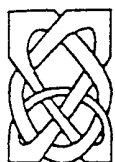THE THINGMOUNT WORKING PAPER SERIES ON

THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSERVATION

The Urban Blind Spot
in Environmental Ethics

by

Andrew LIGHT

TWP 3-02

The Urban Blind Spot in Environmental Ethics

Andrew Light[*]

Sometime around 5:00p.m. on a Winter's day, I look up from my desk in my office at New York University, glance out of my south facing window and immediately think, "the stars have come out, it's going to be a beautiful night." This really is my first unreflective thought, even though what I'm looking at are not points of light in the celestial firmament, but the twinkling windows of the top few floors of the twin towers of lower Manhattan, the World Trade Center. Now that the leaves have fallen from the oak tree outside, I can see the tops of the towers poking above the four story turn of the century brick buildings across the street. It's an old urban metaphor to be sure, and maybe even a bit trite: the city lights bring the stars down from the heavens. But there is something to it. And the occasional flash from a tourist's camera, vainly trying to capture dusk over the city from the observation tower, helps the illusion. There's even a flashing red planet suspended above the structure, apparently and conveniently always at its perihelion. Everything one needs to capture a star gazer's imagination.

Still, as has become increasingly familiar in the last few decades, the lights of the city do not ignite the romantic imaginations of us all. The rise of environmental awareness in the U.S., continuing a steady climb from the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* through the first Earth Day in April 1970, to the election of a self-styled environmental Vice President in 1992, has brought along with it an anti-urbanism which sees the illumination of Manhattan as at best hazardous light pollution. At worst, the urban stars represent the technological hubris of humans foolish enough to think they are now independent from nature if not an outright embodiment of

human domination over the natural world. Perhaps even urban dwellers suffer from a moral corruption, disconnected as they are from what Harvard entomologist Edward O. Wilson calls "biophilia." Certainly, it doesn't help matters much that the highest points in the particular urban galaxy I am looking on now is in the financial district.

But one wonders if it has to be this way? Is the city really the source of all environmental ills, covered only by a thin veneer of cultural accomplishment? Or is it in fact one of the most important front lines on the environmental front, a terrain of environmental values and environmental issues which will be the true test of the ecological acumen and social pluralism of the environmental community? In order to seriously consider this last possibility, we must first acknowledge this anti-urban bias in environmental thought. Only then, like the analysand on the psychologist's coach, will we realize that we have a problem worth confronting.

Many environmental social scientists and historians, including William Cronon, Mark Dowie, and David Schlosberg, have pointed to this urban gap in environmentalists' theories, practices, and organizations. But philosophers have been relatively silent on the matter. Until recently the literature on urban environmental ethics contained only a handful of articles, mostly on very specific topics such as the ethics of personal automobile use. We still await any word on the topic from the leading ethicists in the field today. By and large, cities are considered sources of environmental disvalue: a landscape either to be mined for examples to be avoided or ignored all together as a product of human intentions – an artifact rather than part of nature and so outside of the appropriate boundaries of the discipline.

The purpose of this paper is to help to rectify this disciplinary lacuna. My goal is to first (in the first two sections), offer an explanation for why the urban environment has been discounted in environmental ethics (though along the way I will offer a bit by way of reasons for a similar lapse in the environmental movement in North America), second, provide a series of arguments for why an ecologically and socially responsible environmentalism must not overlook the importance of urban issues, and finally, offer an example of how the city can serve as a unique site for environmental education, if not ecological citizenship, over and above available resources in the countryside or the wild.

Environmentalists need not resort to a language that replaces the nonhuman world with an artificial one – for reasons romantic or not – in order to see the city as a source of environmental value. We only need to accept the task of self-criticism when faced with our prejudices concerning natural value and recognize the central importance of urban questions in ecological renewal. If environmental ethicists (and the larger environmental community) do not take up this task then we will fail in making any lasting contribution to the pursuit of long-term environmental sustainability.

1. The Nonanthropocentric Prejudice of Environmental Ethics

Over the last three decades the field of environmental ethics has come to organize itself around discreet sets of philosophical, political, and practical issues. But especially in North America, environmental philosophy has been dominated by a concern with more abstract questions of value theory, primarily focused on the issue of whether nature has "intrinsic value," or some other form of non-instrumental value. If such value can be justified independent of human consideration then it is an instance of what environmental ethicists call "nonanthropocentric" value, or sometimes biocentric or ecocentric value, as opposed to anthropocentric, or human-centered forms of valuation which have dominated the history of ethics in the West. If nature has such non-instrumental nonanthropocentric value (similar to the sort of value that traditional ethical theories attribute only to humans) then, so most of the major theorists in environmental philosophy would argue, a wide range of duties, political obligations, and rights obtain in our treatment of it.

Curiously however, environmental ethicists are largely silent about urban environmental issues, let alone the normative status of urban environments. In a recent, and extremely rare article on the subject, Alastair Gunn reports that in three recent and top selling textbooks on the subject, out of nearly 200 readings between them not one single selection deals explicitly with

cities.[1] Some authors even appear outright hostile to the potential of finding value in humanly produced cultural landscapes. By and large this dismissal of the built world and urban environmental problems can be traced to the foundations of the field in the search for nonanthropocentric forms of non-instrumental value. What then is the attraction of nonanthropocentrism? Why would the field of environmental ethics so narrowly define itself so as to not be applicable to all environments? The answer is that for the vast majority of environmental ethicists, the embrace of nonanthropocentric foundations for an environmental ethics has entailed a necessary rejection of anthropocentric forms of value, and I would argue, consequently, of anthropogenically created landscapes. But understanding the importance of the rejection of anthropocentrism in environmental ethics takes some explanation.

Since the beginnings of the field in the early 1970s, environmental ethicists have rejected anthropocentric schemes of moral consideration as both part of the cause of the current environmental crisis and as an impediment to any solution to those problems.[2] While the

---

[1] Alastair Gunn, "Rethinking Communities: Environmental Ethics in an Urbanized World," *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 20, 1998, p. 355. The few other papers on urban issues in environmental philosophy include Dale Jamieson, "The City Around Us," in *Earthbound*, ed. Tom Reagan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), pp. 38-73; Bill E. Lawson, "Living for the City: Urban United States and Environmental Justice," in *Faces of Environmental Racism*, eds. Laura Westra and Peter Wenz (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1995), pp. 41-55; and Andrew Light, "Urban Wilderness," in *Wild Ideas*, ed. David Rothenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 195-211. Other environmental theorists who have written on urban issues include Avner de-Shalit, Warwick Fox, Roger King, and Clare Palmer. Fox has an edited volume forthcoming in Fall 2000 on the ethics of the built environment to be published by Routledge.

[2] While reasonable people can disagree about the exact start of environmental philosophy as a recognizable philosophical endeavor, I take as a watershed year 1973 when three critical papers in environmental philosophy were first published: Richard Sylvan (then Routley), "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" *Proceedings of the World Congress of Philosophy* 1973, pp. 205-210; Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep: Long-Range Ecology Movements," *Inquiry* Vol. 16, 1973, pp. 95-100; and Peter Singer, "Animal Liberation," *New York Review of Books*, April 5, 1973, though the later, admittedly, has become more influential in the literature on animal welfare as opposed to environmental ethics proper. For those unfamiliar with this division, broadly speaking animal welfare/rights advocates consider the proper extension of moral consideration beyond humans to be to individual animals (hence these theorists are often called "individualists") while environmental ethicists argue that the proper extension of moral consideration should be to entire ecosystems rather than individuals, consequently discounting the importance of attribution of value to individuals within a species (hence these theorists are often called "holists"). Debates between individualists and holists crop up for example in disputes over whether an overpopulated heard of deer in an area can be culled in order to prevent destruction of the ecosystem they inhabit. Figures such as J. Baird Callicott have pressed this division home. Practical challenges to the upshot of the distinction have come most notably from Gary Varner while theoretical challenges have been raised by Dale Jamieson. Without siding with any party as to the legitimacy of this distinction, the critique in this paper will be directed at holist environmental ethics.

rejection of anthropocentrism has been far from univocal in the short history of the field, it is still arguably true that the vast majority of environmental ethicists reject anthropocentrism as a plausible foundation for an environmental philosophy in general or a theory of the value of nature in particular.[3] The burden of proof in the literature is clearly on the proponents of anthropocentrism and not on the opponents. Nonanthropocentrism can be taken as an uncontroversial starting point in any of the major journals in the field more, I would claim, as an accepted prejudice than as a proven position.

