

Trumpeter (1994)

ISSN: 0832-6193

A Sense of Place: Conservation's Common Ground

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Trumpeter

Little time has been given in the conservation movement to developing and clarifying the meanings of our intentions, except for those few "ecophilosophers" whom many practitioners belittle, and thus ignore, as passive do-nothings who are more interested in hermeneutics than really doing something to help wildlife. Still, we are quite happy to describe the opposition for "it is always so easy to set down in little square boxes someone else's motives, and to impute and attribute and assign perceptions and beliefs to others." (Livingston, 1981, p. 14)

This, for me, is troubling. John Livingston asserts in *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* that one of the chief problems we conservationists have caused for ourselves, perhaps because we always seem to find ourselves in a reactive (and thus frantic) mode, is that we leap into action with little thought to the implications. How can we possibly achieve that elusive notion of "wildlife conservation" if, as individuals, we have not taken the time to grapple with what it might mean to, and for, us?

Similarly, if, as a group, we don't have a common usage of terms, what hope do we have of understanding each other? We do not all need to have the same definition; like Donna Haraway and other "post-modern" theorists, I see no need to search for universality. (Haraway, 1989) Still, I think that we ought to at least attempt to understand each other's definitions, in the hope of finding some sense of common ground, some core foundation from which we all may work. And I do suspect that there is something which most, (although not all), conservationists share: a profound attachment to the non-human.

For the purposes of this essay, then, I will provide a brief taxonomy of the different forms conservation has assumed after which I will offer my own understandings of the concept. The analysis is not exhaustive but does cover the strongest currents..1.

Current Definitions

Words, like wool sweaters, become fuzzy with use. Often academics bemoan the loss of purity when technical words become popular, yet this is not necessarily a bad thing as it can reflect the evolution and often the democratization of ideas. It can, however, contribute to confusion and arguments not based on true disagreement but upon semantics. The words "conservation" and "preservation" are good examples of this phenomenon.

Donald Worster, in his history of ecological ideas, identified two streams of thought important to the development of the discipline: *arcadian* and *imperialist*. The arcadian approach could be traced to ideas of Romanticism when spiritual meaning was sought in nature, whereas the imperialist approach, rising out of the Baconian "Empire of Reason", stripped nature of its spiritual meaning describing it merely as that which ought to be controlled for human benefit. Worster says that the dialectic between these two streams is important to ecological ideas:

[O]ne might very well cast the history of ecology as a struggle between rival views of the relationship between humans and nature: one view devoted to the discovery of intrinsic value and its preservation, the other to the creation of an instrumentalized world and its exploitation. (1977, p. xi)

Such a demarcation could, of course, also describe the two primary constituencies in the conservation community. Worster's arcadian approach closely resembles preservationism, the protection of the non-human for something beyond economic value. Common to this approach is a desire to designate wildlife and wildlands as off-limits to human intervention. The imperialist approach is akin to "wise-use" resourcist conservation where nature is merely a source of food, clothing, tourist spectacle, or anything else that is of utility to humanity. Its present configuration is "sustainable development" adopted in documents like the I.U.C.N.'s World Conservation Strategy.

Although preservation and conservation reflects the dichotomy between the arcadian and imperialist approaches to ecology, (and they most certainly have their violent disagreements),² some theorists like Max Oelschlaeger think they have much more in common than is at first obvious. In his explication of wilderness philosophy, he identified two streams of thought, but for him preservation and conservation swim in the same stream: anthropocentrism.

Oelschlaeger suspects that preservationism lacks a spiritual understanding of nature and thus resorts to traditional resourcist arguments as a means to an ends. This is in stark contrast to biocentrism or ecocentrism which goes beyond "strict preservationism by questioning speciesism" thus abandoning "the idea that humankind is somehow superior to and therefore entitled to impose its values on nature." (1991, p. 292) Like other "isms", it is described in terms of power relations, in this case, humans over non-humans.

The white, middle-class values he perceives to be inherent in preservationism is also of concern:

[P]reservationists are easily stereotyped as people who have made their fortune and become more interested in protecting birds and wildflowers, guaranteeing their access to unspoiled wilderness and cleaning the air and water rather than ameliorating the plight...of the underprivileged. (1991, p. 292)

Such charges of misanthropy are overstated, perhaps for the sake of clear academic categorization. Livingston asserts that such accusations are "cultural constipation at its fullest" (1981, p. 116) for it denies the spiritual connections preservationists feel to all life, not just the nonhuman. In fact, with perhaps the exception of the really hard-line 'wise-use' enthusiasts, I would contend that these feelings of connection to other life are present in most conservationists. Which brings us to my understanding of conservation.

