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The Environmentalists' Dilemma

Dollars and Sand Dollars

The poignancy of the dilemma facing advocates of environmental protection was dramatized for me in an encounter with a little girl. It was a sleepy, summer-beach Saturday and I was walking on a sandbar just off my favorite remnant of unspoiled beach on the north tip of Longboat Key, Florida. The little girl clambered up the ledge onto the sandbar, trying not to lose a dozen fresh sand dollars she cradled against her pushed-out and Dan-skinned stomach. I guessed she was about eight.

Thirty yards away, in knee-deep water, her mother and older sister were strip mining sand dollars—they walked back and forth through the colony, systematically scuffing their feet just under the soft sand on the bottom of the lagoon and bending over to retrieve each disk as it was dislodged. Their treasure was held until collected by the eight-year-old transporter, whose feet were too small to serve as plowshares. Gathering the sand dollars at the point of excavation, she relayed them to the sand bar where a considerable pile was accumulating near the family's beached powerboat.

Many months earlier, I had noted how the fickle current through Longboat Inlet had begun to dump sand in a large crescent spit out into the Gulf of Mexico, forming a waist-deep lagoon. Next came a profusion of shore birds and the colony of sand dollars that multiplied in the protected water, and then came the little girl and her family in their powerboat.

I was startled by the level of industrial organization; even the little girl executed her task with square-jawed efficiency. I engaged her as she emerged onto the sand bar. "You know, they're alive," I said.

"We can put 'em in Clorox at home and they'll turn white."

I asked whether they needed so many. She said, "My Momma makes 'em outta things."

I persisted: "How many does she need to make things?"

"We can get a nickel apiece for the extras at the craft store." I sighed and walked away. Our brief conversation had ended in ideological impasse.

But I was troubled. How could my indignation be stilled so simply? Must the environmental conscience always give way to economic arguments? As I wandered off, I analyzed the short and unsatisfactory debate. I had begun by expressing my concern for life, for the several hundred green discs drying in the afternoon sun. Yet I'd have felt silly saying, "Put them back, they have a right to live." I'd have felt silly because I don't think it's immoral for little girls to take a few sand dollars from the beach, any more than I had been immoral when I had red snapper for lunch that same day. I felt ill-equipped to make my point, about which I had little doubt, that the little girl should put most of the sand dollars back. If I admitted that sand dollars are just resources, like chunks of coal, salable in an available market, I could not at the same time argue that the little girl should put most of them back. Once sand dollars are economic resources, their value is counted in nickels. Therefore, I could not express my indignation in the language of economic aggregation.

Nor could I precisely express it in the language of rights of sand dollars, especially not if that language is given its accepted meaning in the tradition of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. I did not find it self-evident that all sand dollars are created equal with little girls. Imagine instead that I had encountered the little girl with a half-dozen sand dollars submerged in seawater in her bucket and she had said, "We're going to cut up a couple and put the rest in our saltwater aquarium and watch 'em." If I appeal to the rights of sand dollars as individuals (or, even somewhat more weakly, to the intrinsic value of individual sand dollars), I would have to object to this purely instrumental use of sand dollars in a rudimentary science lesson.

I faced the environmentalists' dilemma;[1] it was a dilemma, not because I did not know what I wanted the little girl to do, but because I could not coherently explain *why* she should put most of them back. If I chose the language of economic aggregation, I would have to say she could take as many as she could use, up to the sustainable yield of the population. On this approach, more is better—the value of sand dollars is their market value, and I could not use this language to express the moral indignation I felt at the family's strip mining sand dollars and hauling them away in their powerboat. To apply, on the other hand, the language of moralism, I would have to decry the treatment of sand dollars as mere resources; I would have to insist that the little girl put *all* of them back. Neither language could express my indignation *and* my commonsense feeling that, while it was not wrong for the little girl to take a few sand dollars, she should put most of them back—the aggregationist approach to valuing sand dollars would prove too little, and the moral approach would prove too much.