What is the problem with anthropocentrism for an environmental ethics? If we take anthropocentrism to be a description of the "attitudes, values, or practices which promote human interests at the expense of the interests or well-being of other species or the environment," then it is not difficult to see why the view is objectionable from a standpoint committed to environmental sustainability.[4] If the natural world is measured only by the yardstick of human needs then what justification will exist to preserve it? From the beginning of the field, several authors pointed out that this view necessarily had to be answered in order to proceed with the development of an environmental ethic. In his early article, "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" which was quite influential in laying the tasks of the emerging field, Richard Sylvan (then Routley) put it this way:

> It is increasingly said that civilization, Western civilization at least, stands in need of a
> new ethic (and derivatively of a new economics) setting out people's relations to the
> natural environment, in [Aldo] Leopold's words, "an ethic dealing with man's relation to
> land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it." It is not of course that old and
> prevailing ethics do not deal with man's relation to nature; they do, and on the prevailing

---

[3] For alternative approaches to the dominant views on anthropocentrism in environmental ethics see Richard A. Watson, "A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Biocentrsim," *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 5, 1983, pp. 245-256; Bryan Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 6, 1984, pp. 131-148; Henrk Skolimowski, "The Dogma of Anti-Anthropocentrism and Ecophilosophy," *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 6, 1984, pp. 283-288; Tim Hayward, "Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem," *Environmental Values* Vol. 6, 1997, pp. 49-63.

[4] The definition is Tim Hayward's from his "Anthropocentrism," *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* Vol. 1, 1998, p. 173.

view man is free to deal with nature as he pleases, i. e., his relations with nature, insofar at least as they do not affect others, are not subject to moral censure.[5]

Sylvan went on to term anthropocentrism "the despotic view." Importantly here for Sylvan, as for many others, the predominance of anthropocentrism was partly explainable by the history of Western philosophy which had upheld it as a defensible assumption if not a formal principle. In this sense, the philosophical rejection of the metaphysical and moral justifications of anthropocentrism which had emerged in the history of philosophy became one of the principle tasks of an environmental philosophy.

It is clear however that the original target of anthropocentrism was of a particular from of anthropocentrism, namely one that maintains that human interests will always prevail at the expense of nonhuman interests. But there seems to be no clear reason why this characterization of anthropocentrism as despotism would exclusively capture all possible interpretations of the relationship between humans and nonhumans from a human point of view. In one of the early articles in the field trying to describe an alternative conception of anthropocentrism to the despotic view, Bryan Norton pointed out how anthropocentrism, as characterized by Sylvan, was necessarily connected to a pernicious form of instrumentalism, thus providing environmental ethics with a distinctive niche:

> . . . the question of whether environmental ethics is distinctive [Sylvan's question] is taken as equivalent to the question of whether an environmental ethic must reject anthropocentrism. (. . .) Environmental ethics is seen as distinctive vis-a-vis standard ethics if and only if environmental ethics can be founded upon principles which assert or presuppose that nonhuman natural entities have value independent of human value. (. . .) Anthropocentrists are therefore taken to believe that every instance of value originates in a contribution to human values and that all elements of nature can, at most, have value instrumental to the satisfaction of human interests.[6]

---

[5] Sylvan, "Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" p. 205.

[6] Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," pp. 182-183.

From here Norton went on to describe an alternative foundation for environmental ethics, called

"weak anthropocentrism," which he claimed captured the sense that humans could, for a variety

of reasons, find value in nature for human centered reasons which would not lead to a crude

description of nature as a mere instrumental resource for human ends. But interestingly enough,

the view that anthropocentrism is wedded to a crude instrumentalism persists in some forms to

this day even while the reliance on intrinsic value as the locus of nonanthropocentric descriptions

of the value of nature is waning. In a recent debate between Norton and J. Baird Callicott, a

subjectivist about intrinsic value (one who argues that values, intrinsic or not, must originate in a

valuing agent, human or nonhuman), it is clear that the connection between anthropocentrism

and instrumentalism drives the continued rejection of appeals to human interests as appropriate

foundations for an environmental ethic.[7]

What explains the continued rejection of anthropocentrism in environmental ethics? I

believe that the answer continues to lie behind the instrumental concern implied in Sylvan's

work and drawn out by Norton. But important for me for this discussion is not so much that

anthropocentric value is considered to be equivalent to the instrumental valuation of nature but

that anthropocentrism is perceived as incapable of providing the grounds for a guaranteed

rejection of certain cultural forms of valuing nature. At bottom, the worry of

nonanthropocentrists is more over allowing environmental issues to be decided in terms of

human preferences, preferences which are ground in cultural norms and social practices. The

early critique of anthropocentrism because of its instrumentalism was in fact embedded within a

critique of the perceived cultural relativity of most contemporary environmental policies. At the

end of his original 1973 article Sylvan provides an example of just this sort of worry.

> . . . it would just be a happy accident, it seems, if collective demand for a state of the
>
> economy with blue whales as a mixed good, were to succeed in outweighing private
>
> whaling demands; for if no one in the base class happened to know that blue whales exist

---

[7] See Bryan Norton, "Why I am Not a Nonanthropocentrist: Callicott and the Failure of Monistic Inherentism," *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 17, 1995, pp. 341-358, and J. Baird Callicott, "On Norton and the Failure of Monistic Inherentism," *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 18, 1996, pp. 219-221.

or cared a jot that they do then "rational" economic decision-making [a form of anthropocentric instrumental valuation] would do nothing to prevent their extinction.[8]

Paul Taylor brings this claim for an acultural foundation for natural value home further, and more forcefully, by arguing that anthropocentric value is always "entirely relative to culture: if any particular society did not hold ideals that could be symbolized in nature and wildlife (for example, if it happened to value plastic trees more than real ones), then there would be *no reason* for that society to preserve nature or protect wildlife."[9]

What is the connection though between the rejection by environmental ethicists of anthropocentrism and their silence about urban issues? The answer involves the fact that since many if not most environmental ethicists see the principle goal of their inquiry to involve the identification of an acultural nonanthropocentric value in or for nature, most theorists focus in their work on what they perceive to be pristine forms of natural value, such as wilderness areas, as exemplar forms of this value. If nature is to be considered as valuable in itself then, however the ground of that value is metaphysically or ontologically conceived, it will be best identified in those areas relatively independent of human intervention as opposed to those humanly shaped

---

[8] Sylvan, "Is There s Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?" p. 210.

[9] Paul Taylor, "Are Humans Superior to Animals and Plants?" *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 6, 1984, p. 151, n. 5, emphasis added. While quite interesting, it is striking that views like Taylor's and Sylvan's are false on broadly speaking both realist and anti-realist metaphysical grounds about moral claims. On realist grounds (which suggest that moral claims refer to existing qualities in or about the world), one would expect that if there are conceptions of the value of nature that can stand outside of culture and determine obligations and duties regardless of cultural predilections, then there is no *a priori* reason why there could not be a foundation for human obligations to nature which did not depend on the attribution of nonanthropocentric value. For example, it is conceivable that there is some all things considered better state of the human character which entails duties to nature while not articulating a value in nature independent of human valuing. (Such a view is at least as plausible as the claim that nature has a value in and of itself which can stand against a given culture's culturally bound appraisal of the value of nature, and I think it also has the same epistemic hurdles, or at least hurdles as high as the nonanthropocentric view.) And on anti-realist grounds (which suggest that moral claims do not refer to existing qualities in or about the world), if there is no foundation for human conceptions of the value of other humans then there cannot be a *sui generis* sense of the value of nature that somehow transcends culture. Perhaps the way out of this dilemma is to say that for Sylvan, Taylor and others, a nonanthropocentric conception of nature is by definition outside of culture since it is a view independent of human prescriptions of value, cultural or otherwise. More charitably then, what nonanthropocentrists want is a description of natural value that is acultural, rather than resistant to cultural relativism, since, after all, culturally driven approximations of the value of nature could be expressed in non-relativistic terms.

areas which exemplify exactly those culturally bound preferences that many environmental ethicists wish to reject.