Alternate Definitions

I begin with a bare-bones definition of conservation, the reductionist core upon which I will layer meanings for the richness and beauty of complexity. *By conservation I mean the provision of opportunities for flora and fauna to exist in nature, regardless of their perceived utility to humans.* For those who admire the non-interventionist approach, inclusion of "provision of opportunities" in my definition may set the warning bells ringing. I too am uncomfortable with the use of the word "provision" because it can imply management of wildlife. I would assert, however, that it is not the wildlife that needs management, but ourselves. Humans have caused what often appears to be irrevocable damage and those of us who are concerned with these issues must recognize that actions toward self-management are vital to conservation. As Oelschlaeger writes: "Whatever an

individual's idea of wilderness, mere stockpile of natural resources or Mother Earth, the mass of humanity so fundamentally alters nature that no laissez-faire position is rational." (1991, p. 285) Livingston agrees and adds a temporal perspective: "since the crucible out of which these vanishing miracles were formed is all of Earth time, and the devastation has taken place in no more than a wink of human time, things are in no position to take care of themselves." (1981, p. 19)

The form such action might take, however, can be debated. Action does not necessarily mean legal pursuits or carrying placards in front of legislatures. Rather, it could mean simply thinking about issues surrounding wildlife conservation (not to imply that thinking is simple), challenging standard ideas about human/nature and human/non-human relations, exploring personal connections with wildlife - anything that might help build opportunities, openings for change. Neil Evernden, in discussing the utility of "deep ecology" or environmental philosophy writes that action could be "simply standing up to be counted. A plain testimonial will help precipitate the desired change." (1985, p. 28) It is vitally important for all those concerned to lend their voices to the fray. As Arne Naess advocated in a keynote address to a Conservation Biology conference: "Will the defenders of nature please rise?" (1986, p. 504)

Yet the activist in me struggles with an approach that appears so theoretical. The alternatives, however, do not look any better. David Ehrenfeld writes:

[P]eople are spending too much valuable time and causing too much damage by pretending that our efforts in politics, economics, and technology usually have the effects that we intend them to have, especially when there are strong environmental interactions involved. We have been fooled by our own humanist cant into thinking that we are actually learning how to steer the planet in its orbit. (1981, p. 16)

Despite counsel against such folly, few conservationists listen, especially those who adhere to the "wise-use" definition. Inherent in the "sustainable usage" of wildlife is an action-oriented approach which relies on science and technology as tools for the proper management of wildlife. As historians and philosophers of science have demonstrated, however, science is merely one particular way of understanding the world which can be both limited and limiting. Barbara Noske, who dissects the scientific worldview in *Humans and Other Animals: Beyond the Boundaries of Anthropology*, writes:

Positivist science is a type of understanding which seeks to stand apart from all value-judgement and value-determination, thereby also reducing the object of understanding, nature, to something technical and value-free. The wish to regard nature in this way constitutes a value in itself though, the value of human power over a nature made to consist entirely of matter, transformable for human purposes, bereft of value and meaning. 1989, p. 56)

Evernden characterizes the science of Galileo and his successors: "The condition for discovery of the real properties of nature - number, size, shape, and so forth, is the exclusion of life and all the qualities dependent on it" and adds that the "rise in science.. coincides with a drastic diminution in human perception and, contrary to common belief, in human understanding as well." (1985, p. 18, 32) So what is missing from the scientific approach? For these authors, and for myself, the gaping hole is the lack of recognition of context, of the relationships that exist between subject" and "object". Charles Bergman writes in *Wild Echoes*:

Regardless of the knowledge it may produce, objectivity requires that we treat an animal as an object, not as a living creature that struggles, thinks, and feels - just as we do. It necessarily separates us from animals, yet we're

surprised that we don't feel more connected. The blindness of empiricism is that it gives us too much faith in the illusions of our eyes. We come to believe that what we see is real. In the meanwhile, we have grown illiterate in the unconscious attachments to trees and rocks, and we are unaware of the deeper strategies and motives that shape our objective relationships to the world. (1990, p. 28)

Therefore, although science is most certainly an interesting and worthy part of our understanding of the non-human for its ability to provoke wonder at the miraculous workings of life, it cannot be our only approach..3.

Indeed, Bergman believes that:

Science cannot tell us how to relate to wild animals, how to treat them, what place to make for them in our lives. Our relationships with animals cannot be reduced, or confined, to the comforting absolutes of a biologist's graph. In fact, the virtue of seeing our relationships with animals, both personal and cultural, as something we can choose, as a scenario created by us rather than determined for us, is that we are not bound by what has been. This view gives us the hope of freedom and change in our relations with animals. (1990, p. 23)

Relations with animals, relationships with animals...that is what is often missing in definitions of conservation; that is the common spiritual ground for many conservationists. Despite the different world-views or approaches to the non-human, that is the glue which might bind.

