

LANCASTER
UNIVERSITY

Department of Philosophy



THE THINGMOUNT WORKING PAPER SERIES ON
THE PHILOSOPHY OF CONSERVATION

IN PRAISE OF BACKYARDS:
Towards a Phenomenology of Place

by

Jane HOWARTH

TWP 96-06



ISSN: 1362 - 7066 (Print)
ISSN: 1474 - 256X (On-line)

IN PRAISE OF BACKYARDS: Towards a Phenomenology of Place

Abstract

The conservation of nature is undertaken for all manner of reasons and with a wide variety of goals. The best rehearsed of these, perhaps not just incidentally, are the ones which can be measured: natural resources and amenities. This paper explores a different, less measurable, goal for conservation: the spirit of place. What was it that Alexander Pope invited us to consult? I argue that the value attaching to natural places is one which the orthodox framework in which values, moral or aesthetic, are normally discussed, does not readily admit of a proper characterisation of place. We need to explore, not only the character of places, but also how attachment to place develops, and what importance it has in human life. This enquiry provides no algorithms to guide conservationists; but via analysis of place and the discussion of some conservation proposals, general principles emerge which might serve as guidelines in our dealings with nature.

Keywords: Place, Conservation, Nature, Phenomenology.

What is nature conservation? That is to say, what are its aims and how are they to be achieved? What is to be conserved and how? At present, conservation projects tend to be defined in opposition to development projects. Conservationists fight against projects which would, in some very obvious way, affect nature adversely, for example, by putting concrete over it. This inevitably gives conservation an air of crisis management, but also of negativity, of fighting against progress, resisting the new. When a development project is assessed, nature features as a cost, as environmental damage, rather than a benefit. It also gives conservation an air of being élitist, guarding the interests of the priveleged, nature-loving, few against the interests of the many who will, allegedly, benefit in terms of houses, amenities, jobs and national prosperity in general, from development. Overall, conservation is seen as negative in its aims, and negative towards most of the needs of most of the people.

When conservation is able to be less negative, when it aims to improve rather than merely maintain the status quo, specific projects often involve cleaning up some mess that our culture has created. This does little for the image of conservation. Cleaning up has always been deemed low grade work, to be ashamed of, something which we do not want to know about, if only because it reminds us of the mess.

Alternatively, when conservation is creative, digging ponds, planting trees, it is either too long term to be of immediate interest in our 20 second culture, or it is replacing things which have been destroyed by developments and people resent the fact that the old ones have gone and criticise the replacements for not being the originals.

How might conservation present itself in a more positive light? Look first at how it actually argues its cases. If a site can be established as a Site of Special Scientific Interest or as having special amenity value then these count in favour of its conservation. How, exactly, do they count? Ideally, since cost benefit analysis features so centrally in the decision making process,

the value of a site needs to be representable in some way that can appear on a balance sheet.

The underlying principle of cost benefit analysis is that the correct policy to pursue is the one which has the greatest balance of benefits over costs. In order to assess which one that is, all benefits and costs need to be presented in monetary terms. The question arises: how can we represent nature in cash terms?

Look first at the case from science. It might seem like a first step on the way to putting a price on, say, the richness of an area of country to present it in numerical terms. And this is something which scientists, specifically ecologists, can do. They can measure bio-diversity, the number and rarity of species, the size of the gene pool; or the complexity, distinctiveness or stability of the ecosystem, the food chain, the energy flow. These are all measurable.

But how exactly do these count? There are no exchange rates between species, ecosystems, gene pools and pounds sterling; no obvious market for bio-diversity. Notice that this could be otherwise. If people, privately or as tax payers, companies, institutions or governments were prepared to pay by, for example, sponsorship or research grants to protect species, ecosystems, habitats, then what they were prepared to offer would be a real way for such things to get into the analysis.

In the absence of a market or exchange rates fixed in some other way, the ecological measurements are still of use. The way these can be considered in deciding about development projects is not in deciding for or against a project, but in deciding where it should take place. One can compare possible sites for bio-diversity, rarity, complexity and choose to conserve the more diverse, rarer, more complex.

