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The Importance of an Environmental Ethic that Fits

Scholars and environmental activists debate which environmental ethic is best for guiding the way humans relate to nature. Traditional conservationists claim that there is an inherent dichotomy at play between human development and the environment, and therefore they frame the issue as a zero-sum game. This “wilderness ethic” has caused heated debate and the creation of various counter ethics from different people invested in the well-being of both humans and the environment. Michael Pollan, a journalist, professor, and activist, distances himself from the dichotomy of the wilderness ethic and suggests that people should address the land as gardeners. Others, such as University of Illinois College of Law professor Eric Freyfogle, believe that Pollan’s garden ethic is largely flawed because of his focus on the individual. Instead, Freyfogle proposes that scientists need to express their findings more clearly to the average citizen, and hopes that a clearer grasp of facts will motivate people to act with consideration for the environment. There seems to be a gap in each of these ethics, particularly in the way they compete against each other. The wilderness ethic manipulates the environmental pathos of America to distort the historical reality of much of its environment, and both Pollan and Freyfogle offer one-size-fits-all solutions to multifaceted problem. Continuing to debate which of these ethics is best for mainstream America to adopt will result is a stagnant state of intellectual stimulation. Such debate will continue to gain more and more nuance, yet remain in the ivory tower and inaccessible to that majority of Americans. Simply put, there is no single environmental ethic that will speak to the majority of the population. Instead, we need to start targeting specific ethics towards specific communities.
Although conservationists and preservationists have widely supported the wilderness ethic, modern critics are starting to voice concerns over its validity. In their article, *Taming the Wilderness Myth*, Gomez-Pompa and Kaus explain that inherent in the wilderness ethic is the notion that, “there is an inverse relationship between human action and the well-being of the natural environment” (271). This idea, that what is good for humans is always bad for the environment and vice-versa influences other aspects of conservationists’ beliefs, such as their definition of wilderness. Gomez-Pompa and Kaus define wilderness according to traditional conservationists as, “Mountains, deserts, forests, and wildlife” that is “enhanced and maintained in the absence of people… these areas are seen as pristine environments similar to those that existed before human interference” (271-272). By establishing “wilderness” as land completely free of human influence, supporters of the wilderness ethic assume that such an area exists. By comparing the state of nature today with conjured images of the land as our great-grandparents or even first settlers knew it, this ethic attempts to depict that we have lost natural beauty at the hand of human development. However, as Pollan warns, it is important to closely assess whether “wilderness” (as conservationists suggests) is actually a real thing.

In his article, *The Idea of a Garden*, Pollan uses examples from a forest close to his home to explain that human involvement can't be thought of as separate from the environment...
like supporters of the wilderness ethic tend to suggest. He begins by establishing the Cathedral Pines as an example of what conservationists would consider wilderness. Early in the article he describes the park as, “a famous forest of old-growth white pines,” and “a kind of local shrine…the trees untouched since about 1800.” He also reminds the reader that in 1985, “the federal government designated it a ‘national natural landmark’” (192). Pollan ironically suggests, such pristine land would be traumatized and ruined if humans began to interfere.

But, he then goes on to deconstruct the pathos of “wilderness” represented in this forest by explaining that the site was actually formed by humans influence over hundreds of years. When Cathedral Pines was destroyed by a tornado, foresters were able to analyze the trees and found evidence that the forest was, “probably logged by first generation settlers.” They also discovered evidence in the rings of trees that “probably indicates that loggers removed hardwood trees in [1840]” (193). Relentless, Pollan makes sure to explain that even after Cathedral Pines was protected by the Nature of Conservancy in 1967, “the forest has been a popular place for hiking and Sunday outings.” (194). All of these examples indicate that land easily mistaken as “wilderness” is likely to exist in its present state as a result of human influence. The connection that Pollan begins to make between humans and nature is furthered when he explains the fallacy behind the idea of nature having an ultimate plan.

