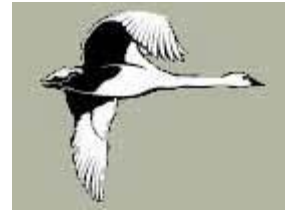


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Nature as a Reflection of Self and Societys



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I.

Matheson Lake lies in the heart of a small wilderness area on Vancouver Island. For untold centuries it has been the home for a complex array of animals and plants. Loons, bald eagles, turkey vultures, ravens, northwestern crows, warblers, yellow pond lilies, cattails, Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, arbutus, willow, snowberry, baldhip rose, salal, western painted turtles, red-legged frogs, snails, zooplankton, and phytoplankton - all of which have remained dynamically intertwined and interacting in an array of ecosystem communities, food webs, trophic levels, and nutrient cycles. Towards the more inaccessible end of the lake is a sheltered area, and it is there that the water often takes on a shimmering and mirror-like quality. Many times, I have looked into the water - at the algae, the beetles, the rough-skinned newts, and minnows - only to discover my own image, albeit one that is usually shadowlike and distorted. And then occasionally I have experienced those fleeting yet paradoxically timeless moments when the boundary between myself and the world has suddenly dissolved, and the lake and all its myriad creatures has become powerfully and indelibly incorporated into my own - into me - and the existence and fate of the animals and plants and insects have been felt as my own..1.

But then, just as suddenly, as if implicit within the very act of attempting to understand the experience, the boundary between self and other is once more imposed, and I am cast again into the role of the proverbial prisoner in his cave of epistemological shadows: subject/object dualisms, and self/other projections.

Throughout western literature, our descriptions of the natural world have reflected the values and biases of a given period in our history. Our perceptions of nature often tell us less about what is actually "out there" in the landscape, and more about the types of mental typography and projections that we carry about in our heads. It is natural, therefore that as values change, so too do our views regarding Nature. We might demonstrate this phenomenon with a number of examples from the past.

One fascinating illustration of the way in which people have projected upon Nature their political and social biases is to be found in seventeenth century England. During the English Civil War the example of the beehive, with its queen, drones or "nobles," and its workers, was regularly employed by Stuart supporters to defend the concept of feudalism and social hierarchy. This tendency to project human values upon Nature and then use such values to lend support to a particular world view or social structure can again be witnessed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, for some, the natural hierarchy of the biological world legitimized British class structure. For a number of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers, such concepts as biological hierarchy and homeostasis were employed to validate and support those traditional values that were being eroded away in a rapidly expanding industrial world.

Similarly, throughout this period, Darwin's biological concept of "the survival of the fittest" was utilized to advocate a host of social, economic and political activities. For example, while Herbert Spencer in Great Britain sought to apply Darwinian theory to all aspects of social and political life, in the United States Darwin's line of reasoning was

frequently used to justify wholesale economic growth and industrial expansion by means of unrestricted competition - including in Commodore Vanderbilt's maxim, "the public be damned!" Thus, the political economist, William Graham Sumner (1840-1910), related the process of natural selection to the development of a society in which the ruthless and the industrious rose to the top.

While many persons were able to find in the processes of the natural world a justification for class privilege, cutthroat competition, and social Darwinism (the latter exemplified in the propaganda of German National Socialism), others were able to look to Nature for a wholly different set of social values. For example, in contrast to Darwin's "survival of the fittest" doctrine, the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) carried on researches and found in the natural realm the endorsement of such values as "mutual aid," cooperation, and social synergy and harmony. Recently, this line of reasoning has been taken up by environmentalists, ecofeminists, and New Age advocates - all of whom find in their study of ecology the justification for the establishment of a new society based upon the values of unity and diversity (the recognition of "one world" and yet at the same time appreciation of the need for political and cultural decentralization), limits to growth, egalitarianism, and interdependence. And much along the lines of the Counter-Enlightenment and the Romantic writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a growing number of people are now perceiving in Nature a set of values which, in many ways is radically different from those that currently dominate our modern world.

