



Aesthetic Value and Environmental Preservation

In his *A Sand County Almanac*, the founder of ecological science Aldo Leopold famously stated that “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” and “It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”¹ It seems clear that integrity and stability are necessary for a flourishing natural environment, but it is not clear why it needs to be beautiful. On one hand, beauty is a human concern, that is, we like to live in beautiful places full of blooming flowers, green trees, singing birds, and so on.² Integrity and stability are necessary for the biotic community itself, but the non-human things that live in it are not concerned with aesthetic value. On the other hand, it is clear that there are many natural areas that are anything but beautiful. Indeed, if beauty is pleasant, then one would be hard pressed to say that bogs, swamps, and deserts are beautiful.

Nonetheless, Leopold insists that aesthetic value is essential. Writing about the Colorado River delta he notes that

The still waters were of a deep emerald hue, colored by algae, I suppose, but no less green for all that. A verdant wall of mesquite and willow separated the channel from the thorny desert beyond. At each bend we saw egrets standing in the pools ahead, each a white statue matched by its white reflection.³

Truly, this is an inspired description of a beautiful natural setting and one could argue that Leopold himself sounds a bit like an art critic describing a work of art, for in both cases the writer wants to convey to the reader something of his aesthetic experience so that the reader may come to likewise enjoy the thing in that manner. With this said, what role does aesthetic value play in the preservation of the natural environment?

One way to make the connection explicit is to note that wilderness areas can be thought of and treated as works of art are. In his *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, Eugene C. Hargrove argues that wilderness areas should be preserved (just as works of art should be preserved) since they provide enriching experiences for those who encounter them.⁴ As mentioned above, this is an anthropocentric view, that is, it is one that originates in *human* interests and desires. This approach is often used by environmental groups and associations (such as the National Wildlife Federation) that strive to preserve wilderness areas since they appeal to the human desire to experience beautiful surroundings. Of course, a difficulty with this is that it will only work on those who are able and willing to encounter wilderness areas. The same goes for works of art: it's quite difficult to convince someone about the value of a work of art if they haven't been or just aren't willing to go to the museum to see it. This is especially relevant for the ongoing discussion regarding drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Indeed, advocates for drilling often argue that few Americans benefit from the preservation of the refuge since they do not travel and otherwise make the effort to experience its beauty (On the other hand, this seems to explain why photographs of the refuge are important: they allow distant observers to appreciate their aesthetic value even if they live in, say, North Carolina).⁵

Another difficulty to consider is that perceptions of aesthetic value are influenced by both cultural and subjective factors. By in large, Americans currently value the beauty of wildernesses however, in the eighteenth century Americans and Europeans valued formal gardens and tended to view wilderness areas as uncivilized and threatening.⁶ This change in taste can be explained by the completion of westward expansion and/or economic development. It is no coincidence that rarity is an element of the value of both works of art and natural settings.

Is the aesthetic value of wilderness areas purely dependent upon human interests and concerns? Is there are way to avoid these difficulties?

Hargrove also argues that such areas also have intrinsic value. This seems to be because we want to preserve them (like we want to preserve works of art) not only because they are enjoyable for us but also because the world is a better place with them in it. We are also often willing to suspend our viewing of them if it becomes clear that such viewing, in fact, harms them. Works of art have intrinsic value in that it seems terribly inappropriate (if not morally wrong) to use them instrumentally. One shouldn't tear up a famous painting and use it for kindling, spray graffiti on a sculpture, and so on. The work of art is not a tool to be used in bringing about the realization of one's personal interests. Aesthetic value seems to be intrinsic to the thing and, on further reflection, it

becomes clear why the preservationist would want to draw our attention to the beauty of the natural world. If we do so, then we may begin to view the natural world as intrinsically valuable and will consequently criticize any attempt to use it instrumentally. This may include damming rivers for the sake of hydroelectric power, deforestation for the sake of creating a space for cattle grazing, drilling for the sake of oil production, and so on.

This is consistent with the preservationist's insistence on the problems of ethical egoism, the position in which the individual looks out for her own interests first. Emphasizing both the intrinsic value of a work of art and the intrinsic value of wilderness area allows the preservationist to highlight the dangers of ignoring the implications of narrowly instrumental reason. The claim is that this puts limitations on the richness of experience, for viewing the world instrumentally will not allow one to fully appreciate something like a work of art or a wilderness preserve. This is supported by the observation that aesthetic experience is characteristically impersonal in nature. That is, in viewing either a work of art or a wilderness area, the individual is overwhelmed by sensory experience or, to put it another way, one can lose oneself in encountering a painting or a biotic community.

I have discussed the reasons for the preservationist's emphasis on aesthetic value and have shown that this approach presents two alternatives: one that centers on human interests and another that emphasizes the intrinsic value of biotic communities. I would like to conclude by suggesting that the Land Ethic espoused by many preservationists expand its notion of the aesthetic value of the natural environment. As intimated above, it is clear that aesthetic value can be gleaned from environments that need not be thriving

biotic communities. Our eighteenth-century predecessors enjoyed formal gardens with well manicured lawns and sculpted hedges and, of course, this tradition continues today. One of the difficulties of the Land Ethic is that it presumes a substantial amount of interaction with the natural environment, an amount that is in many cases unattainable for city and suburb dwellers. However, if an environmental aesthetic is cultivated that stresses both creating and extracting meaning from the environment—whether home, city, countryside, or national forest—then a connection can be established that will support the preservation effort.⁷ Indeed, individuals who generally care about the aesthetic value of their environment will be more likely to appreciate the value of complex biotic communities even if they lie in distant places such as the Alaskan wilderness.

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NOTES

- 1 – ‘The Land Ethic’ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 237-265.
- 2 – For more on environmental psychology see *Environmental Aesthetics: Theory, Research, and Application*. Edited by Jack L. Nasar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- 3 – “The Green Lagoons” in *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1970, pp. 150-151.
- 4 – Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989, pp. 82-83.
- 5 – For more on this issue see <<http://www.anwr.org>>
- 6 – See Hargrove (1989), p. 82-83.
- 7 – For more on this see Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetic of the Environment*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997.