This is not without problems. First, it does not give a way of deciding between, say, diversity and rarity, only a decision procedure within one group. Second, the question these comparisons can help answer is not should this development go ahead, but where should it be. The conservationist case does not get heard as a case against development only against the location of a development. The conservationist may well feel faced by the developers' equivalent of the well known sales ploy of asking not: "do you want to buy?" but: "how would you like to pay?".

Third, these comparisons take for granted certain values, such as the more species the better. If the question is further pursued as to why more species are of more value, the usual defence is in terms of future possible use. A speculative market exists for the possible use we can make of nature as, for example, medicine or food source. Potential uses of scientific findings can feature, if only speculatively, on balance sheets. Nature is a resource, a potentially valuable supply of raw materials.

There is a fourth, more radical, problem. Does quantifying species, species members and ecosystems capture the whole of what scientific interest is? A site might be of special scientific interest not because science has already established its character but because of its potential for furthering scientific knowledge, because it presents a challenge or puzzle for science. It might, for example, promise to be a counter-example to a well established hypothesis, it might appear to be more stable than it should be, it might be unclear what role it plays in the ecology of the greater region. A site is of most interest for science when it presents a challenge, the unknown, unexplored. Such things are not easily measurable or comparable, they do not easily get registered. When pressed, the common defence would be that they might further human knowledge and that is a good. If that is not accepted, the defence will continue, as in the previous case, that the knowledge could be of benefit to people in the future.

Nature is thereby regarded either as a laboratory or as a source of raw materials. The destruction

of a species is a loss because it robs us of a source of knowledge and possibly a source of supply, for example a medicine.

Consider, now, the case for nature as an amenity. This covers a wide range of things: recreation and leisure, heritage, aesthetic value. These features can be translated into cash terms, either by looking at their effect on property prices or by assessing how much visitors, most often tourists, would pay to visit the amenity. This will include, not only direct entry fees which might not always be appropriate, but general spending either to get to the area or within the area on parking, accommodation, food etc.

These figures are clearly somewhat speculative. They are also, at least in the case of aesthetic value, open to a deeper worry. Aesthetic or scenic value is surely not to be measured solely in terms of its ability to 'pay its way'. In response to this worry, attempts are made to assess landscape for its scenic value. This gives rise not to any cash figure to go on to the balance sheet; but it can result in a way of comparing alternative sites. If, for example, landscape assessors devise and work with a check list of features which give landscape high scenic value, then a site which has more of the things on the check list will be deemed better than one with fewer. As with the scientific defence, the aim of landscape assessment is to offer a quantified way of comparing sites, so that a decision can be made between alternative sites for a development; but, as with the scientific defence, there seems to be no case to be made against the development as such.

One striking fact about both defences is that they do not appear to be presenting, as a candidate for conservation, nature as nature. The scientific defence presents nature as a laboratory or standing reserve; the amenity defence presents nature as a playground, a museum or a spectacle. I do not want to challenge either of these ways of defending sites against destruction or development. My aim is, rather, to ask whether these are the only possible defences of nature.

Many actual conservationists feel uneasy with them and with the policies and results which they dictate. The problem is not just that nature is undervalued or inaccurately reflected, but that there is no reflection at all of how we sometimes value nature. There is an appreciation of nature which is not adequately represented as an appreciation either of its ecology or of its potential as an amenity. It involves rather a celebration of nature, a wonder in the face of the world which is our home, a profound sense of loss at its destruction.

The usual focus for defending nature as nature is wilderness. It is not the love of wilderness, of nature as untouched by us, even alien, excluding us, which I want to consider; but a very different sort of love of nature, nature as we interact with it. Many of us, including many conservationists, have very special attachments to particular places in nature. We have learnt, via interactions with nature, to appreciate the particular character of the moor, the meadow or the pond.

My project is to look at nature where we have these very real, if hard to articulate, attachments to particular places in it. These have been said to possess a 'genius loci' defined as 'the atmosphere of a particular place'. Genius loci or the spirit of place is a concept with a history. Alexander Pope famously recommended that we should consult it and described graphically the results of failing to do.