II.

It is for this reason that ecology - at least in its "deep" or radical sense - has been labelled a "subversive" science. And while ecology is regularly employed by mechanistically inclined purveyors of reductionism, for many, it goes beyond the study of the relationships between organisms and their environments, and points in turn to a fundamentally new way of looking at our relationship to ourselves, to one another, and to the world. Indeed, ecology represents a wholly "new" type of consciousness that is emerging within the collective psyche of humankind. But while it is new, it is also perennial and timeless. It is a consciousness of synthesis, integration, and non-dualism, and as such is increasingly able to discern those corresponding values in the world about us.

To endorse this perception of the world is to reject many of the dualistic assumptions (body/mind; human/nature; knowing subject/known object) that underlie our traditional world view. Instead, this new perception regards the whole of Nature as a complex but unified web of interdependent organisms, people, and events. It is the perception of the universe as an essential wholeness, but one which manifests itself in terms of countless diversities, expressions of behaviour, and life forms. And while this perception of the world does not in itself constitute a moral norm, an ecological interpretation of our place in Nature does allow us to describe and acknowledge many of the multi-relational consequences of our activities. Hence, this makes it easier for us to adopt an ethical stance which is more in keeping with the universe recognized and appreciated as a unified whole. For example, I am more likely to acknowledge a sense of responsibility towards my environment and other people if I am convinced that "self" and "other" are not isolated categories, but instead form parts of an interrelated continuum. For if we, as individuals, perceive ourselves to be inextricably linked to the rest of the planet - and indeed our solar system and beyond - we are much more likely to be drawn to an ethic which relates our own self-interest both to other human beings and to the environmental community of which each one of us is a part. In this regard, there is often a very strong relationship between the way the world is imagined to be and the types of behaviour and obligations people acknowledge and act upon.

Consequently, an ecological view of the world lends itself to the adoption of a set of

values in which the boundaries of our morality are increasing extended outwards from ourselves not only to include other humans and cultural traditions, but also to encompass non-human members of the earth's biotic community - animals, trees, plants, and ecosystems. Such a perspective implies a relationship to the biotic community that goes beyond its usefulness as an economic commodity and an object of exploitation.

Yet ironically, we still find the majority of arguments for the protection of a natural area couched in - and therefore reflecting - the dominant economic and utilitarian values of our age. Hence, even for most conservationists the land is perceived as primarily an economic commodity to be exploited - albeit this time on a sustainable basis. In fact the very term "resource management" underscores the assumption that we are still somehow separate from Nature and that our knowledge of the world "out there" must be used in Baconian fashion to manipulate and master its objects for our own use. It is noteworthy that Gifford Pinchot, the original exponent of "wise management" conservation, had equated conservation with "sustainable exploitation" and made it abundantly clear that this was not to be confused with "preservation." Similarly, its latest incarnation in the form of "sustainable development" has come to be synonymous with "sustained economic development" - not with "developing sustainability."

Consequently, we find arguments for the protection of wilderness areas usually couched in economic or utilitarian terms. For example, if a cost/benefit analysis of the region can demonstrate that its value lies primarily in recreation and tourism, then it may be worth saving. If, however, its chief value is to be found in forest products and mining, then, it goes. What is absurd here is to give a qualitative evaluation to something that cannot be measured solely on a monetary basis. Neil Evernden points out that this situation is much like saying that since the human body has been assessed at \$12.98 in terms of that market value of its constituent parts, therefore that figure comprises its final worth..2. Yet we still continue to argue on behalf of Nature on such grounds, or at least in terms of some perceived use. Thus, we contend that wild areas must be protected because of their genetic worth or that we must protect the wolf population because of its value in weeding out the genetically inferior members of the deer and moose communities. The temperate rain forests of British Columbia are important for protecting the quality of our water, for climatic regulation, and as sinks for carbon dioxide - and so on. And while such arguments often prove to be expedient in terms of their accessibility to human self-interest, it is not always easy to provide plausible economic or utilitarian "uses" for everything in Nature, and increasingly the justification for protecting snail darters and other such creatures becomes less and less convincing in terms of our traditional values.

