- the utilitarian, which I have already mentioned, and the aesthetic, as whales, dolphins, and wild cats also excite these interests. The inherent natures of species impose an obligation, it is contended, not only because they have the natural right to live, which we should respect, but also by virtue of the sheer aesthetic delight we enjoy when we see or hear them.

It is pertinent to acknowledge that these three principles do not always fit together. If utility for human beings is the standard, then it is difficult to justify the conservation of all other species, and particularly at given periods of human ordeal in particular regions even the preservation of many species. If aesthetic values are central, then zoos and aquaria are desirable, infringing the natural rights doctrine for natural kinds. If in accord with the metaphysico-theological framework of the introduction, man was created by God as the steward of all other creatures, then human domination is sacrosanct, and the rights of other kinds must yield. Of course if we shave each of these principles of moral philosophy and theories of values of some of their implications, they may be rendered coherent and compatible. But if we do so, we blur their meanings and find them less helpful as standards for guiding us in

respect to particular situations where particular species are endangered.

In regard to Professor Salar Khan's proposals for international cooperation, including the arousal of the scientific community to advance conservation, I have only positive acceptance. I wish to underscore one point he makes on page 7 in the body of his paper and which may defeat his proposals, at least in the short run: "The combined destructive impacts of a poor majority struggling to stay alive and an affluent minority enjoying the lion's share of the world's resources are undermining the very means by which all people can survive and flourish." I applaud this statement. But I wish to add that the division of the world into the rich peoples and the poor peoples, into the North and the South, is a political problem the solution of which extends beyond environmental considerations and even beyond science.