

Environmental Fundamentalism

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The trap of environmental fundamentalism gets sprung early and often, whenever debates get framed as economy *or* environment, humans *or* nature, government regulation *or* market economy, preservation *or* development, growth *or* steady state. Serious public dialogue about desirable future conditions quickly polarizes and degenerates into name-calling: rapists and temple destroyers versus nature Nazis and watermelons (green on the outside and socialist-red on the inside).

Fundamentalism narrows the decision space where common interests overlap. It promotes a politics of blame and shame when what is needed is deliberation and collaboration. Worse, it encourages allegiance rather than understanding. Fundamentalism blinds us from seeing the many natures that evoke hope, wonder, respect, and political action. So-called environmentalists invoking a fundamentalist faith in balanced nature, a pristine continent, a noble savage, and a purposeful evolution paralyze discussions, waste valuable political capital, and deflect needed public discussion away from widely shared public goals of thriving and sustainable communities. Economic developers find fresh meat for their dismissal of environmentalism and understandably look elsewhere for ideals about future communities. Discounting and dismissing the whole environmental message becomes easier if a few prominent rhetorical points are so easily questioned. Bestsellers such Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* effectively throw out environmental babies by criticizing the dirt in environmentalism's bathwater.

Alternative framing of society's social-environmental problems is possible. Biocultural visionaries such as Aldo Leopold advocate appropriate technology and social ecology that blend rather than separate environmental and social concerns. They advance solutions that benefit both environment *and* jobs, human equity *and* biodiversity, urbanization *and* ecology, utility *and* beauty, and thriving *and* sustainable communities. These attractive visions of the future appeal to people of most political persuasions, broadening and deepening the political will to act.

The environment is so complex and our abilities to understand it so imperfect that our appreciation of it will always be limited. The best we can do is assemble numerous partial glimpses—partial natures. There are infinite such natures, each one appears to us through a different lens of human culture: science, art, religion, and so on. We must use civil discourse to choose among these many natures the ones we want to sustain, create, and extinguish. A pluralized nature will uncover shared interests, reveal potential political partnerships, and motivate community action. Rather than be polarized into apathy by fighting over whose nature is best, we can instead join forces to create our shared vision. Rather than excluding people from caring about nature, we should be including people. The more people care about nature, the more we are likely to mobilize the political support needed to redirect unsustainable behaviors and create thriving communities.

Human creativity can improve, refine, and enhance many natures. We can create natures that help us feel positive about our roles in the biosphere and thus inspire in us the will to act as stewards and lovers of nature. We can be more than responsible citizens of the biotic community; we can be prudent innovators, inspired visionaries, and loving partners in the odyssey of evolution. We can do this without losing respect and appreciation for the creativity and complexity of natures that are autonomous, wild, and rightful.

Of course, we always must be wary of hubris. We must admit that we can destroy as well as create many natures. We must be cautious of our own creativity. We must acknowledge that our technological prowess and growing population amplify our ability to eliminate natures, while our capacities to envision, value, and sustain natures remain limited. Many natures exist, many more are possible, and many of these natures can have a nurturing, creative role for humans. Thriving and sustainable communities exist on the higher ground where these natures overlap.