III.

In the end, perhaps, the only justification for the careful protection of the land and life forms from total exploitation and final destruction is our recognition that they possess intrinsic value and worth. Indeed, as we begin to acknowledge our own implicit value and even essential divinity, we shall begin increasingly to perceive these same qualities in the world around us. For ultimately the quality of my relationship to other people and to Nature mirrors the relationship that I have to myself and the integration - or lack of integration - of my own psyche. And so, if we treat our bodies as objects or commodities, we shall tend to treat others and Nature in a similar fashion. If I have not acknowledged my own inner shadow, repressions, and fears, I will tend to project these upon others and the outside world. On the other hand, to the extent that I am able to affirm my own inner beauty, love, and wholeness, these qualities in turn will tend to be mirrored in my experience of the world.

If the world "out there" mirrors my inner one, then in a very real way its transformation begins with the transformation of myself. If this is the case, I must be willing to take responsibility for what I experience. If, for example, I perceive or experience a world filled with poverty, injustice, and pain, it is because these attributes are also within me.

However, as I begin to heal myself and express my own inner wholeness, I shall be able in turn to help transform the external world as well.

It is not uncommon for a wilderness experience to act as a catalyst for an experience of one's own inner being and essential wholeness, and consequently for the experience of one's fundamental relatedness to, and inseparability from other life forms. Ultimately, it is in this experience of myself and therefore of my relatedness to the dragonflies, the birds, and the plants at such places as Matheson Lake that I recognize their intrinsic worth and need for protection. They are extensions of myself, and if they are hurt or lost, a part of me is also hurt or lost.

Throughout history, people have journeyed into forests, the deserts, and the mountains and gained transpersonal experiences of one sort or another. It is in places such as these that we are less likely to be caught up in human conventions and readily definable social structures. Consequently, we are more apt to confront the contents of our psyches and acknowledge whatever may happen to lie within. More often than not, we will retreat into the security of our internalized social structures and categories, and project these upon the world about us. However, one may find that it is at those moments when we manage to suspend our internal judgements, authorities, and daily rules that we are also most open to all the transpersonal experiences of Being, of wholeness, and of merging participation with the universe. But this implies being willing to be vulnerable and open to the moment, without recourse to the normal securities of intellectual categorizations and comparative values.

Traditionally, we have attempted to find security and order through the imposition of our own dualistic categories upon the world. As such, the form that our Western knowledge has taken has been predicated upon dualistic subject/object distinctions, and the "objectification" and control of other people as well as the natural environment. However, in the last years of the twentieth century, we are at a stage in history when - if only for our very survival - it becomes necessary to realize that our ultimate security lies not in the ongoing separation of ourselves from one another and the environment, and not in a consciousness based upon fragmentation and manipulation - but rather in the relinquishment of such thought patterns in favour of a consciousness of wholeness and integration, one that is necessarily grounded in Being itself. And so in order to step successfully into the future, we must find the courage to step first into the deepest recesses of ourselves. And perhaps significantly, the consciousness we shall be nurturing is already being reflected in outline form in our growing ecological perception of Nature and its awareness of the profound integration of ourselves with all manifestations of life.

Notes

1. One of the best descriptions to date of this type of "free flow" experience is to be found in John A. Livingston's *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd.), Chapters Four and Five.
2. Neil Evernden, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 10.

About the Author: Duncan Taylor is an assistant professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria. He is also an adjunct professor of Whole Systems Design at Antioch University in Seattle. In past years he has been an assistant editor for the prestigious journal *Main Currents in Modern Thought* as well as a founding member of the Canadian Centre for Integrative Education. He is currently co-authoring a book for the University of Toronto Press titled *Canada 21: For a Sustainable Environment and Society in the Coming Century*.

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