2. Wilderness and the Geographical Dualism of Environmental Ethics

Take for example the work of Holmes Rolston III, widely considered to be the dean of North American environmental ethics. Any reader of Rolston knows of the focus in his work over the years on wilderness issues and most sympathetic readers regard this focus as entirely appropriate. In one of his more famous essays on the topic, "Values Gone Wild," Rolston exemplifies the intuition that a nonanthropocentric ethic starts in the realization of the value of wilderness and then moves on to reevaluate other spheres of cultural value:

> Only about 2 percent of the contiguous United States remains wilderness; 98 percent is farmed, grazed, timbered, hunted over, dwelt upon, paved, or otherwise possessed. (. . .) But . . . when the wildness is almost conquered, we begin to awake to error in the mastery theory. Not all value is labored for, assigned, or realized at our coming. The anomalous 2 percent that we will to keep wild, and then realize to be valuable without our will, reveals that the theory of value that has governed our handling of the 98 percent is flawed, only an approximation over a certain range.[10]

For Rolston, nonanthropocentrism in environmental ethics entails either an explicit or implicit conceptual division between nature and culture as divided spheres of moral and political concern. Nature is the source of value and culture must now be reconceived as first, lacking the kind of value we find in pristine nature, and second, deserving of reassessment itself in relation to whatever value we find in culture. In a later essay considering the possibility of the human improvement of wild nature, Rolston's nature-culture division is evident: "The architectures of nature and of culture are different, and when culture seeks to improve nature, the management

---

[10] Holmes Rolston III, *Philosophy Gone Wild* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), pp. 134-135.

intent spoils the wilderness. (. . .) The cultural processes by their very 'nature' interrupt the evolutionary process: there is no symbiosis, there is antithesis."[11] Such a nature-culture dualism is quite common in the work of other figures in the field as well.[12] Those embracing this dualism tend o either discount the value of urban areas or ignore them, and hence urban environmental problems, altogether.

Philosophers are not alone in this focus on wilderness. Mark Dowie, in his excellent survey of the recent history of the environmental movement, points out that the image of the environmentalist as backpacker and tree-hugger has persisted throughout the history of environmentalism in America. While many see this focus as more a tendency of the so called first wave of environmentalists at the turn of the century, for example, John Muir and his followers, even the second wave of environmentalism, which got off the ground in the 1960s and 1970s, embraces this wilderness focus: "Environmentalism means wildlife protection and wilderness conservation, while the environmental movement is identified with the Sierra Club and similar organizations."[13] David Schlosberg confirms Dowie's findings and argues that the recent rise of the environmental justice movement has been in direct relation not only to the perceived lack of minority representation on the boards of the major environmental groups, but also the "more telling complaint centered on the movement's focus on natural resources, wilderness, endangered species and the like, rather than toxics, public health, and the unjust distribution of environmental risks," exactly those issues that are of interest to low-income communities and committees of color, largely in urban areas.[14]

---

[11] Holmes Rolston III, "The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed," in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, eds. J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), p. 371.

[12] For another influential view which is infused with an admitted nature-culture division see Eric Katz, *Nature as Subject* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997).

[13] Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Ma.: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 6. For a nice summary of the common supposition that American environmentalism contains three waves from turn of the century reformers to today's interest groups (often accused of being coopted by the business community), see David Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[14] Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism*, p. 9.

At this point however, many will object that my suggestion of a connection between nonanthropocentrism and an anti-urban bias or blind spot is true only of philosophers like Rolston who seek to ground a theory of natural intrinsic value in an objective basis which easily imports a form of nature-culture dualism. It is certainly true that for Rolston, values in nature are objective and not subjective. The intrinsic value of nature exists as a preexisting fact about the world, independent of any valuing agent. It is also true that subjectivists who endorse a theory of intrinsic value, such as Callicott, have argued against the idea of "wilderness" as a meaningful term precisely because it perpetuates a contentious nature-culture divide.[15] Nonetheless, Callicott maintains that the central theoretical question of environmental ethics is the issue of whether nature has intrinsic value. Echoing Norton's interpretation of Sylvan's understanding of the foundations of the field, Callicott claims, "if nature lacks intrinsic value, then nonanthropocentric environmental ethics is ruled out."[16] While Callicott's critique of the focus on wilderness is to my mind laudatory, it is not surprising given his commitment to nonanthropocentrism to find little in his work about non-natural landscapes or urban environmental problems. Further, other subjective nonanthropocentrists who endorse a theory of intrinsic value, such as Robert Elliot, admit to a distinction between the value of nature and the value of humanly produced landscapes which leads them to controversial positions critiquing not only the value of humanly produced landscapes but attempts by humans to restore damaged natural landscapes as well.[17] Clearly, nonanthropocentrism in environmental ethics in general

[15] J. Baird Callicott, "The Wilderness Idea Revisited," in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, pp. 337-366.

[16] J. Baird Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 241.

[17] Robert Elliot, *Faking Nature* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[18] Holmes Rolston III, *Conserving Natural Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 12-13.

[19] Ibid., p. 15.

[20] See Bryan Norton's review of *Conserving Natural Value* in *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 18, 1996, pp. 209-214. Norton here offers some strong criticisms of the epistemological and ontological justifications of Rolston's theory of natural value. For an excellent discussion of Rolston's views and a sharp defense of them against Norton's criticisms see Christopher J. Preston, "Epistemology and Intrinsic Values: Norton and Callicott's Critiques of Rolston," *Environmental Ethics* Vol. 20, 1998, pp. 409-428.

[21] Rolston, *Conserving Natural Value*, p. 15.

either leads at worst to direct reasons to disvalue culturally produced landscapes or at best the tendency to ignore them as appropriate questions for environmental ethics.

Here however we must proceed cautiously. Even the staunchest advocate of the importance, even *sui generis* quality, of wilderness values such as Rolston does not claim that there is no value in human culture or in cities as one of the more remarkable expressions of that value. In one of his more recent books, after stipulating that the earth contains three environments, urban, rural, and wild, Rolston follows with the Aristotelian claim that humans are a political animal and that their "essence is to build a *polis*, a town." "The city is in some sense our niche; we belong there, and no one can achieve full humanity without it." [18] From our

history of living in cities, according to Rolston, comes literacy and advancement, many things which make us human. So far, so good.

But the existence of wilderness, as suggested above, brings us something else: the recognition that all values are not simply the human values cultivated in cities. While in itself such a claim does not represent much of a problem for the appreciation of urban environmental issues, Rolston goes much further in reversing the priority of forms of valuation over that which we would find in a more conventional Arisototelian account:

> No one can form a comprehensive worldview without a concept of nature, and no one can form a view of nature without evaluating it in the wild, deliberating over spontaneous nature and whether and how it can have value. In that sense, one of the highest of cultural values, an examined worldview, is impossible to achieve without wild nature to be evaluated as foil to and indeed source of culture.[19]

Many will no doubt find this claim curious. The explanatory hurdles involved in demonstrating first that nature has such a value, and second that the value of nature exerts such a grounding of other human values, are substantial to say the least. But Rolston goes on to make a case for his argument, ground in a claim to the importance of the natural origin of human culture as emerging from wilderness. And regardless of the conceptual problems with the view, even an anthropocentric environmental ethicist like Norton admits to the enormous influence of Rolston's version of intrinsic value on the literature, and in the wider environmental community.[20]

What I find worrisome though is the implication, however justified, in a view like this one for urban questions, specifically the issue of the ontological or moral status of urban environments and experiences in those environments. Shortly after introducing this notion of the grounding of cultural values in the appreciation of the value of wilderness, Rolston clearly states that a full human life cannot be achieved in the city alone. Without being specific about what he is referring to, Rolston offers an account of the prevalence of environmental concern among urban dwellers (as opposed to rural people) to the "depravation" that they feel in the city. Whatever this depravation is, it causes them to look outside of the city and become concerned with the wild. Accordingly, the urban dweller who does not look outside the city for sources of

value, or what Rolston terms a "mere" urban person, is "one-dimensional; three-dimensional persons will know how appropriately to respect urban, rural and wild environments."[21]

Now certainly, many in the environmental community will find this claim uncontroversial. After all, the suggestion appears to simply be that a full life is lived not in one kind of environment but in many, and Rolston is giving cities their due as the source of a uniquely human form of value which still has some positive content. Who then would want to object to the claim that, all things considered, a life is better where one can appreciate the three different environments that Rolston identifies? But Rolston is not claiming that all three environments are equal. It is not just that a human is comparatively worse off if they do not "respect," the wild, but that a human life is incomplete, that a human life is not wholly human, without the knowledge of this respect. To drive the gravity of this point home further we must realize that for Rolston we humans do not live in the wild.[22] The wild is not our home, for

---

[22] Ibid., p. 14.