Consider again the altered scenario in which the little girl takes a half-dozen home in her bucket to be cut up or imprisoned in an aquarium. Suppose the little girl takes them home, and they are, predictably, dead in a week, but that the little girl attains an interest in biology, eventually becoming a marine biologist who works to protect echinoids. If sand dollars had myths and legends, the sacrificed sand dollars might be worshiped as saviors of their kind. And to the little girl, also, they would then have been far more valuable than nickels. It is this sense of respect for sand dollars as living creatures, worth more than mere nickels but less than little, round people, that I could not express in either the strict language of moralism or in the language of simple economic aggregationism. I knew I wanted to get the little girl to put most of them back, and to respect the remaining ones as living creatures from whom we might learn something worthwhile; I was torn between two inadequate languages for expressing the value of sand dollars. In this sense, the environmentalists' dilemma is primarily a dilemma in values, conceptualizations, and worldviews more than a dilemma regarding actions and policies. It affects mainly how environmentalists explain and justify their policies, and only occasionally and tangentially does it affect those policies themselves.

My conversation on the beach represents, in microcosm, a larger dilemma facing environmentalists. I know that this practical and industrious family would not be moved by speeches for sand dollar liberation, however eloquent. That argument had been cut short, rendered irrelevant by the little girl's utilitarian reply. Sand dollars are by no means an endangered species, so that line of argument wasn't applicable.

Once I'd given up my moral high ground and asked only whether they needed so many, I'd conceded the utilitarian value of sand dollars. If a few are useful as commodities, surely more are correspondingly so. Of course I could have given her the conservationist line, that she should take only the sustainable yield of the colony. But I didn't have the faintest idea how to do a population model to show the little girl that she'd exceeded permissible levels of exploitation and, even if I could have, it wouldn't have satisfied me. I wanted to say more. So I fell silent, stymied.

As in my conversation with the little girl, environmentalists often begin by implying that there is something morally wrong in the systematic exploitation of nature, something that cannot be fully expressed in the lan-

guage of scientific resource management and maximum sustainable yields. When the heat is on, however, they retreat to the solid ground of economic arguments, as I did when I tried the "How-many-do-you-need?" routine.

Environmentalists face two crises, one external and one internal. Against outsiders, they must continually defend their hard-won successes and urge new reforms against advocates of commercial interests who insist that environmental legislation ought never to disrupt "economic efficiency." Examples abound. The Reagan Administration set out, almost immediately after taking office, to invalidate all regulations, environmental and otherwise, that could not be shown, through a benefit-cost analysis, to promote economic efficiency. After decades of trying, environmentalists intent upon saving the Chesapeake Bay from progressive deterioration of water quality caused by industrial dumping and run-off from farmers' fields and subdivision yards achieved a regional plan for protecting the bay. Now they are fighting innumerable battles on a local level as development interests in individual communities pressure local governments to implement the plan by fleshing it out with maximally lenient local land-use plans.

While these external challenges command the attention of environmentalists, a theoretical crisis, in language and worldviews, causes paralysis and miscommunication within the movement: There has emerged within the movement no single, coherent consensus regarding positive values, no widely shared vision of a future and better world in which human populations live in harmony with the natural world they inhabit.

The environmentalists' dilemma, which is primarily a dilemma in ultimate values, results in inarticulation when environmentalists discuss, explain, and justify their policies. To the extent that utilitarian and more preservationist approaches are seen as exclusive choices—as *opposed* rather than complementary values—it follows that I must choose between two inadequate languages to express my indignation. Neither the language of biocentric moralism nor the language of utilitarianism was adequate to explain and justify my view that the little girl should put most of the sand dollars back.

Historically, it has been useful to speak of two divisions of the environmental movement, "conservationists" and "preservationists," because some environmentalists have faced this dilemma squarely and have opted for one horn of it or the other. Most conservationists see natural ecosystems and other species as resources and are concerned mainly with the wise use of them. Finding its philosophical roots in the ideas of Gifford Pinchot, first official forester of the United States, this group judges all questions according to the criterion of the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run. The members of this faction, who are often trained as professional resource managers, have usually exerted their influence through control of governmental agencies such as the Forest Service and the Bureau of Reclamation. These environmentalists apparently diverge from the value system of their more commercially concerned opponents in industry only in insisting that costs and benefits of development and exploitative projects be computed over longer frames of time. Conservationism, or wise-use environmentalism, emphasizes avoidance of waste in the present pursuit of economic well-being. Thus, while natural ecosystems and other species are resources to be used wisely, they are very definitely to be *used* for human purposes. Pinchot once said, "The first great fact about conservation is that it stands for development. . . . [Its] first principle is the use of the natural resources now existing on this continent for the benefit of the people who live here now."[2]

Conservationists, especially those who are trained in resource management and those who work in government resource agencies, have generally applied concepts and a value system that tend toward economic reductionism, which interprets values as individual preferences expressed in free markets. The value of a sand dollar, on this view, is what someone is willing to pay for it. This reductionistic approach has led to a long-standing collaboration of conservationists with economists and to a tendency to pose questions in quantified terms in which information on resource use and its consequences can be aggregated and presented in dollar terms.

