

An environmental ethic for outdoor education: dilemma and resolution

Towards an environmental ethic

K. McRae

School of Education
Canberra College of Advanced Education

Abstract

Programs designed to promote the use of natural environments for leisure purposes need to be based on a sound and justifiable environmental ethic. This paper attempts to develop such an ethic. The general and basic ecological attitude, arguments relating to the need for human survival, other arguments which relate to human interests such as the need for beauty, recreation and scientific endeavours and utilitarian arguments relating to the needs of future generations are examined and are seen as being morally and practically inadequate.

The only justifiable environmental ethic is seen as one which has, as its central concept, the interdependent natural community in which the interests of all individual members of the community (including the interests of human beings) are regarded as secondary to the good of the total community. In the ethic, humans protect the natural environment because the entities of nature are "fellow-travellers", members of the same moral community.

Introduction

Over recent years in Australia, a number of programs have been developed at tertiary institutions to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement programs which involve the use of the outdoors for leisure purposes. It is obviously desirable that any program which is designed to promote such use of natural environments should be based solidly on an environmental ethic which has sound philosophical justification and which is likely to guarantee the protection of the various natural environments in which the leisure activities take place.

A number of questions must be addressed in this regard. What philosophical arguments provide a secure foundation for an environmental ethic? How can the inherent contradictions involved in an outdoor education program which emphasizes both the development of a leisure ethic and an environmental ethic be resolved? Can they be resolved? The intrusion of humans into the natural environment will have an impact on the delicate balance of the entities which comprise the natural environment. How can the natural environment be protected in spite of this intrusion? How can the impact be minimized?

A basic ecological attitude

An environmental ethic or ecological attitude is a central part of the conceptual framework of every reasonable argument concerning environmental issues.

No reasonable argument contends that the destruction of natural forces, processes or life forms is a primary end or the pre-eminent goal of human behaviour. Even arguments which advocate the destruction of the natural environment do so only because they cite a higher or more important goal. Or so they would have us believe.

This basic ecological attitude no doubt has many psychological and sociological sources which will not be explored here. It is obvious at least that all people desire clean air to breathe, unpolluted water to drink and healthy food to eat. Among all reasonable people there is a basic, although sometimes minimal, respect for the environment in which they live. In addition, the vast environmentalist literature and the continuous accounts of various environmental crises also serve to create an environmental consciousness in human thought. It has, however, become difficult to avoid the conclusion that the present state of the relationship between human beings and the environment is uncertain. The fouling of the ocean shoreline, harbours and rivers, the elimination of species of animals and plants, the destruction of rainforests, and the contamination of the air by a variety of pollutants, have all become serious issues of public debate. Arguments concerning these environmental problems, it seems, have all begun with a basic respect for natural processes and life forms, and the issues debated have involved arguments between competing relevant interests. Ethical ecological problems have become a conflict between competing ethical priorities. Those who want to build a dam for the purpose of producing hydro-electricity, for example, are not "against nature". They simply believe that the benefits to humankind from the development of the dam outweigh the benefits of the protection of a wild river and endangered flora and fauna. Those who wish to retain the river for leisure purposes or to protect the endangered species have a different set of priorities, or a different evaluation of the benefits and costs of the projects. Thus, an ethical ecological problem is just a kind of ethical problem, a problem of competing interests, values and goods, which coincidentally has as its substantive background certain scientific-ecological facts. It involves the conflict of different moral principles, different means of interpreting respect for the natural processes of the environment.

Since ecological problems involve the competition of moral values, it is possible to examine the moral claims made in various arguments to see if they are justifiable

in regard to the protection of the natural environment. Do certain moral values, moral arguments, or competing goods better serve to explain or justify a policy of environmental protection? For example, does the need for more domestic energy supplies override the obligation to protect every endangered species?

Rational arguments concerning the protection of the natural environment generally begin with the question of direct human interest. Given an action that will benefit human beings and that may cause harm to the environment, one can ask: Could any purpose be served by refraining from the action and instead protecting the environment? Could the protection of the environment itself directly benefit the lives of the human beings concerned with the questionable action? If so, do the benefits gained by protecting the environment outweigh the benefits of performing the action? These are the types of questions that environmentalists have been asking in their attempt to illuminate the relevance of the science of ecology to human action, and in their attempt to convince people that they are not acting in their best interests in respect to nature.