Common amongst proponents of the wilderness ethic is the belief that nature, if left alone, will follow a systematic order of development. This can be exemplified in the theory of forest succession, which lays out the “natural” order of events that would take place if a forest was cleared and left “alone” to grow. Pollan uses the example of the destroyed Cathedral Pines to explain that nothing in nature happens according to an ultimate plan and that in fact,
“nature herself doesn’t know what’s going to happen” (p. 196). Faced with the tornado-ridden ex-forest, Pollan explains that, based on an infinite number of variables, any number of things could develop if the forest was untouched by humans. He begins his explanation by pondering, “A lightning storm – or a cigarette butt flicked from a passing car – ignites a fire next summer…hot enough to damage the fertility of the soil” (195). In this case, the recovery of the forest would take decades. Another possibility is that deer population could soar, and due to their eating habits, a new forest of completely different trees could develop. Further still, Pollan continues, “Let’s say the rains next spring are unusually heavy, washing all the topsoil away…we end up with no forest at all” (196). Pollan’s point is that nature doesn’t have a concrete plan and that any number of influences can determine the outcome of a specific piece of land. This conclusion builds on his previous notion that humans are and have been directly linked to the makeup of the environment. Having established this foundation, Pollan goes on to propose his own environmental ethic that he believes to be more useful than the wilderness ethic.

Based on his discovery that nature has “no fixed goals,” that countless variables influence each event in nature and that humans can be counted among those variable for much of history, Pollan proposes that human influences can actually be considered natural to some degree. He qualifies this realization into a new ethic that he calls, the garden ethic. Rather than calling for the complete absence of human interaction with nature (as proposed by traditional conservationist), Pollan suggest that humans accept their role among the natural influences of the world and act not as dominators, but as gardeners.
Pollan is persuasive and by the end of his article I find the garden ethic more compelling than the wilderness ethic. However, I have difficulty with the way Pollan uses his critique of the wilderness ethic to imply that his ethic is a comprehensive solution to the problem. At the end of his article, Pollan makes a final attempt to show the unproductive logic behind the wilderness ethic when he explains, “Thanks to exactly this kind of either/or thinking, Americans have done an admirable job of drawing lines around certain sacred areas…and a terrible job of managing the rest of our land. The reason is not hard to find: the only environmental ethic we have has nothing useful to say about those areas outside the line” (200). At this point in his article, Pollan has done a thorough debunking of the wilderness ethic and although he doesn’t explicitly say that there is only room for only one environmental ethic, he has only suggested one other possibility. Because he has spent the entirety of his article poking holes in the wilderness ethic, when he refers to it as, “the only environmental ethic we have,” he is really arguing that America has no valuable ethic. It can be concluded that he believes the garden ethic will serve to fill this void. I will return to my struggles with Pollan’s assumption that American only needs one environment ethic later. Now, it is important to understand that he is not the only one who suggests a one-size-fits all mentality.

In his essay, “Conservation and the Lure of the Garden,” Eric Freyfogle first critiques Pollan’s garden ethic and then suggests his own method for motivating people to act responsibly towards the environment. Freyfogle is bothered by Pollan’s ethic because of the implications it has when viewed on the large scale. He imagines a landscape covered with individuals’ gardens and wonders what would happen to all the species of animals that were deemed unwanted by the people looking after the land. Essentially, Freyfogle faults Pollan
because, “Focused on such a small piece of land, the gardener can easily ignore the ecological ripples. The underlying problem, most simply, is Pollan’s small spatial scale” (1001). This is an apt point, but Pollan’s ethic calls for a change in the gardening mentality as well. Gardeners acting in accordance with Pollan’s ethic would surely tend their land with consideration for the environment and themselves.

In addition to individual’s actual gardens, Freyfogle also critiques Pollan for the broad definition he gives to the gardener. Freyfogle argues that the definition of what it means to act towards the environment have been set to broadly by Pollan to actually hold people accountable for their actions. He accentuates this point towards the end of his essay by reasoning, “The most industrial of grain farmers or tree growers could easily read Pollan’s narrative and nod in agreement, for, as they see it, they too are in the garden-tending business” (1001). Freyfogle does a fair job of challenging the garden ethic, but rather than offering suggestions for its improvement, he explains his own way to influence people’s relationship with the environment.

At the end of his article, Freyfogle presents what he believes conservationist biologists ought to focus on in response to the garden ethic. Because the garden ethic doesn’t take the conservation of land on the large scale into consideration (or so Freyfogle believes) and because it allows too much leeway for people to label their actions as environmentally beneficial, Freyfogle proposes, “The proper response for conservation biology is to present its own views more clearly and forcefully” (1003). Though it’s easy to understand the potential benefits of more accessible and comprehensible scientific data, the words Freyfogle uses to present his plan shows what has become a common theme in the environmentalist
conversations. By expressing the need to “forcefully” share the findings of scientist with the larger community Freyfogle sounds as if he is trying win over the supporters of the garden ethic. This phrasing suggests that the two ethics are in competition with each other, rather than different approaches to a complex problem. Why is this conversation framed in this way? Both Pollan and Freyfogle want people to take better care of the environment, and although their beliefs of what exactly this means may differ, bickering about who has the right answer seems childish if not counterproductive.