For example, associates of mine who work as zookeepers rail loud and long against animal rights activists for their perceived radical stances and unrealistic goals. Similarly, many of those activists would, I am sure, sneer at the activities of these people who not only work in a zoo, but who keep animals in their home for captive breeding and study. But although these two groups are on different ends of the conservation continuum and see the other group as hopelessly misguided, there still exists a profound attachment in both to the non-human. Evernden reminds us that the ecologist "was motivated initially by his irrepressible wonder at the existence of life, and the wilderness defender may remember that it was his experience, not real estate, that prompted his concern." (1985, p. 143) So if connection with the non-human is the motivation for commitment to conservation, what might that tell us about what conservation means? I concur with Evernden when he writes:

For although [the environmentalists] seldom recognize it, they are protesting not the stripping of natural resources but the stripping of earthly meaning.... We call people environmentalists because what they are finally moved to defend is what we call environment. But, at bottom, their action is defense of cosmos, not scenery. (1985, p. 124)

Hence the realization that "if we do harm to the rest of Nature, we are then harming ourselves." (Devall & Sessions, 1984, p. 303) This is not meant in the sense that if frogs as indicator species of environmental degradation are dying, we should suspect that we too are at risk physically. Rather, the damage is spiritual.

For example, John Livingston recounts the childhood feelings associated with the destruction of a ravine behind his home:

[I]n the grass by the pond beneath the dogwoods, the toads and the frogs and the newts and their hypnotic sunlight had been irreversibly

incorporated into my world, literally into me. My world was being tampered with; I was being invaded. Next spring I would have a piece missing, chewed out of me by the ditch diggers. (1981, p. 101)

His description of his experiences resonated within me. I grew up on a farm near the outskirts of a small community in southern Ontario. As a child, I was quite uneasy about much involved in livestock farming. I was upset about the dehorning and tagging of the cattle, the castrating of piglets, the caging of chickens and, of course, the "harvesting" of all of these creatures. As much as my family tried to make me into a good little farmer, I was never capable of any of those tasks.

I was also very disturbed by our treatment of the wild animals with whom we shared the land. It seemed to me that anything that wasn't domestic was condemned - the groundhogs were shot because the cattle might trip in their holes, the coyotes because they might kill sheep, the weasels because they might kill chickens, the porcupines because they might strip a few saplings, and the deer because we needed to do the humane thing and ensure they did not die a "hard" death of starvation. (What was never mentioned, of course, was one of the causes of their starvation - overpopulation from the elimination of predators.) I cried, I ranted, I debated - to no avail. I could not understand why others didn't share this terrible sense of loss, this pain.

Bergman writes that the "fact that we define extinction largely in biological terms, instead of say, social or psychological terms, is simply an expression of the way we see nature." (1990, p. 80) Thus the pieces that are missing from Livingston, myself, and the many others who share this compassion are of no portent if a strictly biological understanding of extinction, or of conservation, is all that gets to count. But if extinction could be understood as a grievous sense of loss, and conservation as a way of avoiding this feeling, it would be closer to how I personally experience the phenomenon.

Similarly, how we define "animal" has great significance to the meanings of conservation. Evernden writes:

[A]n individual is not a thing at all, but a sequence of ways of relating: a panorama of views of the world. Concentration on those relationships, and on relationship in general, clearly constitutes a substantial alteration in our way of understanding the individual. (1985, p. 183)

Thus, for me, conservation cannot be about preserving merely genes, or habitat, but about making room for relationships. Seen in this light, the concept of zoos as tools for conservation becomes absurd:

[A]n animal is not just genes....A solitary gorilla in a zoo is not really a gorilla, it is a gorilla-shaped imitation of a social being which can only develop fully in a society of kindred beings....To attempt to preserve only a package of genes is to accept a very restricted definition of animality and to fall into trap of mistaking the skin-encapsulated object for the process of relationships that constitutes the creature in question. (Evernden, 1985, p. 13)

As Devall and Sessions remind us: "A condor is five percent feathers, flesh, blood, and bone. All the rest is place."(1984, p. 317)

All the rest is place. But what does "place" mean? Some could interpret place as simply habitat. But, for me, it is far more than that. It entails a sense of belonging, an understanding of relationships. Place is where one's life makes utter sense, place is home. Conservation, at its very core, is about providing and maintaining options for place.

Notes

1. For more detailed accounts, I would recommend Livingston (1981), Worster (1977) and Nash (1982).

2. Neil Evernden, in discussing the high emotion involved in debates between industrialists and environmentalists, could easily have been describing the disagreements between conservationists and preservationists: "The environmentalists and the industrialist possess differing ideas about the proper order of things. Moreover, since the debate is not simply about the physical contamination of nature but about the moral contamination of an ideal, there is also an underlying presupposition of "rightness" that adds a level of outrage and indignation to the debate." (1992, p. 6)

3. That is, of course, my opinion. Haraway (1991), in discussing feminist approaches to science, notes that feminists are divided into two camps: those who wish to clean up science versus those who want to leave it behind altogether.

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Continued on page 19.

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