Opponents of environmental protection

Before examining the arguments of environmentalists more closely, it is prudent to begin with an opponent of environmental protection, e.g., an industrialist or an engineer or a developer — someone who wishes to utilize natural resources for the benefit of individual persons, society, or even humankind as a whole. This opponent of environmentalism might not see any need for the protection of the environment. He might think it permissible, for example, to dump industrial chemicals into rivers, to burn coal which is high in sulphur content, to destroy rain forests, or to build a dam and thereby eliminate species of flora and fauna. He would not commit these actions as a result of malice, nor would he consider them acts of wanton destruction. On the contrary, many cogent arguments would undoubtedly be put forward to justify morally these actions. One argument might point to the personal economic benefits that would accrue to the agent and to others involved — benefits that are considered to outweigh any harm to the environment. Another argument might cite the inviolability of individual property rights and the need for the protection of these rights. Still another argument might be based on the benefits of economic development for the society as a whole: flourishing industries, even with pollutants, are commonly seen as a sign of a prosperous society. Even social justice can be used as an argument: before all members of society can have a decent share of society's products, there must be enough products to go around. These products are seen as being a result of the utilization of natural resources.

These opponents of environmentalism can claim in various ways that the enhancement of human life requires the utilization and, in some places, the destruction of the natural environment. And, consequently, if this were the predominant view concerning the relationship between human beings and the environment, there would be little protection of natural resources; any human benefit would override the need for protection.

Answering the opponents: The human survival argument

Environmentalists in general have answered this array of interest-oriented arguments by claiming that their opponents are misguided in their sense of what is

actually in their best interests as human beings. These people, it is argued, fail to realize that the primary interest of humankind is its own survival, and that the careless utilization, pollution, and destruction of the natural environment threatens its survival. The counter argument to that of the opponents of environmentalism is that an environment which is so damaged as to prevent the source of life will end human existence. If one wants to preserve human existence, one must preserve the life-supporting features of the natural environment. Therefore, the first response to the engineer who wants to build a dam designed to produce electricity is that he is actually doing harm to himself, that he is damaging the balance of natural forces upon which his life and the life of humankind depends. He is satisfying narrow and immediate selfish interests while neglecting the more basic and important interests of survival.

This argument has strong emotional appeal and may, in the end, be true, but there is some argument about whether it is practically adequate to justify morally environmental protection. The opponents of environmentalism can challenge the assumption that humankind's physical survival is threatened by imminent environmental collapse occasioned by the excessive exploitation of natural resources. It is claimed that extrapolations that environmentalists use in their predictions are vulnerable to criticism because they assume that certain practices and growth rates will remain roughly constant. In a sense, these arguments are correct. Environmentalists who argue that human survival is threatened tend to ignore the development of new technologies and social institutions which could make continued human existence possible in spite of the degradation of the natural environment. The future may be different; the quality of the future may be seriously impaired; but there could still be a future.

The fact that human survival in itself is not essentially connected with the protection of the natural environment is illustrated by a consideration of the problem of nonhuman species of life which are threatened with extinction. Despite the web of life, the survival of human beings does not necessarily depend on the total functioning of the natural ecosystem, the continued existence of all species of life. At best, the increased rate of the extinction of various species is a sign that something is wrong with the health and stability of the natural environment. Perhaps, at a certain point, the loss of variety in the life forms on earth would threaten human survival, but it is not obvious that this point has now been reached. Once again, then, it is clear that the mere interest of humans in their own survival is not enough to justify a serious obligation to protect the environment (or to protect endangered species). Depending on certain empirical circumstances, the appeal to human survival could, indeed, permit a great deal of environmental destruction rather than protection.

It is also argued that, since humans live in the environment, they must use it to some extent. Only when it is used (or abused) in a certain manner and in a certain amount is there any danger of the kind of ecological collapse which will cause the end of human existence. According to the rationale of this argument, then, there is only an obligation to protect the environment when the abuse threatens the ecological collapse which will harm humankind. But this means that if humankind is no longer in danger of making the

planet uninhabitable, then its obligation to ensure the protection of nature may very well vanish. This is not what is meant by a serious obligation to protect the environment. An environmentalist wants the natural environment protected even if there is no imminent danger to human survival. The human survival argument does not provide a sufficiently cogent base for an environmental ethic as it is not even capable of providing a purely practical justification for the protection of the natural environment. In addition, the argument can be seen to be advocating merely the protection of human life with no regard for non-human natural entities. A justifiable argument would have to include support for the preservation of all forms of life.