The competitive nature of the conversation between Pollan and Freyfogle is representative of the larger debate over environmental ethics. Although many participants agree that the status quo is unacceptable, their visions of exactly how humans ought to relate to the environment differ. But, is the extent to which they differ enough to warrant the continuous cycle of disproving one ethic as a way of promoting another? Pollan doesn’t describe a scientific component in his garden ethic and Freyfogle doesn’t call for a shift in the way people view themselves in relation to their backyard flowers. Yet, both writers want people to act more responsibly towards the environment and this should be enough for them to work together (as opposed to in opposition) when educating people.

When speaking to Elizabeth Vidon, professor of environmental studies at SUNY ESF, I was struck by the logical approach she took to the environmental conversation. After I described my perspective on the argument between Pollan and Freyfogle she responded, “It makes me a little sad to see people butting heads over conflicting perspectives because I think they’re both right. I think it depends on the audience, people are going to be motivated and inspired by different things” (Vidon). Vidon’s point is significant because it broadens the
possibilities of the conversation. Rather than searching for a blanket ethic that will speak to the entire population, environmentalists ought to address people from the perspective to which they feel most connected.

Vidon went on to explain exactly what she meant by approaching this conversation in ways that will resonate with many different people. When speaking about everyday Americans, Vidon posed the question, “For the general populace, are they really going to respond substantially to conversations about how much nitrate is going into the Gulf of Mexico? Well, no” (Vidon). This approach represents faults in Freyfogle’s science based ethic. Sometimes, ecological destruction can’t be represented in a way that appears relevant to people who live far away. In these cases, Vidon suggests a solution that I assume Pollan would agree with. Vidon continued to answer her own questions by saying, “You start messing with the water in their backyard and you know what, they are going to care” (Vidon). Vidon explained that in some instances the garden ethic may be more effective than other approaches. She doesn’t say that it will always work and that it should be adopted by everyone who cares about the environment, but clearly, it has some value when attempting to reach certain people. In almost the same breath, Vidon offered another example that demonstrated the value of Freyfogle’s model.

Vidon began her second explanation by reiterating her core argument and then offering support for Freyfogle’s ethic. Not stopping to breathe, she said, “So, I think approaches to environmental conservation…have to be specific, some things need to be targeted to the scientist and those of us who like those data that say what’s happening. I think that’s a really robust approach” (Vidon). Clearly, when dealing with members of the scientific community a
comprehensible factual representation of the situation is more likely to be successful than an argument rooted in emotional appeals. In barely a minute of conversation Vidon demonstrated that a one-size fits all approach to this conversation is likely to isolate large groups of people. She even took her argument a step forward and brought in another group that needs representation in this discussion. After suggesting tactics to engage the majority of Americans and members of the scientific community, Vidon admitted that not all people fit into these categories and that even more ethics will be needed to reach them. When appeals to science don’t work, Vidon reasoned, "For people who are very religious who don’t put a whole lot of stock in science, I think you have to go at them from a different angle.” Perhaps, she suggests, they will respond, “to a religious standpoint that says, “You’re a Christian, so this is your duty”? (Vidon). After speaking with Vidon, it became clear to me that one of the biggest problem with the environmentalist conversation is that most of the parties involved are right. Pollan is right in that people need to feel connected to the nature that is close to their homes, Freyfogle is correct in demanding more accessible data for scientists and everyday citizens, and Vidon is right in that different people respond well when approached in different ways. To me, it is obvious that in order for environmental change to take place the conversation needs to switch from one of opposition to one of collaboration.

The one-size-fits all approach to environmentalism as represented in Pollan’s garden ethic and Freyfogle’s argument on behalf of conservationists biologist needs to change. If environmentalist stopped looking for the faults in each other’s ethics, and started working together to reach the most amount of people possible, then I think they will see that more and more people begin to think harder about the way they relate to their environment.
Works Cited


Vidon, Elizabeth. Personal interview. 7 Mar. 2015.