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On Being Human: Nature Through the Eyes of Culture

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Last night a gentle snow fell upon eastern Washington. To celebrate the occasion this morning I decided to hike the ridge of Kamiak Butte, a 3,650 foot high monolith rising out of fertile wheat fields in a region known as the Palouse. By western standards, the Butte is not an impressive natural feature. Contained within a county park, its 298 protected acres abide in sharp contrast to the intensively cultivated wheat fields of the region, providing refuge for a myriad of local plant and animal species. The park is an island of natural repose in a sea of man-made landscapes manipulated for productivity. The ecological dissimilarities between Kamiak Butte and its surrounding environs is what gives it a distinctive character and draws people to its otherwise unimpressive slopes.

On this day I was alone on the mountain and took joy in the fact that my footsteps were the first to imprint the newly-fallen snow. As with dozens of previous visits, each step up the trail brought with it a heightened sense of rising above the difficulties and concerns that so consume my day-to-day life in a nearby academic community. From the ridge one can look down upon the modest-sized towns of the region, which appear as tiny clusters of humanity bobbing up and down on an ocean of wave-like hills. In one of those towns live my wife, our two young children, and the t.v.-infested house which we share. Yet here, on the wind-swept ridge, there is refreshment from the tensions and busyness of life below. High-pitched cartoon voices and everpresent academic pressures melt away in the soothing music the wind creates as it bows the Western Larch and Douglas Fir that mantle the mountain.

Kamiak Butte has become for me a kind of sacred place. It is a sanctuary to which I have gone for prayer, meditation, or sometimes simply to stroll and daydream. The Butte is located adjacent to Idaho, a state virtually defined by its impressive mountain ranges and wilderness domains. By comparison, Kamiak Butte is but an insignificant aberration in the landscape. Yet it has come to embody a personal meaning to which acreages and altitudes do not relate. In short, for me a lowly mountain has taken on a significance that is directly related to my experiences of the world beyond its peaceful confines. The mountain itself is just a mountain - an array of trees, rocks, and living creatures. But I have made of it something more by imposing upon it my own meaning and thus transforming it from mere space to place. I have read my view of the world into Kamiak's landscape and made of it a hallowed and personal venue.

Projecting one's ideology onto natural landscapes is not unique to me or other Americans. It is a behavior that characterizes peoples and cultures everywhere. All societies, from industrialized Western ones to tropical forest hunters and gatherers, read into their native landscapes the social and cultural images that comprise their lived experiences. Conceptualizing the natural world in terms

of one's culture is simply part of being human and being associated with a particular group. Although many factors go into shaping culture, each cultural expression acts as a kind of prescription lens through which its members look upon the natural world and come to a shared understanding of how that world relates to their own society. Cultures everywhere draw a major distinction between the world of human society and the non-human, natural world (Willis 1990). Yet the character of those cultural distinctions is always refreshingly unique, providing a fascinating array of conceptual approaches to understanding human-nature relations.

In a comparative study of contemporary hunter-gatherers on several continents, the Israeli anthropologist Nurit Bird-David (1993) determined that the tropical forests in which such groups live are viewed in terms of the social relations represented in their respective cultures. Relying on metaphors to explain tropical hunter-gatherer views of the environment, Bird-David describes the shared conception that human-nature relations are understood in terms of a child's relationship to a caring adult. The "forest-seen-as-parent" metaphor carries with it the understanding that the forest will provide unconditionally for the needs of those who live within it. As such, hunter-gatherers are said to have "confidence" toward their local environment, relating to it in personal, "subjective" terms. Their perspective is one which extends the social relations of their intimate, band-level society to the forests in which they subsist. Other studies (Turnbull 1961, Hewlett 1991) have documented that the social relations of such societies are nurturing and supportive, characteristics which Bird-David sees revealed in the personal and benevolent conceptions they have toward their tropical environments.

Another cross-cultural example of the way cultural meanings are read into the surrounding environment can be seen among the native peoples who live in the region of the Bajo Urubamba River in Eastern Peru. The research of Peter Gow (1995,) an anthropologist who has lived extensively among the horticultural inhabitants of the region, suggests that the tropical Amazonian landscape is viewed as an aspect of local kinship structures. Features of the forests - rivers, gardens, and other significant localities - are thought of in terms of the historical interactions of the people associated with them. Gow suggests that native peoples perceive themselves and their human relationships as being "implicated" in the landscape to such a degree that neither those relationships nor the local environment is thought of independently. The environment is not abstracted from the culture of those who live within it. For the people of Bajo Urubamba, the tropical forest is "lived space" and social intercourse, as governed through kinship structures, cannot be fully understood without reference to their local environment.

Many other ethnographic works could be cited as further examples of the ubiquitous and unavoidable tendency to conceive of the natural world in culture-specific terms. Industrialized and technologically-sophisticated societies are no

different from those just mentioned in the way that cultural values are projected onto the natural world. The historian Roderick Nash (1982) has traced the origins of the American notion that wilderness is a place to be protected and valued to a nineteenth century reaction among affluent Easterners to the rise of urbanization and industrialization. What was once considered to be a "howling and desolate" wilderness by the first Euro-American immigrant communities (whose circumstances led them to view the surrounding forests as a threat), has now been revised into a set of cultural values that considers wilderness to be the threatened entity.