Perhaps the most important question that needs to be asked is not whether human survival is at stake. Human beings are very flexible, inventive and adaptable animals and there would seem to be little doubt that new cultural patterns would emerge even if the natural environment was seriously depleted, damaged or even destroyed. The more important issue is whether the quality of life offered by such a degraded environment would be tolerable. The answer to that question has to be resoundingly in the negative. This leads to a second argument adopted by environmentalists.

Human interest arguments for environmental protection

Environmentalists commonly argue that there are human interests such as beauty, recreation and science which justify protecting the natural environment. This position actually comprises a variety of related arguments, for different observers consider different aspects of the natural world to be most important, valuable, or beneficial to human beings. Despite their differences, however, they all contain one point which goes beyond the survival arguments in that they find an object or value in nature worth preserving. The object or value in nature is always important to human beings. The motivation behind these arguments could be termed 'enlightened self-interest' as opposed to the crass self-interest of human survival. The interest transcends the basic need for survival and focusses on objects and concerns which are not strictly necessary for human survival.

These arguments abound in environmentalist literature, and they are the kind of arguments most often associated with preservationists. The arguments have in common the fact that all the uses to which nature can be put are considered necessary for the well-being of humankind. In one form or another, these arguments are often used as justifications for a policy of or as the moral basis for an ethic of environmentalism.

In the strictest sense, the argument for protecting the environment for human interests other than survival cannot be substantiated logically. For example, beauty of some kind could remain in the world even if the natural environment were destroyed. Scientific endeavours would continue. Other settings for leisure activities would be available and the self-growth fostered by participation in leisure activities in the natural environment could be achieved in other activities in other settings. While the argument does have some logical flaws, it remains important for the formation of an environmental ethic. There is sufficient validity in the arguments even if they cannot be totally justified. The loss of the beauty of the natural environment cannot be replaced by other forms of beauty and this loss would be a lamentable occurrence. Scientific endeavours which provide insights into the

way humans degrade the environment generally and the natural environment in particular cannot be conducted if there is no point of comparison. Obviously other forms of leisure activities could replace those which take place in natural environments, but they would be different and, for some people, inferior and incapable of providing the enjoyment and satisfaction, the sense of achievement and wonder achieved in nature. We have reverted therefore to questions relating to the quality of life and these are subjective matters of perception, feelings and values rather than narrow, rational, logical argument. They are matters of personal belief and judgement.

The weakness in the position is that it fails, in itself, to go far enough. People who pursue "enlightened self-interest" in a natural environment can be seriously, if slowly, affecting the balance of that environment and be unwittingly helping to cause irrecoverable damage. In order to appreciate the spiritual wonder and beauty of a mountain wilderness, a person must climb the mountain and intrude upon the (humanly) empty ecosystem. For the wilderness to be useful as a biological (and educational) standard it must be investigated, studied and measured. This must affect its pristine quality. There is no question, therefore, that the human interest argument alone could ensure the preservation of the natural environment. There are too many people who have too many interests and too little understanding of the impact of their presence for preservation to be likely. Action which affects the natural environment cannot be evaluated solely in terms of the amount of human satisfaction which results from the action. The interests of non-human natural entities must be given moral value if an environmental ethic is to provide the securing of an obligation to protect the natural environment.

Basically, the human interest arguments are weaker than they should be because decisions about any particular case for environmental protection usually hinge on the question, "Which action will best promote human interest?" But this question ignores a more fundamental question which is the real heart of the debate over environmental protection, namely, "Which human interests should be promoted?" The failure to address this question of the value of human interests renders the argument particularly inappropriate; for accepting human interest as the only moral end of action stops debate over the value of alternative ends, debate over the purpose of moral action itself. As long as human interest in general is taken as the goal prescribed by a moral theory, the protection of the natural environment will remain merely a contingent means to that goal. But if the ends of moral action are themselves taken to be part of the debate, then two different possible results may emerge which will favour the environmentalist cause more than the basic human interest arguments:

- certain interests may be seen to be more valuable than others, i.e., more worth pursuing. These important human interests may be connected to the protection of the natural environment in a non-contingent way, thus creating a secure human interest argument for the protection of the environment; or
- interests other than human, i.e., the interest of the natural world, may be seen as more valuable or important than human interests, thus leading to an environmental ethic that entails environmental protection independent of direct human concerns.