There is no obvious way, in contemporary decision making, of defending places. If a place is of value ecologically or as an amenity, then it may be given special consideration, though how this is represented in numerical terms is, as ever, hard to determine. But many places may not be of value in these respects.

So, the significant places which people have learned to recognise and to which they have become attached are hard to get into the reckoning unless they have something else in their favour. When people object to those places being destroyed they are accused of merely playing the NIMBY (not in my backyard) card, and dismissed on that ground. Why, exactly, are people dismissed as having no case when they seek to defend their own backyards? Putting aside the derogatory, dismissive connotation of 'backyard', the argument would seem to go as follows. This development has to be in someone's backyard, so your claim that it should not be in yours, simply because it is yours, is no better than and so is counter-balanced by any other such claim, so it has no ultimate weight.

How good is this argument? Take the first premise. This is true only if the development does have to go ahead. It also presupposes that there are no possible locations which are not someone's backyard. Often, this is simply not true: the problem is often, not the lack, but the expense, of alternative locations. It is certainly not true that everywhere is somebody's backyard. The planet is not made up exclusively of backyards. Second the argument assumes that no backyards are any better or worse than any others, that all backyards and all attachments to them are equal. This is by no means obviously true. So, I shall not take it for granted that no case can be made for someone's backyard. Indeed, the rest of this paper may be regarded as a defence of backyards which, to avoid the derogatory implications, I shall call 'places'.

Place has the reverse evaluative implication: places can be violated, they are worthy of respect, basically, they are a good thing. Now, not all backyards are places - my aim is to explore the possibility of defending the ones which are. We know what people mean when they speak of the sense or spirit of place. We become attached to places and this attachment is something deep.

My concern is with natural places not man-made ones, though that distinction is scarcely a clear one. So my topic is in some ways a very small one: a particular kind of attachment to a particular kind of natural feature. I happen to think that there are wider implications both for conservation and for philosophy. Attachment to place, I believe, is fundamental to many of the relationships we forge with the world around us. Exploring this attachment might provide an, albeit sketchy, model for exploring other relations between humans and nature. What we need is a richer taxonomy, an articulation of different kinds of relationships with nature which we want to conserve. We need a 'discourse' to present the case for nature: that, I think, is one area where philosophers and conservationists might fruitfully work together. The exploration also raises fundamental issues about what philosophical analysis is.

Look first at the wider philosophical issues. A current philosophical orthodoxy - and not just philosophical, it is rife throughout our society - is subject object dualism. According to this orthodoxy, philosophers seek to analyse concepts, revealing the simple elements involved in complex concepts. Having done this, meta-issues arise concerning the objectivity or otherwise of the concepts analysed or the elements revealed by the analysis. Questions arise such as: are ascriptions of these features to objects objective judgements, do they constitute knowledge, are they factual descriptions, are the features discovered in the object. Alternatively, are the ascriptions subjective, evaluative, indicating a subjective response to the object, a projection onto objects by subjects?

These are seen as central issues in philosophy. This concern with objectivity and subjectivity on the meta-level has consequences for the conceptual analysis. If one offers an analysis where the answers on the meta-level to the question: 'is this element objective or subjective?' is 'both', your analysis will be deemed to be incomplete. Everything, when properly analysed, must be either 'in' the object or 'in' the subject.

Notice how this direction in philosophy eats into the hands of the allegedly 'real' world of cost

benefit analysis. If a potential cost or benefit is a feature of an object, measure it; if of a subject, count it, ask it, or charge it. Then you get something which fits neatly onto a balance sheet. We do not thereby need to worry about the messy, qualitative area where objects and subjects interact, where they are inextricably linked, for on this view they are not - all links can be extricated.

If, in the jargon, subjects and objects are in a 'synthesis', 'internally' related, if, that is, they are as they are because of the way they are related to each other, this kind of analysis will not respect that, it will offer a distorted view of both subject and object.