[23] Rolston, *Philosophy Gone Wild*, p. 230.

[24] Ibid., p. 224.

[25] Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 36.

[26] As one might expect, weak anthropocentrists like Hargrove and Norton are better on such questions, but not always and not without some prodding. Norton's early work on weak anthropocentrism sought to justify it as an adequate foundation for valuing just the sorts of wild places that Rolston is fixed on. See Norton, "Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism," p. 184. Norton now focuses more on the importance of "place" as opposed to "nature" or "environment." See Norton and Bruce Hannon, "Democracy and Sense of Place Values in Environmental Policy," in *Philosophy and Geography III: Philosophies of Place*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), pp. 119-214. Still, there is little by way of explicit account in his work on urban problems. Even if there was though I would not want to necessarily tie my claim to the importance of urban issues in a robust environmental ethics to a rejection of nonanthropocentrism. Though I try to remain agnostic about the existence of nonanthropocentric intrinsic value in my own work, I believe that whether it does or does not exist is irrelevant to the question of whether we should attend to urban issues, for the reasons I will raise in the next section below. For a justification of my agnostic position on intrinsic value see my "Callicott and Naess on Pluralism," *Inquiry*, Vol. 39, 1996, pp. 273-94.

[27] I should note here that while I have no statistical evidence to back it up, I find this geographical dualism geographically mappable. Environmental ethicists in the U. K. and much of the rest of Europe are far less concerned with wilderness and wildness since, I believe, there is not much there that one can point to by way of wild nature, even under a more liberal description of such environments. Australians, Norwegians, and North Americans seem inordinately preoccupied with the issue, especially those theorists who live in proximity to such places. There is, in a certain sense, a kind of *western* bias in environmental ethics in North America, which may be attributable to the location of theorists like Rolston

presumably if it was then it would not be the wild. So, it isn't as if we have a choice to become better persons by living in the wild and then round out that experience by coming to appreciate our experience of the urban as a source of equal value. This is not simply an appeal to the plural value of various environments. We can only live in the urban or the rural and still maintain the division of the three kinds of environments that Rolston identifies. If the urban, rural, and wild were equal then respecting only one of them as a resident would be equally as bad as only respecting any other one of them as a resident. But humans cannot live in the wild so wherever we live, in the rural or urban environment, it is the wild that completes us because the wild is the home of nature, or in a sense, the home of our home as an evolved product of nature.

Further, note that Rolston is a bit more careful in this later work not to use the term "experience" in his description of the kind of interaction we should have with the wild. The term used is "respect." But what does this respect entail? In earlier work (and there is no explicit repudiation of this point that I can find) a full human life is only possible through the actual experience of the wild: "Society is crucial for one aspect of persons, wilderness for another. Never to plunge into wilderness, never to expose oneself to it, is never to know either forest or self."[23] So it is not just that one must respect or understand the importance of the wild, the rural,

and the urban in relation to each other in order to be a fully three-dimensional human, one must actually experience the wild. The claim is then not simply that a richer life is lived, all things considered, by respecting the three environments of the Earth, but that missing experience in one deprives one of a full life. An analogous claim might be that a full life cannot be lived without hearing a live performance of Chopin's *Etudes*. If Rolston were willing to say comparable things about urban experiences, perhaps those of us bothered by this suggestion could be partly pacified. But for every suggestion that the place of humans is in the polis, there are other suggestions that the city is a source of disvalue, specifically in terms of understanding one's self. "Lostness plagues the urban, mobile world," says Rolston.[24] And elsewhere:

> Big-city life in a high rise apartment – to say nothing of the slums – or a day's work in a windowless, air-conditioned factory represents synthetic life filled with plastic everything from teeth to trees. Such life is foreign to our native, earthen element. We have lost touch with natural reality; life is, alas, artificial.[25]

All life, apparently in the city, is not natural, not a part of nature. It is something wholly different. Parks, trees, vestiges of streams, let alone buildings and cultural landscapes, are not a part of nature. They are anthropogenically derived and anthropocentrically valued. Humans too, in some sense are unnatural in the city, or at least one-dimensional, unrooted, unless they experience the wild, the source of all value.

Anthropocentrism then is not simply a moral predicament, a hurdle to an environmental ethic which seeks to find a legitimate basis for the human-independent value of nature, but the bulwark of an inferior anthropogenically produced landscape. Why a rejection of anthropocentrism in ethics must lead to a denigration of the city as at best a second-class environment, it not clear at all. There is no necessary progression from the critique of anthropocentrism to here, but clearly the blind spot toward the city or lack of attention to urban problems in environmental ethics has its roots in the movement from nonanthropocentrism to the point we find ourselves at in Rolston's work. Even if one believes that the foundations of the field in nonanthropocentrism are well grounded, here, clearly we have an undefended prejudice – a move from a critique of crass human-centered forms of valuation to a rejection of humanly

produced landscapes, landscapes which cannot possibly bear any semblance of acultural descriptions of value. Even those subjectivist nonanthropocentrists who reject an acultural, objective ground for natural value, appear to let the agenda of the critical issues up for discussion be decided by the wilderness agenda, hence producing the urban blind spot in their work as well.[26] This is not to say that preservation of those statutorily designated wild areas is unimportant, nor are issues involving species preservation and biodiversity loss unimportant. It is only to say that there is much more at stake under the big tent of environmental philosophy than seems to be getting attention and the reasons for this predicament don't seem to very good ones.

In addition to the readily apparent conceptual nature-culture value dualism that Rolston assumes in his environmental ethic, and which has been the subject of strong criticisms by anthropocentrists like Norton and subjective nonanthropocentrists like Callicott, I find another dualism here which is potentially more damning: a *geographical dualism* between wilderness and cities which represents a bifurcation of two realms of existence, one containing "nature," however Rolston conceives of nature, and one not containing nature by definition. Natural values do not exists in cities because cities do not contain nature. As a consequence, what many people would call "environmental problems," or problems which concern the natural world, also do not exist in cities.[27]

While we will see below that other environmental ethicists share this same bias against the urban world as a world containing nature, it is important at this point to note how much support there is for Rolston's position in other fields as well. It is not as if nonanthropocentric environmental philosophers are the only ones prepared to make the claim that the experience of wild nature, or nature under a specific description, is the grounding draw of the essence of value and the essence of a good human life. Though I do not have the space here to do the theory justice, E. O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis is rife with similar suggestions.

For Wilson, "biophilia" is the name of the subconscious connections that human beings seek with the rest of life. But this love of life is not a chosen love, instead it is a naturally evolved inclination of humans toward nature. For Wilson, like Rolston, the human evolution of

emotional, aesthetic and even spiritual cravings to be close to nature is a result of our origins in nature. As a naturally evolved species who spent most of our history in nature, we are shaped by the forces and complexity of nature. The only question is whether we will let our natural origins shape our forms of life.

> Humanity is part of nature, a species that evolved among other species. The more closely we identify ourselves with the rest of life, the more quickly we will be able to discover the sources of human sensibility and acquire the knowledge on which an enduring ethic, a sense of preferred direction, can be built.[28]

[28] Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), p. 348.