Environmental protection for future generations

The basic human interest arguments relating to survival, beauty, recreation and science can be used with more force by introducing the notion of future generations of humans. It can be argued that, even if the destruction of a certain area of the natural environment or the elimination of a certain endangered species would increase immediate human benefit, the long-term consequences for future generations would result in a loss of benefit. A major problem arises in the utilitarian “future generations” argument in support of environmental protection. i.e., the practical problem of the uncertainty of utility calculations in the distant future. Given the limitations of present-day information, the utilitarian really does not know how the actions of humans on the environment will affect the future. The practical consequences of this situation is that without clear assessment of the utility of an action for future generations, the utilitarian environmentalist will be unable to defeat arguments which are based on an increase in immediate human benefit.

The existence of the uncertainty is not an irrefutable blow to utilitarian arguments, but the uncertainties do obligate the utilitarian to be rigorous in evaluating the consequences of any proposed human action and to resist as strongly as possible arguments which are based solely on short-term benefits without consideration of long-term costs.

The real problem with utilitarian arguments, as with non-utilitarian arguments based on the love of humanity, on the rights of future human communities, is that the obligations which arise can only be felt by contemporary humans if they perceive it to be in the interests of their children and grandchildren. The realistic tendency will be to sacrifice the interests of distant generations for the “immediate” gain of contemporary humans in the next few generations. This is not a secure basis for an obligation to protect the environment.

A secure foundation for environmental protection

To provide a secure foundation for environmental protection, it is necessary to move away from the vagaries of human interest, whilst remembering that some human activity may be more inherently valuable, more tolerable, and more morally justifiable than others. It is necessary to examine a completely different kind of theory about moral value, a theory in which the interests of humans is not given special consideration, a theory in which ecological values are recognized as independent of humans and significant in themselves.

The central concept in the establishment of an environmental ethic is considered to be the interdependent natural community. Humans do not live isolated from other natural entities, and thus they must treat the other members of their natural community with moral consideration. The concept of a natural moral community is the most plausible basis of an environmental ethic because it avoids many of the problems associated with the more common approach of conceiving of individual moral rights or moral consideration. There is no need to consider the rights or moral respect due to individual entities because they do not, in themselves, possess a quality which makes them morally considerable. Insects, plants and rocks do not have moral rights, but insofar as they are part of the moral-natural community they deserve respect and consideration. Aldo Leopold summed up the argument

in *A Sandy County Almanac* when he said that individual entities were parts of a co-operative endeavour with expectations that each entity would co-operate with the others and that communal limitations will be placed on the various of each entity:

All ethics ... rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in the community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for) ... In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such.

The basis of this environmental ethic is a new moral framework in which the good of the community, rather than the interests of individual members of the community, is given pre-eminence in moral evaluation. This new framework based on communal ends and good is contrasted with the liberal tradition of emphasizing individual rights and interests, but it is also opposed to the utilitarian goal of maximizing individual satisfactions. The greatest satisfaction of interests for the greatest number of individuals is not the end of moral action; the end of moral action is rather the overall good of the entire biotic community, the quality of the integrated whole. This concept of an ideological community offers a much more comprehensive and plausible object of moral concern than a concept of some universal organism because the concept of community preserves the value of individual natural entities by relating their worth to community function. In addition, ecological science provides a solid foundation for conceiving of the basic interdependence and unity of humans with natural communities and ecosystems because it explains the processes that work in these systems. Ultimately, a knowledge of this interdependence provides the content of moral obligation.

An environmental ethic based on the moral worth and moral relationships inherent in natural communities, must also be an ecological ethic. The inspiration for this new environmental ethic is the almost visionary outlook of Leopold’s “land ethic” He extended the moral community, by means of ecological science, to include animals, plants, soil, water — the entire natural community. This land ethic offers a rationale, a justification, for the protection of the natural environment. Humans protect the natural environment because the entities of nature are “fellow-travellers”, members of the same community. Thus, an environmental ethic and a policy of environmental protection is simply the correct manner of acting towards members of one’s moral community.

Arguments against the ethic

This environmental ethic is open to attack by the entire tradition of human-oriented ethics. The rebuttal of the ethic is divided into a series of parts. First, it is argued that such an ethic harms or devalues human life and achievements. It would thus be irrational and incoherent for human decision-makers to adopt such an ethic. By adopting it as a guide to action, humans would be acting against themselves.

Second, the anthropocentric critic raises the issue of consciousness and moral value. Value is seen to exist only in the minds and actions of rational human beings.

An ethical system which exists apart from human interests and concerns would be a theoretical impossibility for it is human consciousness which must think about the non-human value.