In cost benefit analysis terms, nature will be presented objectively as a source of knowledge or supply, or subjectively as an amenity - a playground, a spectacle. What about, I want to ask, nature as nature? - and not forgetting here human nature.

Attachments can take a variety of forms; but certain attachments to nature, and, in particular, attachment to place is, I claim, of just this kind. It is an appreciation of nature as nature, and it is not something which leaves the subject and object intact, unmoved, as it would be without the attachment. That is what I mean by its being 'deep'.

It might be objected here that, since individuals' attachments to places and the places to which they are attached are so varied, even idiosyncratic, nothing of any general import could possibly emerge from a study of place. This objection, I want to claim, is misguided. It may be that one can have all manner of responses to, preferences for, a place but not all of them would count as attachment. Attachment is something which one has developed: it has a certain sort of past. Also, it may be the case that one can develop an attachment to any kind of location; but not all attachments would count as attachment to place. To count as that it must have as its object certain features of location which make it significant, make it an example of place, and of natural place. The relation between the attached subject and the place of attachment is, that is to say, an internal one.

'Analysis' of place, therefore, should aim to reveal not the simpler parties to the relationship, but the simpler relationships which are 'constitutive' of the complex relationship. One wants interrelatedness to run right through the analysis.

One kind of 'constitutive' relation will be to do with how the sensitivity to place develops. Such sensitivities typically take time to develop. So, there will be a temporal dimension to the analysis. What we need to do is not so much to give an analysis of place as tell a story, or, these days, a narrative: a narrative, a past, which is implicit in any appreciation of place. The aim of the analysis or narrative would be to reveal the complexity of the notion of place, how there is implicit in recognising place and its significance, a wealth of interrelationships linking humans and nature. Writers such as Thomas Hardy or Edward Thomas articulate such links with great sensitivity. My analysis or narrative is, in comparison, sketchy and somewhat thin. The sympathetic reader will flesh it out for herself or himself

Typically, perhaps necessarily, such appreciation develops out of attachment to some specific place. This too is something which we develop. It may begin, perhaps in childhood, with finding oneself wanting to linger somewhere, wanting to explore, feeling 'invited' by it, 'receptive' to it, 'attuned' to it, though a child would scarcely articulate it in that way, might rather say it is a 'special' place.

What sorts of locations invite this response? Not all natural locations have the characteristics of natural places. Examples of candidates for being places would be a forest glade, a rocky cove, a small island in a lake. Examples of locations but non-places would be oceans, deserts, mountain

ranges, arctic wastes. What makes a location also a place? First there is some requirement of size on places: locations can be too small or too large to be places. There may not be precise dimensions; but the Brazilian rain forest is too large to be a place, a square yard of the New Forest is too small. It might be a 'spot', but not a place. The size must be somehow of 'human scale', 'perceptually graspable', not necessarily at a glance but maybe at a 'wander'.

Second, and relatedly, places must have 'human' features, features of a kind and scale which humans can relate to perceptually and not just conceptually via knowledge about it. The middle of the Pacific ocean, Sahara desert or the North American prairie are too featureless to be places. There is probably some requirement about shape also - some sort of natural arena, with protective sides. Children tend to like 'small' places.

So, lingering in such a paradigmatic place is the start of the story. How does it go on? The next step is perhaps the development of a deeper attachment, a greater sensitivity, to that particular place. Sensitivity involves an initial 'openness', a willingness to relate to something other than oneself but not alien. an acknowledgement that it commands respect. The place invites further investigation, so that one becomes familiar with it, knows every nook and cranny, feels at home in somewhere not man made. It comes to have a significance as a kind of home. Its spirit can be restorative of your spirit

This initial liking of the place leads to one's learning about the place, acquiring the ability to read it, acquiring knowledge of the past of the place, how it got that way. This knowledge informs one's present experience of the place. One's knowledge of the place broadens and deepens. One thereby develops a sensitivity to the significance of the place. One learns how the place can be affected by its surroundings: distant hills, the shape of the horizon, the weather, different seasons, distant noises, smells. Footpaths and routes leading to the place can affect it. These are not 'in' the place but are partly constitutive of it. Inhabitants or visitors, human or otherwise, similarly can affect a place while not being permanent residents of it.