[29] Ibid., pp. 349-350.

[30] Ibid., p. 350.

[31] See for example, Nicholas Agar, *Science, Ethics, and Nature* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

[32] Wilson, p. 351. It should be noted however that Wilson's colleague in work on biophilia, Stephen Kellert, at the Yale School of Forestry, is much more balanced in his portrayal of environmental priorities. Kellert is forthright about the existence of natural experiences in cites (something that Rolston would object to and Wilson may or may not): "Even the most impoverished city offers extraordinary opportunities for experiencing natural wonder. (. . .) Society's challenge is to make the positive experience of nature accessible to all rather than to dismiss its presumed relevance to an entire group." See Kellert, *The Value of Life: Biological Diversity and Human Society* (Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1996), p. 28. Kellert also does an admirable job of advocating the design of cities with nature in mind. Peter H. Kahn Jr. claims that empirical studies on biophilia confirm the importance of these urban themes in Kellert's work. See Kahn, *The Human Relationship with Nature* (Cambridge, Ma.: The MIT Press, 1999).

[33] Kahn is an exception, directly taking on this worry. See *The Human Relationship with Nature*, p. 223.

[34] No doubt some philosophical colleagues will find my claims here specious and unphilosophical. The persistence of a position as true in the face of arguments that it is false do not count as good reasons to accept the position. But to me, as I have argued elsewhere, the point of environmental philosophy is first to contribute to the resolution of environmental problems, which necessitates attention to a different set of issues, be they philosophical or not. For an example of this pragmatic approach to environmental philosophy (though not to all questions in applied ethics) see my "Ecological Restoration and the Culture of Nature: A Pragmatic Perspective," in *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*, eds. Paul Gobster and Bruce Hall (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, forthcoming). A more complete defense of this pragmatist methodology appears in my manuscript, *Pragmatism and the Reconstruction of Environmental Ethics*. I do not believe though that the general call for an attention to urban problems in the field will necessitate a full blown acceptance of the position I call methodological environmental pragmatism.

[35] Rolston, "The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed."

[36] Kellert, *The Value of Life*, p. 192.

The evolutionary "imprint" on us in the form of our genetic nucleotide sequences, representing our long struggle in and with nature, "cannot have been erased in a few generations of urban existence." Evidence for this claim is found for Wilson in the tendency of humans to acquire phobias to objects and circumstances which threatened them in their natural environments – snakes, spiders, open spaces – rather than more modern dangers such as guns and automobiles. Additionally, people tend to prefer living near water where parkland can be viewed, and spend more time in leisure in parks, zoos and aquariums than athletic events.[29] And we should not be surprised to learn, at bottom, biophilia is connected to the idea of wilderness. People are attracted to wilderness because it "settles peace on the soul," and is "beyond human contrivance."[30]

Not surprisingly, several philosophers have connected Wilson's biophilia hypothesis to the search in environmental ethics for a nonanthropocentric intrinsic value to nature.[31] What I find more striking though, and more worrisome, are Wilson's conclusions about the proper direction of environmental ethics following on the heels of such analysis. Though he claims not to be arguing for an innate human nature in his recitation of the common human predilections toward green spaces, Wilson is adamant that the existence of this residual attachment to wild nature in human consciousness is sufficient ground to claim that the philosophical task at hand is to focus on "the central questions of human origins in the wild environment."[32] It would appear that many environmental ethicists completely agree.

3. Why an Urban Environmental Ethics?

At this point I expect that some readers will be ready to completely discount Rolston and other anti-urbanists out of hand. Others, particularly colleagues in the field, will not. How then to respond?

The traditional answer to Rolston's anti-urbanism (or his geographical dualism) would be to take on the philosophical merits of his case. If nature, specifically wild nature, is the source

and locus of some kind of fundamental value then what is the ground of that value, how is it manifest? Other philosophers such as Norton or Callicott have taken up this task with predictable results: metaphysical and epistemological debates are rarely resolved to anyone's satisfaction, they tend to either limp along in the literature or die out with little by way of resolution or concession by one or another party. While philosophically stimulating, they don't go very far in helping to set an agenda for environmental philosophy which will help it to contribute to the resolution of environmental problems rather than only to metaethical and metaphysical debates on the value and status of nature.

Importantly however, whatever one thinks of the philosophical merits of Rolston's case, or the many other environmental ethicists who hold views which are sympathetic to his geographical dualism, an anti-urban bias in the field, and in the larger environmental movement, persists and is likely to persist no matter what philosophical resources are committed to denying it. As was briefly pointed out above, environmental historians and social scientists have documented the anti-urbanism prevalent in the environmental organizations. Hating the city, or at least ignoring it, is a fact of life in environmental circles which is only now being challenged, though largely from outside of the main environmental movements. I would argue that no matter its philosophical problems, the rhetorical force of Rolston's claims about the value of wilderness will most likely persist in the face of strong philosophical objections, at least as this force is measured in terms of its impact on the larger movement. Environmentalists tend to be snapshot phenomenologists, generalizing their positive experiences in the wild as proof of the importance of the value of the wild and the unimportance of the things we would compare to it. It is no surprise to me that Rolston's form of environmental ethics and the environmental ontology others, such as the deep ecology of Arne Naess, relies heavily on the experiential dimensions of wild nature as the source of human attitudinal change. After all, figures like Rolston and Naess emerged not just out of philosophy departments, but the movement as a whole. Only rarely have environmental professionals confronted the obvious dilemmas that arise from such claims about the importance of experiencing wilderness: if experiences in wild nature are required for a greater environmental consciousness, or even for complete human self-actualization, then the attainment of such experiences by a majority of the population would

threaten the stability and viability of exactly those wild areas which environmentalists cherish.[33] Nonetheless, Rolston's claims are intuitively appealing to a broad swath of the environmental movement, and I suspect of the general public as well. We have learned to denigrate the city at the expense of Rolston's wild areas, and environmental philosophy appears well placed to encourage this attitude. How many of us, after all, environmentalists and nonenvironmentalists alike, will want to wade through turgid arguments in epistemology and ontology to decide whether our intuitions are correct?[34]

The philosophical arguments over the importance and value of wilderness, the validity of nonanthropocentrism, and the supposed problems with anthropocentrism can and should persist in the literature. But another tack may be taken as well in response to the geographical dualism at work in much environmental ethics and the anti-urban blind spot that it engenders. I propose that we focus on two things to overcome this blind spot, rather than an engagement in the ontological and epistemological issues: (1) the importance in ecological terms of environmental issues in the urban context, and (2) the regressive social dimensions of an anti-urban bias in environmental thought. Let us call (1) the ecological question and (2) the social question. On the ecological question, again recall that even the most adamant defender of the priority of wild values such as Rolston admits to the cultural values produced in the city. Further, though somewhat less appealing to them, Rolston and other wilderness advocates accept that preservation of the wild must be pursued hand in hand with the movement for sustainable human communities.[35] If a complete environmental ethics must acknowledge the normative and axiological connections between the urban, rural, and wild environments, as Rolston maintains, then surely it must acknowledge their resource connections as well. Seen from such a perspective, living in a city must entail a form of ecological citizenship – which I will loosely define here as a ground of moral and political environmental responsibility for one's duties to the human and natural communities one inhabits and interacts with – as well as a form of political citizenship. More on this last point will follow in section three.

Focusing on the social question however is more difficult. I doubt that many nonanthropocentrists sympathetic to Rolston's views will give up his geographical dualism. But

perhaps they may come to recognize that the anti-urban connotations of their views endanger any hope of forming a broad consensus on environmental problems as well as implicating their views in morally suspicious connotations. Environmentalism has a long history of association with nativism, if not racism, which it has never been able to afford, and has chaffed against. Those who refuse to admit this moral lapse cannot be pragmatically reconciled with those who do. But before getting into this issue, what are the ecological grounds for a call for more attention to urban environmental problems?

