

The Land Ethic and Old, New, and Inclusive Conservation

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Introduction

The past 100 years have seen an unprecedented loss of biodiversity worldwide. Furthermore, abundance of wild animal populations has declined by 50% since 1970. By most accounts we have now entered the 6th mass extinction event in the Earth's history, for the first time driven by anthropogenic factors. Humans are causing irreversible changes to the biosphere and many believe the future of life on Earth hangs in the balance. Ours and the coming generation have the awesome responsibility to conserve the biosphere – Conservation Biology is a key scientific underpinning for this endeavor. Conservation Biology is now a generation old, an age at which a scientific discipline often takes a critical look at itself and attempts to re-define its' future.

Old, New, and Inclusive conservation

Recently, there has been a contentious discussion among conservation biologists about what has been termed "New" conservation (e.g. Soulé 2013, Marvier 2014). The debate between "Old" and "New" conservation led to a call late last year for reconciliation and "Inclusive" conservation (Tallis et al. 2014). One of the important divisions between Old and New conservation was whether nature should be conserved for either its *instrumental* or its *intrinsic* values. One tenant of Conservation Biology since its inception is that nature is good and that it has intrinsic value (Soulé 1985). The contention is that focusing on instrumental value could weaken conservation efforts in the long term. The term inclusive conservation was coined to propose a conservation wherein all values are accepted.

Values in Nature: Individuals to ecosystems

Does nature have intrinsic value? If so, wherein lies this value? Sentient beings? All organisms? Individual organisms or species as a whole? If we discover intrinsic value (i.e. "good") in nature this implies that we as humans have duties to do what is right to protect natural value.

Although conservation biology has traditionally assigned intrinsic value to nature, classical Western ethics deal with individual humans as the subject and object of value. Environmental ethics developed in the 1970s as philosophers struggled to identify values in, and duties to nature (see Rolston (2012) for an overview, and enviroethics.org for a comprehensive bibliography).

Human societies and philosophers now generally agree that *sentient beings* pursue a "good" of their own, even if it is radically different from what we perceive as "good". They have intrinsic value; legal systems have been developed to protect animal rights, for example.

What then, of *non-sentient beings*, e.g., insects and plants? Many philosophers have deemed that all life is good – that all individuals pursue some "good" of their own. They have intrinsic value (Figures 1 and 2).

