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The American Experience in Environmental Protection

 Springer

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Preface

Greetings all, and welcome to the growing world of Environmental Ethics. What follows in this introductory text is an account of the growth of environmental awareness and environmental conscience, in the course of the twentieth century (brought up-to-date in the twenty-first as appropriate), primarily in the United States. I have aimed to keep it short and readable, for maximum usefulness. The major limitation occasioned by this aim is its parochialism: all the cases and literature selected are of the United States (the case of the lethal explosion in Bhopal, India, was a US case, and held implications only for US policy); all the weights and measures are in pounds and miles. The greening of American thought, as seen in public attitudes toward the natural environment, may generalize to the world at large, but the peculiarly American interaction among the peculiarly American institutions in the course of this history suggests that indigenous social and cultural expectations may play a large role in any nation's orientation to the natural environment that surrounds their history.

Several audiences guided the composition of this work. First, it is directed to undergraduate and graduate students, whom I have had the great pleasure of teaching (and learning with) for over 40 years, and who I have found to be earnest and delightful but woefully ignorant of the background, concepts, and defining conflicts in the field of environmental studies. We often felt the need for a short treatment of the key cases, initiatives, and literature that created this field. Whether the students will be doing bench science on the diseases of plants or fieldwork on the effects of climate change in the southern Appalachian Mountains, I knew they would do better with a feel for the history that led them there.

I was especially concerned for our business students, who were headed off to the corporate world with training primarily in economics, finance, management, marketing, and demonstrations that reliance on the free market will solve every problem. They tend to learn that environmentalists are their enemies. They are not; American corporate leaders have become some of the strongest advocates for the preservation of the health of the land. For this reason, I have included several of the cases that have shaped the relationship between the major actors in the movement to preserve the environment and the corporations that found themselves, not by their own choice or expectation, ranged in opposition to them. This

text distinguishes itself from the bulk of the environmental literature by ensuring that the perspective of the corporation is fairly represented.

Another audience, following on that point, may be the corporate officers who find themselves (not necessarily by their own choice or expectation!) responsible for developing or implementing environmental policy within the corporation. Possibly they have time to educate themselves in the sciences that comprise ecology and the history of corporate confrontations, but likely they do not; this book should tell them all they need to know. For that matter, it should provide enough fact and insight to help any citizen sort out the political/environmental choices before us. After all, they have a right to know.

The need for brevity and rapid absorption in the various audiences has led, inevitably, to a concise organization that must constitute oversimplification for purposes other than my own. It has also led to decisions to omit entirely consideration of social ecology, ecofeminism, bioregionalism, and other primarily political aspects of the subject. It has long been my contention that the various topics of “environmental justice” have nothing to do with the environment and everything to do with larger legal and political fields of justice; they await another work.

Anyone, scientist or otherwise, who has tried to follow the concerns for the biosphere, warnings of climate change, loss of water, and numerous others, knows that scientific facts—number of parts per million (ppm), number of degrees of global warming to be expected under various scenarios, number of people whose health may be at risk from environmental conditions, population figures—form the bulk of most arguments. I have not always tried to include the latest figures on these problems; by the time the book reaches the shelf in the store, they would be out-of-date. It will always be the student’s job to update the numbers. But I have tried to state the problems, put them in perspective, and encourage the reader to find out more on his or her own.

The book is now yours, to read, mark, and reflect upon; I hope you have as much joy reading it as I have had in writing it.

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Introduction

There is little consensus on the nature and power of environmental ethics. One significant historical fact underlies all discussions: where only a few centuries ago Nature—the non-human part of our world—was regarded as nothing but an obstacle to our purposes and sometimes a means to our ends, an alien, an enemy to be conquered; Nature is now seen as the basis for all human as well as non-human life, valuable and worthy of preservation. The conditions for this transformation are generally known: with the explosion of the human population and its expansion to all habitable parts of the Earth, the boundaries of what is still wild are plainly seen; with the overuse of the fisheries and forests, the limits of the natural resources upon which we have depended are now in sight; and a series of natural collapses and catastrophes, threatening to the health of humans and others, have brought home to us the need to adopt a protective attitude toward the natural ecosystems.

Implicit in this transformation is a profound change in perception, in the way non-human Nature is seen and comprehended. All other ethics are anthropocentric, oriented to the good of human beings. Part of the subject matter of environmental ethics starts there: Nature is good, and must be protected, for the sake of human safety (from poisons, toxic spills, and explosions), human health (vs. pollution of air, water, and soil), and human enjoyment (in the preservation of the scenic wonders of the wilderness). Against the anthropocentric subject matter, there stands the ecocentric or biocentric part of the environmental ethic: Nature is good for its own sake, and should be protected, all of it, just for that reason. No reasons need be advanced to ground such an obligation to protect, any more than reasons have to be advanced to support the value of an individual human life, and the duty not to kill. Between these two clusters of values, there is a third, calling on the spiritual aspect of the natural world: Nature is beautiful, and requires our attention for that reason alone, and for what it does for our souls when we are in contact with it.