Ignoring urban environmental issues is a crucial mistake for at least three ecological reasons, all of them almost painfully clear. First – even from the perspective of exactly that wilderness oriented philosophy which is at the center of most contemporary environmental ethics – because of population pressures there is a direct trade-off between the ability to preserve non-urban areas and the extent to which urban spaces can be made livable. As suggested above, and acknowledged by Peter Kahn, we cannot all expect to have experiences in what is taken to be pristine wilderness and still preserve the existence of such a thing. Cities therefore must become at least one potential home for the sorts of experiences Rolston wants, or if not Rolston, the sorts of experiences that ethicists less enamored of geographical dualism see as important. Stephen Kellert is convinced that such experiences are possible in the city, claiming that the suggestion that there is insufficient opportunity for "meaningful contact with the natural environment" in the city (as required by biophilia) reflects "a false dichotomy between cities and nature."[36] Though again I do not wish to cross swords with Rolston here about his ontological conception of the primacy of wild value, it is telling that no less an authority in environmental ethics circles than Aldo Leopold certainly had different intuitions:

> The weeds in a city lot convey the same lesson as the redwoods. . . . Perception . . .
> cannot be purchased with either learned degrees or dollars; it grows at home as well as
> abroad, and he who has a little may use it to as good advantage as he who has much.[37]

[37] Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 266.

[38] Allen R. Myerson, "Energy Addicted in America," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1998, Week in Review, p. 5.

And even with such sentiments we are not even scratching the surface of the educational opportunities regarding nature which exist in urban areas. The biodiversity exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City is a good case in point. But in order for the city to serve this purpose we must attend to the environmental issues found within it. This is something environmental ethicists have not been doing.

Second, cities, even without a concentrated attempt at conservation efforts, engender economies of scale which consume less energy than rural areas or regions which sustain human populations alongside wilderness areas. In a recent article about the loss of conservation gains made during the late 1970s and early 1980s in the U. S., *The New York Times* reported a study which showed that more urbanized states tend to consume less energy per capita. The lowest consumption rate went to New York state (215 BTUs on average) because so many residents live in apartments (sharing walls and hence sharing heat) and do not own cars (nor needing to). The highest consumption rate went to Alaska, with 1,139 BTUs on average, five times as much energy consumed as a New Yorker. Other states with the highest individual consumption included Wyoming, North Dakota, and Montana, while the lowest consumption rates included Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and even California.[38]

It would seem that encouraging urban dwelling does more good for the environment – even if the inhabitants who stay there are not fully self-actualized on Rolston's account – than living in states which are the home to preserved wilderness. Certainly, the prevalence of extractive industries in less populated states helps to account for their increased energy consumption, but this does not discount the importance of concentrated urban centers for energy savings. Further, if we were to generalize Rolston's argument that experience in the wild helps one to become more fully human, grounded, etc., then we could argue that the more such experiences the better. Perhaps even living close to a wilderness area, as Rolston does, is even the best, most preferred lifestyle for true ecological self-actualization. But if living lightly on the earth is indicative of environmental responsibility, ecological citizenship if you will, then surely Manhattanites are doing more for the planet than our colleagues in Colorado. Even in the face of such facts, Rolston persists that the philosophical hot spots are near the wild, not in the city.

Though I hope he does not mind me conveying the anecdote, Rolston once commented to me shortly after I moved to New York state that I *used* to live in a good place to do environmental ethics – Montana – and that presumably, now, I did not.

Finally, third, anyone interested in the sustainability of larger biotic systems has to be concerned with the sustainability of the urban environment as one of the largest concentrated impacts on those systems, simply because of the higher populations of urban areas (even assuming resource savings such as those just suggested). Social scientists like Kellert have taken on this issue head on, as have progressive environmental planners and architects. Others have not. I will return to this point below. The ecological and social questions become blurred when we take up the issue of population, so at the end of this section I will provide an example of an environmentalist critique of cities which seems to be overlooking the importance of both issues in its focus on population issues.

Let us turn now to the social question. As I suggested before, environmentalists best prepare themselves for some harsh social criticisms if they wish to hold on to something like Rolston's geographical dualism. Direct accounts of how the urban blind spot implicates environmentalism in a regressive history provide a strong motivation for expanding the notion of what counts as a legitimate object of environmental concern. Particularly compelling and appropriate for the discussion so far is Avner de-Shalit's critique of what he calls "ruralism" in environmental thought.[39] Largely directed at environmental historians like Anna Bramwell, who read the history of environmentalism as contiguous with the history of late nineteenth and early twentieth century right-wing ideologies, de-Shalit provides a ground for criticizing this trend in broader environmental thought as well. But de-Shalit argues that what is being described by Bramwell and implied in other progressive critiques of environmentalism, by figures such as Murray Bookchin, is ruralism rather than environmentalism. A key to understanding ruralism includes a recognition of its anti-urban bias:

By "ruralism" I mean the glorification of country life, and a dissatisfaction with urbanism

---

[39]Avner de-Shalit, "Ruralism or Environmentalism?" *Environmental Values* Vol. 5, 1996, pp. 47-58.

not only from the purely ecological point of view (e.g., as a source of pollution), but also because it is said to represent an inferior moral condition, or even a state of degeneration.[40]

Clearly we might want to consider the ruralist thesis as applying to theorists like Rolston. Unfortunately it also applies to fascist and nativist groups that Bramwall identifies as environmentalists.

In contrast, what de-Shalit considers to be true environmentalism, "rather than preaching the superiority of rural life," is also "concerned with improving our urban life, without a rejection of industrialism."[41] But while I wholeheartedly agree with de-Shalit that environmentalism should be concerned with urban life and not romantically glorify any alternatives, rural or wild, it is clear even from de-Shalit's discussion that most environmental ethics and most environmentalism is actually not concerned with urban issues even if it ought to be. Though not necessarily ruralist, many environmentalists evoke racist and fascist accusations for not explicitly denying the negative critique of urbanism contained in ruralism and for suggesting that those who only reside in cities are missing an opportunity at full humanity. Rolston is not alone here. Other figures in the field unwittingly step into the same position from very different starting points.

Take for example David Abram's fairly recent articulation of a phenomenological basis for a new environmental awareness, and presumably a new environmental ethic.[42] On Abram's account a new animism is needed to recognize our connection with what he calls the "more than human" natural world, which I interpret as Abram's form of nonanthropocentrism. But in his

---

[40]Ibid., p. 50.

[41]Ibid., p. 51.

[42]David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human-World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996). This book is perhaps the best selling and most widely discussed book of environmental philosophy yet by the public published. In addition to coming out as a trade title in hard cover with Pantheon, the paperback was published by Vintage. Abram won two forty thousand dollar non-fiction literary prizes for this work. It is the book that I get asked about the most from non-philosophers and from my students.

explanation for how this animism can be derived from a reinvigoration of our bodily senses, as interpreted through the work of Merleau-Ponty, the city becomes less interesting the more one rejuvenates a carnal empathy with the land. Just the initial step of becoming more aware of the blending and expansion of one's senses (which Abram identifies as the "synaesthetic" view) reveals something akin to Rolston's suggestion of the one-dimensionality of urban experience. If we reacquaint ourselves with our "breathing bodies," according to Abram, the world transforms itself: "countless human artifacts with which we are commonly involved – the asphalt roads, chain-link fences, . . . – all begin to exhibit a common style, and so to lose some of their distinctiveness."[43] Mass produced artifacts of civilization "draw our senses into a dance that endlessly reiterates itself *without variation*."[44]

Abram's account here is a perfect example of an environmental theory which is set up, intentionally or not, to offer reasons to reject human built spaces as beyond the pale of environmental enlightenment, without resorting to an overt form of ruralism. In a presentation of this critique of Abram's work, Abram responded that he does not "diss" the city, and that his phenomenological view provides the ground for reform of urban architecture as much as it establishes a connection with nature through the human senses.[45] But even though he does slightly qualify some of his critiques of urban space in his book, there are no comparable criticisms in Abram's work of non-urban space. As such, there is in principle more wrong with the city than with any other environment because it is more distant from original, wild nature. Those bound to the city by race, class or circumstance are those trapped in a less ennobling experience. This is exactly the urban bias that environmentalism needs to avoid and the morally pernicious implications of it are clear. If Abram thinks that his view does apply to urban environments as well, then in anticipation of the possible association of his view with a similar

[43]Ibid., p. 63.