Out of such particular attachments, a 'sense' of place can develop. So that one recognises places which are amenable to such human attachment. One can come to recognize a place as such without actually having already developed an attachment to that place. One can learn to be open to, and to respect places generally as congenial but not humanised, they are still other than us. We can learn to relate to them; and, if we do, they can contribute to our quality of life, not just in a trivial way of a quick fix, but in a serious way: making us the people we are, serving to constitute the continuity of our lives.

So, the spirit of place has a past. It also has a value: places, unlike mere locations, can be violated or destroyed. What counts as violation and destruction of place and what would count as conserving it.

A location is identified purely by where it is: its degrees longitude and latitude. This is not sufficient to identify place. The same location could, over time, change between being a place and being a non-place, from being a natural place to being a man-made place, from being one particular natural or man-made place to being a different particular natural or man-made place. So, having the same location is not sufficient for being the same place. Nor is it necessary: locations stay the same size, places can grow or shrink, even move, in certain ways, without changing their identity. As we have seen things not spatially 'in' the place can be partially constitutive of it.

Place is not a geographical or ecological notion, though some geographers have attempted to explore it. It may turn out that kinds of place correspond to ecological or geographical kinds; but if that is so, it is so contingently: discovery of a correlation would require prior analysis of the

concept of place.

It is also important, for the kind of place I am seeking to describe, that the 'human scale' features are features of nature, are not man-made, not the product of human construction. To build something of human scale in a desert or an ocean would not turn it into a natural place. This is not to say that the place must have only such natural features. Natural place can tolerate some measure of human intervention. A ruined abbey or dry stone wall in something which was already a natural place might not destroy, can even enhance, that character.

It is part of what is there to be wondered at in nature that we can relate to it, it can be congenial to us, despite or because of the fact that it is other than us, not the product of our creation. This independence, otherness of nature can show itself as alien, hostile as in the case of wilderness; but it can also show itself as congenial, welcoming even, as in the case of place.

Place can tolerate human intervention provided that that intervention does not destroy the otherness of the place. The overall principle is that human intervention can show the development of congeniality but mustn't destroy the otherness of the place.

The place must not be 'humanised', must not lose its character as other. This can happen in two ways: too much human intervention, or disrespectful human intervention. What sort of interventions destroy, violate or enhance place is obviously a vital issue for conservation, if place is deemed to be something worthy of conserving. There is no simple algorithm; but the dual requirements of congeniality and otherness might offer loose guidelines.

We might look to the past to learn for the future. Nature can restore itself, grow over the 'humanised'. Ruins are a reminder of this and so can enhance place. Dry stone walls in the Lake District act as constant reminder of the otherness of the weather and terrain, and the long history of respectful interaction. Past interaction preserves place where it bears the hallmark of respect for place with its dual character of congeniality and otherness. The history of a place must be a natural history including human history only where the humans have recognised the independence of nature.

Just as not all locations are places, so not all preferences are attachments to place. There are all manner of locations which we can enjoy in all manner of ways, for all manner of reasons. But, attachment to place is not mere preference. It is something which goes very deep, is of significance in the life of the individual who has it, and which is an important part of being human. It is comparable with one's attachment to one's closest friends. It is not a mere preference, though it might have started out as such.

Just as place is not an ecological or geographical notion, so attachment to place is not narrowly psychological, not to be explained as, for example, territoriality.

Overall, I want to claim, natural places are an appropriate backdrop to our nature. Place is not an object of consciousness so much as a setting for human nature. What does that mean? It is part of our natures that we have bodies and our bodies feel and move differently in different surroundings. We respond bodily to place, we are relaxed, at home there. Another feature of our natures: we are reminded that though we can and do reflect on, seek to understand, our lives, we, first and foremost, live them. Things happen to us as they do to other living things; we are not in control of every feature, we do not understand, cannot articulate, everything about ourselves. We, subjects, are not pure translucent consciousness. Places in nature can get us away from language, from the tyranny of words.

