

Stewardship of Public Lands

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Afterword

To conclude this monograph on the Stewardship of Public Lands, we provide a thought-provoking essay by Holmes Rolston III, the 2003 Templeton Prize winner. Rolston is often considered the father of the field of environmental ethics. AASCU's American Democracy Project promotes the value of citizens actively involved in their communities, indeed fully engaged as "stewards of place." The Stewardship of Public Lands holds a distinct position among ADP initiatives in challenging educators and students alike to consider place in a fuller context. Beyond simply human-lived communities, the Stewardship of Public Lands challenges us to think about our responsibilities to place in a grander view. Rolston's essay advances the idea that education ought to engage students three-dimensionally—in cultural, rural and wild environments. His essay provides both context and consideration for those engaged in the stewardship of place.

Greening Education: The New Millennium

Holmes Rolston III

Abstract—Three-dimensional persons need encounters with cultural, rural and wild environments, else they are under-privileged. Although science discovers the biodiversity on Earth, and technology brings dramatic powers for development, neither can guide us in the deeper-values decisions about how to balance the three. Should we maximize sustainable development? Or prioritize a sustainable biosphere, working out an economy within a quality environment with abundant wildlife and wildlands? Economics alone cannot answer such a question. Educated persons today must be as environmentally literate as they are computer literate. Increasingly, being a resident on a landscape is as important as being a citizen. On this home planet, we cannot afford the poverty of a de-natured life.

Today's college students need to be wiser than Socrates. "The unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology*). "Know thyself." The classic search in philosophy has been to figure out what it means to be human. That can't be done in this new millennium without a

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complementary maxim: “Life in an unexamined world is not worthy living either.” To put it bluntly, with his half-truth, taking it for the whole, Socrates went wrong.

In his search for the good life, Socrates loved Athens, which is well enough. A human is, as Aristotle put it, a “political animal” (*Politics*). We live in towns (Greek: *polis*), in social communities. We cannot know who we are without an examination of the cultures that shape our humanity. This is a strong argument for receiving a college education. But Socrates avoided nature, thinking it profitless. “You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and trees won’t teach me anything, and the people in the city do” (*Phaedrus*).

John Muir (1965) knew better. When he finished his formal education and turned to live in the Sierra Nevadas, he wrote, “I was only leaving one university for another, the Wisconsin University for the University of the Wilderness” (p. 228). No education is complete until one has a concept of nature, and no ethics is complete until one has an appropriate respect for fauna, flora, landscapes and ecosystems. “Who am I?” warrants the more inclusive question, “Where on Earth am I?,” which leads to the most urgent question of the new millennium: “What on Earth ought we to be doing?”

Place nature in your worldview; place your worldview in nature to become a three-dimensional person. The totally urban (urbane!) life is one-dimensional. Life with nothing but artifacts is artificial. Privilege comes

through experiencing the urban, the rural and the wild. With this three-dimensional education, you can talk back to New Yorkers who think Manhattan is the center of the Earth. You can also deal with the Washington power brokers: “The best in life is outside the beltway.”

You can even startle scientists: “Science alone does not teach



Seminar participants gather around creek bank.

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us what we most need to know about nature: how to value it.” A college education needs the natural sciences: physics, chemistry, geology, biology, ecology and even conservation biology. Certainly students will learn their facts about the richness of life on Earth and, hopefully, develop an appreciation for biodiversity that they cannot learn in philosophy, whether from Socrates or the postmodernists. But science is not conscience. One argument forbids moving from what *is* (description of biological facts) to what *ought* to be (prescription of duty); any who do so commit the naturalistic fallacy. Then again, ought not biologists (above all!) celebrate Earth’s biodiversity?

Biology confronts every biologist (researcher and student alike) with an urgent moral concern: caring for life on Earth. Somewhat ironically, just when humans, with their increasing industry and technology, seemed further and further from nature, the natural world has emerged as a focus of ethical concern. It is not simply what a society does to its slaves, women, minorities, handicapped, children or future generations, but what it does to its fauna, flora, species, ecosystems and landscapes that reveals the character of that society.

But should we have more Wal-Mart, if this means fewer osprey? Is global capitalism unjust if it makes the rich richer and the poor poorer? Ought Nepali park rangers confiscate the cattle found grazing within tiger sanctuaries, even if the poor herders are starving? A people on a landscape will have to make value judgments about how much original nature they want, or wish to restore, and how much culturally modified nature they want, this way or that. Ecologists may be able to tell us what our options are, and what the minimum baseline health of landscapes is. But nothing in ecology gives ecologists any authority or skills at making these further social decisions. Prioritize economics. Do whatever to the environment, so long as the continuing development of the economy is not jeopardized thereby. Or ought we to prioritize the environment? Demand a baseline quality of environment and work out the economy within that? Sustainable development? Even if this threatens the tigers? Or sustainable biosphere? Even if the cattle owners go hungry?