[44]Ibid., p. 64.

[45]My presentation was "The Question of Style in Public Philosophy," at the Association for Literature and the Environment conference, Missoula, Montana, July 1997.

anti-urbanism as that found in ruralism, he should provide some positive examples of urban experience. But the blame cannot be laid solely at Abram's feet. If environmental ethics and environmentalism more broadly were thought of as not being restricted to non-urban issues, then perhaps Abram would have provided those examples as a matter of course.

As I said before at the end of my discussion of the ecological question, issues involving population pressures often cross whatever line we may wish to draw between these ecological and social questions which may motivate bringing urban concerns to the fore in environmental ethics. While many studies duplicate the ecological findings suggested above, that there are precious few substitutes for intensive urban development coupled with expansive public transportation systems to generate lower impact on natural systems, questions about population pressures in cities often deflate such findings. While environmental worries about population in the U.S. peaked with Paul Ehrlich's warnings about a population bomb (and later explosion) in the early 1970s, other issues such as immigration and new scaler studies of the impact of cities on ecosystems have stepped in to fill the gap. And just as Barry Commoner worried about the regressive social implications of Ehrlich's population bomb scenarios, we can be equally concerned today with the newer forms of this criticism as it has attached itself to cities.[46]

For example, take the recent work on what has come to be known as "ecological footprint" studies. Ecological footprints are extrapolated maps of the environmental impacts of urban areas generated with the help of Geographical Information Systems (GIS). The point of such maps is to demonstrate that the environmental stress caused by cities is far greater than the actual physical borders of the city.[47] The basis of the map, on the face of it, is ground in an ecological question about the sustainability of cities.

But the rhetoric of the planners and geographers who first devised this technique often ends up sounding like the geographical dualism found in Rolston, including its unfortunate social

---

[46] For an excellent recent overview of the Ehrlich-Commoner debate, see Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (London: Routledge, 1999), chapter 3.

[47] See William E. Rees and Mathis Wackernagel, *Our Ecological Footprint* (New York: New Society, 1995).

implications. In a recent popular defense of the technique, William Rees suggests that the increased urbanization predicted into this century (some 5.1 billion people living in cities by 2025) is evidence of humanity's "technological hubris." "Separating billions of people from the land that sustains them is a giddy leap of faith with serious implications for ecological security."[48] Urbanization, we are told, removes people spatially and psychologically from the land that sustains them. This analysis best shows its true colors however in a series of impending "dimensions of urban human ecology" which Rees runs through. According to Rees, we need to worry about cities because croplands and forests are being used more intensively to sustain urban populations, more hectares of productive land are being relied upon to sustain the populations of rich countries (presumably their cities), and, in a world of "rapid change," cities are unsustainable since the lands in its footprint are not secure from ecological change or social hostility.[49]

But there is no reason to believe that cities themselves are making it easier for populations to grow. Rees' worries about urban populations, except for the strategic concern at the end, are all claims which apply generically to any population growth. The convention of using the ecological footprint to critique cities amounts to little more than the old wine of population worries in the new bottles of GIS data.[50] When considering the alternative argument that cities produce economies of scale that are needed for energy savings, Rees replies with his strategic worry: analysis which finds energy savings in urbanization "implicitly assumes that the city enjoys a stable and predictable relationship with its hinterland."[51] In the end, Rees uses this analysis to argue that sustainable cities should not only be sites of consumption, but also

---

[48] William E. Rees, "Life in the Lap of Luxury as Ecosystems Collapse," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 30, 1999, p. 1.

[49] Ibid., p. 2.

[50] While I have never carried it out, since first reading the literature on ecological footprints I have always wanted to run a GIS experiment where the population of New York City is emptied out equally into the surrounding regions. It seems doubtful that the astounding forest regeneration that Bill McKibben and others have celebrated in upstate New York would be sustainable without the existence of a population concentration device as effective as the city.

[51] Ibid., p. 3.

production as well, producing their own energy and food.

Certainly there is nothing wrong with this last suggestion. Cities certainly would be improved if they could incorporate their own sites of production. But the strategic worries that Rees raises are troubling. Is it the case that urbanization is unwise for *ecological* reasons because surrounding lands may become politically unstable? Perhaps. Thomas Homer-Dixon has argued that environmental problems are more likely to create political violence in rural rather than urban areas.[52] At the same time, Homer-Dixon reports that urban violence (at least political violence) does not necessarily increase with rural-urban migration. The extent to which urban advocates should worry about this consideration is at best unclear. What is clear is that Rees' reasons for seeing cities as examples of technological hubris are more social than ecological.

Again, the social issues at work in population debates among environmentalists historically have been troubling. As suggested above, Paul Ehrlich famously focused on population issues in the early 1970s, leading him to a preference for at least a kind of "lifestyle politics," which located environmental reform outside of substantive critiques of the political and economic system, which at worst led to an assumption of the need for a strong green state which would coerce citizens into forms of personal environmental responsibility (such as limiting numbers of children per couple) rather than participating in a democratic ecological citizenship. Commoner disagreed with this approach, seeing the locus of solutions to environmental problems in a democratic process of reform of social, economic, and political structures. Population pressures were considered by Commoner to be relative to infrastructure and the sustainability of technological systems.

While the exact terms of this debate did die down, it is fair to say that many environmental organizations continue to be plagued with population worries under a different disguise. For example, the Sierra Club has been saddled with this issue for much of its recent history. Mark Dowie reports that recent debates in the Club have not been about population

---

[52] Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 155ff.

control *per se* (at least not on individual responsibility for birth rates) but rather about immigration.[53] Prominent activists in the Sierra Club have been heavily involved with the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a group that tries to make anti-immigration sentiments "palatable by forming coalitions with environmental organizations."[54] Frank Orem, an active member of FAIR is also chair of the Sierra Club's national population committee and has managed, with the help of others, to get the issue considered at almost every national Sierra Club organization. This has lead to a disastrous tainting of the Club as plagued by racists. Several highly visible referenda by the club over proposed endorsements of immigration restrictions in California have been very embarrassing for the membership.

One can easily see the potential for such issues to arise with the focus on population in ecological footprint analysis as well, especially if its advocates continue to hide their social positions behind an ecological agenda. The denigration of urban experience by theorists such as Rolston and Abram do not help matters either. The anti-urban bias of environmentalists and the urban blind spot of environmental ethics is ripe for ruralist and racist abuse. At the end of the day, environmentalists must confront the fact that shortly into the next century more than half of the world's population will live in cities. As these people will be held there by the forces of capitalist production, those of us interested in the environment as a terrain upon which social justice is often decided have a responsibility to give reasons why the urban environment can be reclaimed as a rich social, and even physical sphere and not derided, to paraphrase Frank Lloyd Wright, as morally cancerous.

One of the biggest shames of environmentalism is that those who benefit most from ghettoization, from poverty, from unequal distribution of wealth and entitlements, from pollution, and from social unrest, are served by an environmental movement which apparently dismisses the inner city and its residents as much as these agents of oppression do. Contemporary environmental ethicists are only adding more fuel to this fire. An expanded environmental ethics that embraces the literal ground of these problems would help to redefine

---

[53] Dowie, *Losing Ground*, pp. 165-166.

[54] Ibid., p. 163.

environmentalism and make a greater contribution to sustainability of ecological systems and reform of social systems.

4. Urban Ecological Citizenship, an Example: Restoring Nature

In closing, I will offer a brief example of an environmental issue which may have more potential in cities than in rural areas, and presumably is less important in wild areas. It also responds to the ecological needs of local environments and avoids the social problems just discussed. The example I have in mind is restoration ecology, the practice of restoring damaged ecosystems. But first, one caveat to set up the example concerning the importance of public participation in environmental practices.