Third, a practical corollary to the second point, is raised, i.e., the pervasive influence of human thought on ecological decision-making. An ethic based on the value of the natural community or ecological system must use human decisions about the boundaries and structure of the natural community. How humans define a natural community will affect the moral decisions made. Thus human interests and human bias will always be represented in the evaluations of the environmental ethic.

Finally, the argument against the environmental ethic raises the point of the achievement of human civilization and human life. These non-natural products of the human community contain obvious value, and any ethical system which ignores or downgrades them would be seen as being incorrect.

Answering the criticism

The answer to this complex criticism serves to clarify the nature of the environmental ethic, and re-establish it as the only means of justifying a policy of environmental protection. The answer falls into two parts. First, it is simply not true that all value systems or ethical theories must be based on human interests and concerns. Although ethical institutions may have originated from human situations, desires, actions and relationships, it is possible to stretch ethical concepts beyond the boundaries of human life. Indeed, if the environment is to be protected, these boundaries of moral concern must be extended.

Secondly, and most importantly, once non-human moral value is recognized, the practical ethical results are the same as the environmental ethic. The concept of ecological health forces the human decision-making to evaluate human action in terms of the ecological structure of the entire human and non-human community. It may well be true that human bias cannot be eliminated totally, but it is nevertheless true that ecological principles such as the health, stability and integrity of the natural community place a limitation on human action and eventually on human civilization itself. If humanity decided to remain within the natural community, the human actions, human cultural and social achievement must always be balanced with and guided by the overall health of the entire natural community. As long as humans are part of the natural community themselves, there is a harmonious merging of natural and human interests in the concept of ecological health.

The concept of ecological health and the subsidiary principles of ecological science thus provide a standard for human action, human intervention, in the environment. This answers the claim that the environmental ethic is misanthropic to the point of incoherence or absurdity for the standard provided by the concept of ecological health gives guidance about the manner in which human action can work for both the environmental community and human society. This defence of the environmental ethic is, of course, of extreme importance. Only by means of this environmental ethic, a system of moral rules which recognizes the existence of value in the natural community, a community encompassing both human and non-human entities, can a policy of environmental protection be rationally and morally justified.

Conclusion

This conclusion also provides the answers to three important and related questions left open in this paper. First, it provides a basis for decisions about the value of different types of human actions. All human actions can be evaluated in terms of their effects on the ecological health of the total human and non-human natural world. In cases where there is conflict between rival human interests, the activity which would have the least seriously deleterious ecological consequences, and which could be shown to fall within the criterion for ecological health, would be chosen by decision-makers obligated to act in accordance with the guidelines of environmental protection.

Second, it provides a solution to the dilemma posed in the beginning of this paper in that it allows participation by humans in leisure experiences in natural environments providing that the ecological health of the natural environment is not impaired. Third, it provides guidelines for the practical implementation of a policy in relation to environmental protection.

One general implication of the environmental ethic is that the need for the protection of the natural environment and its community of life forms requires urgent action to educate both adults and children about the natural environment in order that they will develop an understanding about it and a commitment to protecting it. It is recognized, as indicated previously, that practically no natural environment is completely unaffected by some form of human action. What needs to be avoided is action which deliberately or consciously inflicts further damage. The environmental ethic discussed in this paper provides a realistic, broadly and soundly based set of guidelines for a consequential policy of environmental protection which will empower the ethic. Unless people are educated about the natural environment, the moral justification for the position that has been adopted will no longer exist.

Other implications of the ethic for programs concerned with the use of natural environments for leisure purposes will be outlined in a subsequent paper in this journal.

References

- Blackstone, W.T. (ed.), *Philosophy and Environmental Crisis*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1974.
- Brooks, P., *Speaking for Nature*, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1980.
- Commoner, B., *The Closing Circle: nature, man and technology*, Bantam, New York, 1972.
- Darling, F.F., *Wilderness and Plenty*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1970.
- Ebling, F., *Biology and Ethics*, Academic Press, London, 1969.
- Goodpaster, K. and Sayre, K. (eds.), *Ethics and Problems of the 21st Century*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, 1979.
- Leopold, A., *A Sandy County Almanac*, Ballantine, New York, 1970.
- Marsh, G.P., *Man and Nature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965.
- Myers, N., *The Sinking Ark*, Pergamon Press, New York, 1979.
- Nash, R., *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1967.

Passmore, J., *Man's Responsibility for Nature*,
Scribner's, New York, 1974.

Schwartz, W., *Voices for the Wilderness*, Ballantine,
New York, 1969.