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In the great outdoors one is immediately confronted with life persisting in the midst of its perpetual perishing. The seasons are evident: spring with its flowering; fall with its dieback. Park visitors may be at leisure, but the struggle out there is perennial; eating and being eaten, survival through adapted fit. That is the ultimate “dialectic,” if we may use Socrates’ philosophical word: Life is a search with opposites in conflict becoming complements in resolution. Wild nature is a vast scene of sprouting, budding, flowering, fruiting, passing away, passing life on. Birth, death, re-birth, life forever regenerated—that is the law, the nature of life. In town, too, people age and perish and reproduce and prosper, generation after generation. But immersing oneself in a “nature reserve” confronts us more directly and intensely than usual with this life struggle and life support in primordial nature. Life goes on—protected in the park—but on its own, wild and free.

Forests and soil, sunshine and rain, rivers and sky, the everlasting hills, the rolling prairies, the cycling seasons—superficially, these are just pleasant scenes in which to recreate, to get out of the classroom and into the field. At depth, however, these are the surrounding creations that support life. If one insists on the word, they are *resources*, but now it seems inadequate to call them recreational resources. They are the *sources* that define life. They are the ecosystems that humans inhabit, instrumental to civilization, but more than that: here is primeval, wild, creative source. Visiting the outdoors, one does go “outside,” “out into” the country. One senses how much in the world was put in place without any human activity; one wonders what is our artifacted place in such a nature-placed world. Experiences of such values may be soft. They are also deeply educating. They can be had in rural nature, but for most students today, such experiences are primarily found on public lands.

Humans depend on airflow, water cycles, sunshine, photosynthesis, nitrogen-fixation, decomposition bacteria, fungi, the ozone layer, food chains, insect pollination, soils, earthworms, climates, oceans and genetic materials. These ecological values contribute positively to human experiences. But they also seem to be there apart from humans being here. Nature is an evolutionary ecosystem, with humans a late add on. In the woods, a first impression is that this is not where I live; the whole idea of being in the backcountry is being somewhere different from where you live. But a second and deeper

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“Man is the measure of things,” said Protagoras, another ancient Greek philosopher (recalled in Plato, *Theaetetus*). Yes, humans are the only evaluators who can deliberate about what they ought to do conserving nature. When humans do this, they must set up the scales; humans are the “measurers of things,” we prefer to say. But do we conclude that all we measure is what people have at stake on their landscapes? Cannot other species display values of which we ought to take some measure?

An education these days requires becoming environmentally literate, just as much as it does becoming computer literate. In curriculum evaluations on my campus, we asked what’s different today from the classical education that the senior faculty got 50 years ago. The Pythagorean theorem hasn’t changed, nor have Thomas Aquinas’ five arguments for the existence of God, nor (despite studies from new perspectives) has the history of the Civil War. What’s really new is the computer world, the Internet. And, almost paradoxically, what’s really new is the environmental crisis. Education across most of the last century sought to produce *citizens*, leaders productive in their communities. That’s another goal, half-true, which if taken for the whole, goes wrong. This generation, and those from here onward, need to know how to be *residents* on their landscapes, how to be Earthlings.

When a student goes home and says that before one can graduate he or she has to demonstrate environmental literacy; hence the summer field course in a national park, mom and dad may be doubtful. “Why do you have to get concerned about the chipmunks and daisies? Shouldn’t you study something more serious? College costs a lot of money!” Those who study hard have an answer: “I have been searching for a land ethic” (Aldo Leopold). Or, if granddaddy is there and grew up on a farm, perhaps the best answer is: “When you graduate and commence in the world, you need to know how to kill something and eat it.” Or at least to know your roots in the soil. Parks, wildernesses and national forests are, yes, places to get “away from it all,” but even more, they are places to get “back to it all,” encountering the protected reserves of elemental nature. The again, “back to” metaphors are always a little worrisome; better to say “down to it all.” Outdoor experience there helps to protect a full answer to the question of human identity.

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impression is that this is where we do live, our cultures superposed on natural systems. We re-contact the natural certainties—only to realize that they are less certain now than ever before in this history of the planet.

An ecological perspective makes it clear that culture remains tethered to the biosystem and that the options within built environments, however expanded, provide no release from nature. An ecology always lies in the background of culture, natural givens that support everything else. Some sort of inclusive environmental fitness is required of even the most advanced culture. Whatever their options, however their environments are rebuilt, humans remain residents in ecosystems. This is a truth for rural and urban people, but what better place to learn it than in protected nature reserves, where we turn aside from our labors and take this wider, more ecological perspective.

Environmental awareness is vital because the survival of life on Earth depends on it. The main concerns on the world agenda for the new millennium are: war and peace, escalating populations, escalating consumption and degrading environments. They are all interrelated. For the first time in the history of the planet, one species jeopardizes the welfare of the community of life on Earth, as with global warming and extinction of species. Ecology is about living at home (Greek: *oikos*, “house”). Figure out this home planet. What’s new about education is that this has become the most inclusive concern of all: figuring out the human place on the planet.

The educated person today doesn’t want to live a de-natured life. Humans neither can nor ought to de-nature their planet. You are not educated for the new millennium unless examining your life leads to getting put in your place in your encounters with once and future nature.

References

- Muir, J. (1965). *The story of my boyhood and youth*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.