Earlier I suggested that one of the goals of an environmental ethic sensitive to urban issues would be the development of a sense of ecological citizenship. If, again loosely speaking, such a sense of citizenship involves environmental responsibility for one's actions, one's fellow citizens, and one's environment, then how is that citizenship to be engendered? Taking responsibility for one's political community is familiar enough to us but how do we take responsibility for our environment as part of that community? The first and most important goal of the development of a an urban ecological citizenship involves the stimulation of public participation in the maintenance of natural processes. While it would take further argument to prove than I have space for here, I believe that a direct participatory relationship between local human communities and the nature they inhabit or are adjacent to, including urban natural areas, is a necessary condition for encouraging people to protect natural systems and landscapes around them rather than trade off these environments for short-term monetary gains from development. If I am in a normative and participatory relationship with the land around me I am less likely to allow it to be harmed further. But this does not mean that a relationship with nature is participatory only if it leads participants to make scarifies for nature. It only means that such participation is a necessary condition for protecting nature as a foundation of ecological

citizenship. Why? One reason is that environmental protection, as is the case with other laws governing common resources, often admits to free rider problems. If all environmental legislation was mandated from above and local populations had no reason to take an interest in environmental protection, then little would motivate citizens from abstaining from free rides, or even out and out violation of environmental regulations. This problem has been proven over and over again in the history of environmental legislation. Most recently we have seen this in several well publicized examples in the developing world where drawing lines around an area and declaring it a national park or wilderness has done little to ensure environmental protection of the site. Deane Curtin gives a thorough account of some of these cases, including the failing attempt by the Nepalese government to create the Chitwan National Park over the needs of local communities to collect firewood.[55] For reasons such as these I am tempted to gauge the relative importance of different environmental practices in terms of their ability to engender a more participatory relationship between humans and the nature around them. I believe that restoration ecology represents such a practice, and its greatest headway so far in terms of serving as a conduit for public participation in nature, has been in urban areas.

Restoration ecology is the practice and science of restoring damaged ecosystems, most typically ecosystems which have been damaged by anthropogenic causes. Such projects can range from small scale urban park reclamations to huge wetland mitigation projects. On two common indicators of the importance of environmental activities – number of voluntary person hours logged on such projects and amounts of dollars spent – restoration ecology is revealed to be one of the most pressing and important environmental priorities on the North American environmental agenda, and in most other developed countries as well. In the U.S. for example, the cluster of restorations known collectively as the "Chicago Wilderness" project in the forest preserves surrounding the city, typically attract 3000-3800 volunteers per

---

[55] Deane Curtin, *Chinnagounder's Challenge: The Question of Ecological Citizenship* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

weekend to help restore the native Oak Savannah ecosystems which have slowly become lost in the area.[56]

In general, restoration makes sense because on the whole it results in many advantages over mere preservation of ecosystems that have been substantially damaged by humans. But it must be remembered that this is a technological practice, very different in kind from acts of wilderness preservation, for example, which are more purely environmental initiatives. Nonanthropocentrists, such as Eric Katz (and Robert Elliot, as mentioned above), who have commented on restoration to date have even gone so far as to argue that the objects produced by restoration are not natural at all, but instead artifacts because they are produced by humans.[57] While I disagree with this view, the logic it stems from is ground in the nonanthropocentric value dualism between nature and culture described above, and no doubt partly by the geographical dualism attributed earlier to Rolston (though I am happy to report that Rolston is much more open to the importance of restoration in an overall environmental management scheme than others).

But despite such objections, restoration is an institutional practice that is of top concern to governments, businesses, NGOs, and research universities. The practice is so common that it is almost unremarkable to note that every region of ever developed country contains some restored landscape. But I think if we were to focus on the fact that restoration is taking place and chalk that up to proof of the importance of the sort of environmental issues which will motivate the development of an ecological citizenship, we would miss something quite important. What we would be missing is that the fact that landscapes are being restored is not nearly as important as the choices that we have to make about what to value in those restoration projects which produce those landscapes. Seen as an environmental practice it is easy enough to focus on the end products of restorations only and then use this focus to endorse the best technologies which can help to produce the best restored landscapes. I would argue however that as a human

---

[56] See William K. Stevens, *Miracle Under the Oaks* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995).

[57] Katz, *Nature as Subject*.

practice that involves our connection to nature, we need to think about what values are produced in that practice and how those values can best be made use of in the broader, long-term project of creating a sustainable society.

Now, to date, my intervention on questions concerning restoration has focused on the value of public participation in restoration projects as a positive pragmatic outcome of such activity.[58] When restorations are performed by volunteers then they are, in the sense I have described above, an important generator of the forms of responsibility associated with ecological citizenship. Even if it is true that humans cannot reproduce the value of nature as philosophers like Katz maintain, it is quite plausible that a moral ground justifying restoration projects can be found in the value of human participation in nature.   The value of this participation is not however justified in a vacuum. In the case of restoration, participatory practices get us better restorations because they create the sorts of relationships with nature that I argued were a necessary condition for long term environmental sustainability. Those restorations that are not produced by volunteers do not capture this participatory value and do not necessarily add the long term project of creating communities committed to the protection of their local environments.

Sociological evidence available to date focusing on the Chicago restorations suggests that participants in restoration projects are more likely (as one might expect) to adopt a benign attitude of stewardship and responsibility toward nature as a result of such interactions with nature. The reason appears to be that participants in restoration projects learn more about the hazardous consequences of anthropogenic impacts on nature because they learn in practice how hard it is to restore nature after it has been damaged. This same research suggests that participants take the lessons of restoration with them on the road. When restorationists visit preserved areas, such as national parks or wilderness areas, they are more likely to act as more responsible environmental citizens while in those places.[59] The more interesting philosophical

---

[58] Andrew Light and Eric Higgs, "The Politics of Ecological Restoration," *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 18, pp. 227-247.

[59] See the essays in Gobster and Hull, *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*.

issue then becomes how to guarantee or further this value of participation in restoration projects. In terms of the values represented in the practice of restoration, there is a strong moral and political claim inherent to the practice for having more local participation in restoration projects as a sort of schoolhouse for environmental responsibility and a means of stimulating more democratic environmental practices. At its core participatory restorations amount to public participation in nature; it is a restoration not only of nature but also of the human cultural relationship with nature.[60]

This sort of analysis gets us both short term and long term goals. On the short term we want to encourage laws which would mandate local participation in restoration projects which are publicly funded (something like a right of first refusal for local communities and neighborhoods) on the assumption that local participation in *all* restorations is part of the overall criteria for what counts as a good restoration. This criteria is just as important as scientific or technological proficiency in restoration and could even outweigh the value of proficiency in some instances. The reason again is that I would claim that in the long-term we will only have environmental sustainability when we all have vested interests in our local environments.

But on the long term we will want to focus our attention as ethicists and environmentalists on those areas most likely to generate such foundations for ecological citizenship, namely those geographical areas which are most amenable to public participation in restoration. Larger rural restoration projects, such as the multi-million dollar projects undertaken by the Army Core of Engineers to de-channalize rivers are too unwieldy for significant voluntary efforts. But urban restorations, such as the Chicago projects and the prairie restorations at the University of Wisconsin arboretum in Madison are perfect for serving this purpose. One could even claim that the massive public participation generated in Chicago was directly linked to the location of the city in relation to the restorations. Certainly, restoration should not be restricted to such smaller sites, but these sites may in fact be the best suited to fulfilling the full normative value of restoration – creating an opportunity for citizens to form relationships with their local

---

[60] See Light, "Ecological Restoration and the Culture of Nature."

environments. Though I do not have the studies to support the supposition, I would suggest that community gardens, and other common forms of urban environmentalism, are important for the same reasons.

But my example of restoration ecology as a demonstration of the importance of urban environmental issues and practices does not go far enough. If environmental ethics is to fully embrace the urban, then it must describe the brown space of the city to be as important a locus of normative consideration as the green space. An environmentalism expanded to include the city as an object of its concern needs to be founded in a specific set of moral and political positions rejecting the anti-urban bias and the urban blind spot that is endemic to traditional environmental views. As a consequence, we will only have a fully environmental ethic, which covers all environments, when we turn our attention to the preservation of richly textured urban spaces as often as we do to old growth forests.