Today it is this same cultural context of an urbanized and industrialized society that to a large degree shapes the various ideologies that Americans project onto nature. Interestingly enough, a growing number of those ideologies employ a scientific view of nature as a set of threatened "ecosystems", while that same scientific perspective has been the driving force behind the technological advances that have led to urban sprawl, industrial emissions, and the rest of modern civilizations' unwanted consequences. As Alice Ingerson (1993:64) points out, "Environmental reformers...want to change a system [one based on human exploitation of nature] that shapes their definitions of and their desire for change in the first place."

As "modern" Americans, we are really no different from the native peoples of the Amazon who project their kinship structure onto the surrounding landscape. Yet, instead of kinship we tend to project a scientific worldview that has gained precedence as the central tenant of our current cultural framework. Instead of seeing kin relations in nature, we see ecosystems and biochemical processes. A significant difference in the way that small-scale and complex societies project their respective cultural values onto the landscape has to do with the sheer number of sub-cultural ideologies represented by modern nation-states. In the United States, many divergent cultural ideologies exist, from corporate urbanites to logging communities to radical environmentalists, and each reads the landscape in significantly different ways. Those differences stem from the particular values represented in each sub-culture. My own research (1995) among wilderness interest groups in the Northern Rockies demonstrated that the central cultural values of environmentalists, pro-logging groups, and Forest Service personnel correlates with their respective conceptions of wilderness and how humans should relate to it. Each group was determined to project onto wilderness landscapes their disparate views of modern American culture and society.

The study suggests that there is an ongoing struggle to acquire the authority to define what wilderness "really" is and, by implication, what should be the legitimate place of humans in relation to it. Science has become the weapon of choice in this battle to negotiate the meaning to be attached to nature. Efforts to protect or exploit wilderness are almost exclusively couched in abstract and scientific terms. Claiming to have an objective understanding of what consti-

tutes natural environments reveals much of the ethnocentrism of our modern, "scientific" cultural orientation. Science can never be culture-neutral so long as it is practised by culture-bearing persons - a simple concept that is often overlooked by the drive to attain legitimacy through objectivity.

Although most people will agree that we exist in a "real" and tangible world, I am suggesting that we need to accept the fact that we can only comprehend it through a given set of cultural filters. We have become obsessed with the belief that there is some objective view of nature to be had and better science will lead us to it. An understanding that it is appropriate to view the world in cultural terms needs to be reaffirmed. That is, after all, the only way we have to view it. There is no purely objective vantage to be had. Rather than seeking to establish an all-encompassing paradigm by which to categorize and manage nature, perhaps we need to learn to live with a diversity of views without trying to disprove those that do not conform to our own scientifically-biased perceptions, influenced as they are by a narrowly-bounded set of cultural values. As Bird-David suggests, non-Western, non-industrialized perspectives cannot simply be dismissed as quaint or backward; rather, they point out *our* need to come to a more "pluralistic view of the natural environment and human-nature relatedness" (1993:121). I would suggest that the same idea applies to the diversity of views held by sub-cultures within our own society.

There exists plenty of room for Westerners to become more literate of the role that culture plays in our lives. This need pertains not only to conservationists but to all the various interest groups attempting to affect how we as a society relate to the environment. Cross-cultural perspectives can help us to better understand our own otherwise sublimated cultural values - values which invariably frame our perceptions of the non-human world. Cultural literacy can also help us to accept our humanity - the fact that we are culture-bearing, culture-bound creatures who cannot rise to some imagined height of analytical neutrality. We have no means to comprehend the natural world in non-subjective terms and there is nothing wrong with that. Conservation efforts, if they are to be effective, need to incorporate such an understanding. If indigenous group relations with their natural environments have any application to the attainment of sustainable human-nature relations in the industrialized world, perhaps it is through the realization that cultural values, beyond strictly scientific ones, have a legitimate place in formulating sustainable conservation strategies.

The next time I hike up Kamiak Butte and gaze upon the surrounding landscape of the Palouse, it will undoubtedly appear different than the time before. That difference is part of what makes the hike worthwhile. It is always a new experience. The landscape will appear different because my life changes day to day and, as a result, so do my perceptions of the world around me. Those perceptions, as unique expressions of shared cultural values, color the landscape I look upon and make it a part of my lived experience. I do not try to distinguish which perception is closest to some objective reality, but simply appreciate

each one in the recognition that my personalized experience of nature has a legitimacy unto itself. It is that subjective experience, more than any scientific paradigm, that is the prime motive behind my own conservation ethic. And I am convinced that if conservation is to succeed at a time when economic determinism is gaining ever more momentum, the subjective experience of nature needs to be legitimized and appealed to among different segments of our diverse society. After all, people do not love ecosystems and neither does science love a forest.

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