I shall now consider four kinds of proposal for 'conserving' nature which are often supposed to involve no loss of value, and I shall argue, in the light of my analysis of place, that they do

involve violation or destruction of place.

Consider first, the case of shadow projects, such as building a new pond to replace one which has been destroyed by the construction of a road or runway. One might even speak here of 're-locating' the very same pond. It is presumably not beyond the powers of modern technology to do precisely that: remove the stuff of the pond, the very same water, wild-life, surrounding earth and vegetation to a new site. However, it could surely not be seriously proposed that the original place which, let us suppose, centrally featured the pond had been re-located. I suggested earlier that having exactly the same location is not necessary for something to be the same place: a natural place can change its location, it might grow or shrink, but gradually, continuously, and by 'natural' processes, in accordance with ecological laws. Disappearing and reappearing 30 miles East, or being transported the distance on a series of lorries, is not such a process, does not conform with ecological laws.

So, it would be agreed that the original place has been destroyed by the move. This though, it might be argued, does not involve loss of value, because an exactly similar place has been created elsewhere. The new pond with its surroundings has an exactly similar ecology, provides an exactly similar amenity as the original one.

But this response clearly misses the point of the claim that the past of a place is constitutive of that place. The new location might become a place, might acquire significance, a past, one may in time become attached to the new place; but one might not have that time, and no adult can develop new childhood attachments. Further, it is likely that it will always be part of the new attachment that this is a substitute. It might remind one of the original, but that highlights the loss of the original. We acknowledged that if someone wishes to be buried in a particular place, an exactly similar one somewhere else will not serve. If we accept that for dead bodies, why not for living ones?

We value, become attached to, natural places, and such attachments are important, they make the person the individual he or she is. They might also be considered as part of what constitutes the good life, though it is perhaps a part which has been lost sight of by allegedly 'placeless' modern man.

Consider, second, a proposal to extract mineral deposits from or to lay cables or pipelines under a place, but to complete the work by restoring the place, so that it is exactly the same as before, so that no-one could tell the difference. While the work is underway, the location will not be a place, but the place will be restored exactly as it was. Scientifically, as an amenity it will be just as it was, and it will be at the same location. How can value be lost? Here, I want to say that the place, if not actually destroyed, has certainly been violated.

It is part of one's attachment to a place that it has significance, one 'reads' it in certain ways, one's experience of it involves beliefs one has about it. The past of a place is constitutive of that place. In the case of a natural place, beliefs would typically involve beliefs about its past. Very generally, a natural place should have developed according to natural processes. Undermining and restoring is not such a process. The history of a place makes a difference to how one 'reads' the place. To experience it as the result of human construction is different from experiencing it as the result of natural processes. This is so, even where the human intervention occurred long ago. My experience of places in the Yorkshire moorlands has never been the same since I learnt that they were originally wooded.

It might be objected at this point that there have been past human interventions in nature which have contributed to place rather than violated it. A paradigm case of this might be the results of the landscaping as carried out by such figures as Capability Brown. Opinions differ about

whether this did in fact 'improve' nature. If it did, then perhaps this was because these landscapers were sensitive to the place, did indeed 'consult its spirit', and maybe got it right. This, however, would licence future interventions only on the part of those equally sensitive to place.

A third case is that of changing the surroundings of a place. This includes a wide range of things from motorways and windfarms to overflying aircraft to tourist centres. The claim would be that, since one has not changed anything in the place, one cannot have affected that place. This seems from the start a somewhat implausible claim. Surroundings are partly constitutive of place. Given the nature of the human senses, one's experience of a place will be changed by the smells of motorway fumes, the noise of overflying aircraft, the sight of windfarms on the horizon: the distant hills, once protective and benign can take on a sinister character.

In this category, one can distinguish changes for 'development' reasons and changes for conservation reasons. Both might affect place. Industrial development might affect places far away, by climate change or pollution altering the character of the sunsets. Conservation might affect place by fencing an area for its protection.