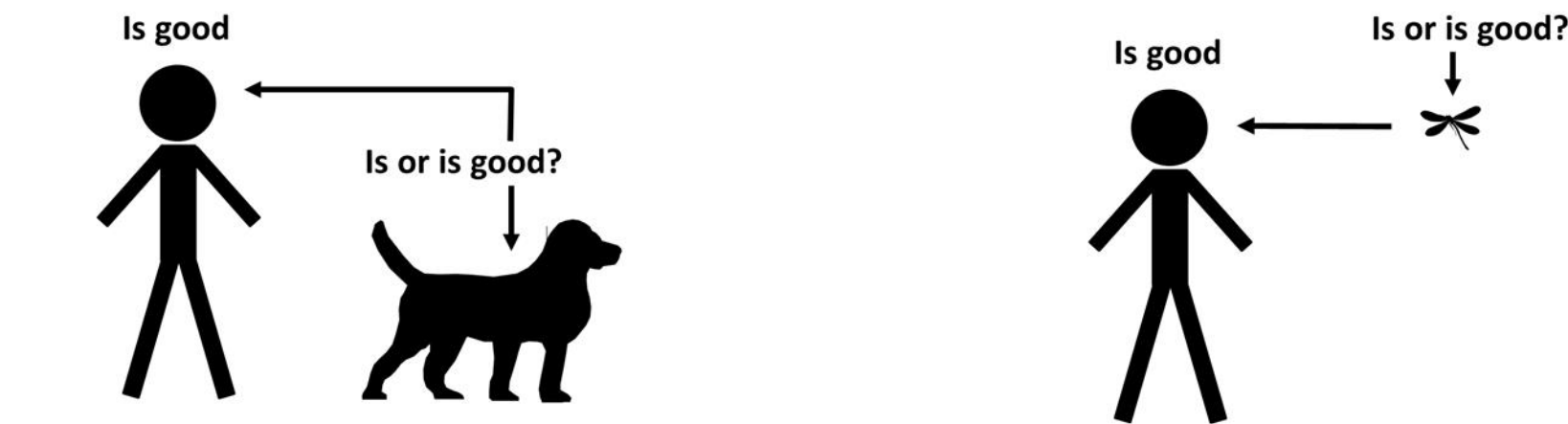


Figure 1. Western ethics has focused on individual humans as the objects and subjects of values. More recently, sentient beings and non-sentient beings have been accorded intrinsic value and objective good of their own, no longer requiring a human subject as a valuer.

Species are not individuals. They fall outside the traditional value system. Species exist as dynamic forms through time and space. Thus, to assign intrinsic value to a species the object of value must be the *process* of speciation. In the end this must include *the biotic community* because species are what they are where and when they are. Legally, many societies have already granted protection to species.

Are societies ready to accept that we have a moral obligation towards ecosystems? Are we ready to uphold a *Land Ethic*?

The Land Ethic

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" Aldo Leopold, (1949) *A Sand County Almanac*

The Land Ethic provides a moral code by which humans can interact with their ecosystem. Species and communities are what they are within their ecosystem – in order to fully value these we must realize our moral obligation to ecosystems. Many societies have already legally recognized the need to protect species in their ecosystems, in fact, through habitat directives and endangered species acts. Philosophers have argued for duties to species and to ecosystems (see Rolston 2012), reinforcing and deepening our understanding of the Land Ethic (see Callicott 2006).

At its broadest form the Land Ethic provides a moral code for humans on Earth (Figure 2).

"We are searching for an ethics adequate to respect life on the Earth. An Earth Ethics" Holmes Rolston III (2012) *A New Environmental Ethics*



Figure 3. Planet Earth, from space (clip art image). Ethical consideration has been given first to all life (biocentrism) and now to species and ecosystems (ecocentrism). Earth is the only ecosystem of which we are aware – the only host of life that we know of. If we accept that life is objectively good, the Earth ecosystem ought to have moral standing. Although we may be Earth's sole moral agents, it is the height of arrogance to assume we are its sole moral objects.



Figure 2. A dragonfly with its intricate and beautiful wings displayed (clipart image). The wings are a marvel of aerodynamics "engineering" allowing dragonflies to capture their flying prey. Rolston (2012) makes an elegant and persuasive case that the wing design of dragonflies have served the "good" of dragonflies for over 320,000,000 years. Rather longer than we as human valuers have been on the scene!

Conclusions

- Philosophers and conservation biologists agree that nature (organisms, biodiversity) is good. More contentious is whether this good is intrinsic and objective, or instrumental and subjective to human valuation.
- I concur with those philosophers who maintain that nature has intrinsic value and that good exists objectively, outside of human subjective experience. This good has existed since before the dawn of *Homo sapiens* and will exist after our departure.
- This good transcends individual organisms and extends to the dynamic processes that are species and ecosystems.
- The existence of objective good implies duty towards nature in the same manner in which we have duty to other humans.
- Thus, human actions toward nature can be considered right or wrong; The Land Ethic provides the moral ground upon which to stand.
- Although new and inclusive conservation have practical application in our real-world efforts to stem the tide of anthropogenic destruction of nature, *I believe that conservation biologists must strive to discover, express, and protect nature's intrinsic value.*
- Any suggestion to apply "inclusive valuing" to questions of human rights would be rejected as absurd by most modern societies – there can be no compromise about recognizing the equal value of each individual human.
- Why then should we accept that what is morally right or wrong in terms of our duties toward nature is subject to human interpretation?

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