The fourth case concerns the adaptation of a place for tourism. This involves making the place available to more people. The 'developments' may purport to be 'in keeping' with the place: discrete signs informing and interesting people in it, visitors' centres built of local materials 'blending' in with the natural character.

But this introduces words into a context which I suggested earlier is valuable for its ability to free us from words. An influx of visitors who don't know the place, and treat it as a source of information or recreation, can obviously change the experience of it for those whose place it is. Even without the people, the signs signify people, detract from the original significance of the place. The tourist centre will often be indicative of activities which are not 'in place' here - buying post cards, eating etc.

Now, what of the meta-issues? Are these attachments, significances, interrelationships in the object, the place or in the subject, the 'sense' of place? You know how I will answer that question: yes and no, both and neither. But maybe I owe a little more.

The natural line, I think, would be to say that what I have described is attachment which is a feature of subjects, and significance which is something subjects project onto objects, and so not 'really' there. My response to that is to say that one would say such a thing only from a detached standpoint from which objects look very 'thin'. The significance of place is not just in the head, it emerges as attachment develops. To try to describe this from a viewpoint of one who has developed no such attachment, encountered no such significance is to exclude, from the outset, the very thing we are trying to understand. To exclude significance from nature is to exclude ourselves from it, to insist on an ontology, a metaphysic which, it could even be argued, is responsible for the crisis we are in.

Alternatively, I could claim to be cashing out the metaphor of 'projection' - and concluding that it is not a very good metaphor. It fails to do justice to the phenomena. It feels as if the direction of flow is the other way - one is getting things out, or back, from nature.

Similarly, to regard such attachments as 'purely' or 'merely' subjective responses, as individual preferences, is to exclude at the outset from one's account of subjects anything which makes sensitivity or attachment to nature possible. Sensitivity to place is not just personal association. These attachments must not be mere personal associations, place is not just a peg to hang these on, but rather what one is attached to, at home in, at peace in, it is familiar, significant. You

could not articulate the nature of the attachment without reference to the place to which one is attached. If that distinction is not clear, consider the difference between good and bad poetry. A bad poem will be intelligible only to its author, it will be merely anecdotal and if you're not familiar with the occasion, you won't understand the poem; a good poem will note universal human significances. So, with place, sensitivity to its significance as place, as nature, is quite different from having personal associations with it.

Furthermore, the importance of place to people is not something which people are particularly good at articulating or even recognising. Consulting people may not be the answer. They might not be able to say, might not know, how a place contributes to their quality of life. When it has been violated or destroyed, when it has gone, then they might realise the loss; but even then they might not, they might simply feel that something is wrong, consult their doctor, take the prescribed anti-depressants, and so on down.

Finally, it might be objected that place is a cultural notion, and so, to that extent, subjective. To which, my response is to concede that of course cultures are affected by the kind of nature in which they develop. If we lived in a desert, we would almost certainly not have our concept of place, we would quite possibly find place an unintelligible notion, just as we find the desert nomads' ability to navigate unintelligible. But we don't live in deserts, we live, our culture has developed, in a nature which has places, and our relations to nature are a response to that.

If this objection, however, is that the concept of place is a cultural construct and so attachment to place is not an attachment to nature as nature, my response would be that nature looks like the least plausible case for a cultural construct. So the criticism is likely to be made against a backdrop of absolutely everything being a cultural construct, in which case, I'm not sure I'm worried. If, on the other hand, they have a concept of nature which isn't a cultural construct, then I'd like to hear about it.

Alternatively, I could claim that what I have been doing is exploring the way in which the notion of place is 'constructed', for that, too, is a metaphor.

If however the claim is that place is a cosy, romantic, élitist notion, a bad thing, or that it is a bad thing for us to be attached to backdrops to our nature - our natures may be better ignored - then maybe I'll just go along with that. Maybe we shouldn't be conserving places, maybe, the fewer the better - let's set to work destroying them. I've been concerned to ask what they are, not whether they are a good thing. And if we decide to destroy them, we shall first need to identify them, so my analysis might still be of use.