Opposed to this group is another, often called "preservationists," which is committed to protecting large areas of the landscape from alteration. This faction derives its spirit and mandate from John Muir, who was the first president of the Sierra Club (in 1892). Muir saw his quest to preserve nature as a moral one. He rejected or reinterpreted the Christian views of monotheism and the Judaeo-Christian idea that nature exists for the sake of humans, arguing that the dogma "that the world was made especially for the uses of men" was the fundamental error of the age, and that "Every animal, plant, and crystal controverts it in the plainest terms." Muir railed against human arrogance that judges nature only according to human values:

> How narrow we selfish, conceited creatures are in our sympathies! how blind to the rights of our fellow mortals! Though alligators, snakes, etc., naturally repel us, they are not mysterious evils. They . . . are part of God's family, unfallen, undepraved, and cared for with the same species of tenderness and love as is bestowed on angels in heaven or saints on earth.[3]

Initially, Pinchot, Muir, and their disparate groups of followers worked together in opposition to the timber barons and other wasteful exploiters of natural resources. Both of these leaders, especially Pinchot, can today be thanked for creating the immense National Forest system. But Muir

and Pinchot quarreled over grazing in the national forest preserves, and opposed each other bitterly over the plan to dam Hetch Hetchy, a beautiful canyon in Yosemite National Park. Pinchot allied himself with the developers: "As to my attitude regarding the proposed use of Hetch Hetchy by the city of San Francisco . . . I am fully persuaded that . . . the injury . . . [caused] by substituting a lake for the present swampy floor of the valley . . . is altogether unimportant compared with the benefits to be derived from its use as a reservoir."[4]

Muir stated the case for preservation: "These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar."[5] "Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man."[6] Muir's pantheism implied that humans exist as part of a great spiritual whole. We worship that whole, the creator and sustainer of us all (which Muir identified with nature itself), he thought, by preserving and studying the most spectacular and beautiful areas as shrines. But Muir's heretical theological reasoning was never made explicit in his public writings. Indeed, he was referred to as a "man of God" by his contemporaries, and he appealed effectively to the powerful tradition in American protestantism, traceable to Johnathan Edwards, that saw nature as God's messenger to humans.

With scientifically trained professional conservationists lined up against Muir over Hetch Hetchy, he appealed to the public. In reviewing the revised edition of Muir's *Our National Parks* in 1909, the *New York Times* declared: "It is the sentimentalist like Mr. Muir who will rouse the people rather than the materialist."[7] And rouse them he did. Against all odds, Muir and his band of amateur preservationists held up the Hetch Hetchy Project for more than a decade. But when Woodrow Wilson took office and swung his weight in favor of the dam, the bill was forced through Congress by a narrow margin. The despondent Muir died shortly thereafter.[8] But his flaming rhetoric had created a powerful force of *moralism* in American environmentalism. That force has, from time to time, come to the fore as a political power, as when the Sierra Club, under the radicalized leadership of David Brower in the 1950s, succeeded in quashing a proposed dam in Dinosaur National Monument.

When I asked environmentalists what they thought was meant by the terms "conservationist" and "preservationist" today, most of them said the terms were meaningless or that the old terms have deteriorated into pejoratives, with "preservationist" being an epithet for someone who wants to "lock up" resources, and "conservationist" referring to a person who has demonstrated too great a willingness to compromise with economic interests. Since there seems to be a real question whether these terms are meaningful and useful today, I will use them sparingly and usually in historical contexts.

For the purposes of this book, however, I think it best to question the continuing usefulness of categorizing environmentalists as *two exclusive groups*. Here, Economic Aggregators and Moralists will mainly appear as ideal arguers. They are idealized spokespersons who have "bought into" one worldview or the other. A worldview will be considered as a constellation of concepts, values, and axioms that shape the world its proponents encounter. We can count on idealized spokespersons to give the best account they can, with their respective worldviews, of any given situation. It is best to think of Aggregators and Moralists in this way, as idealized arguers, because we can then leave open the question of whether most environmentalists, in their day-to-day activities, exclusively employ one or the other of these worldviews. Using this ploy, we can allow real individuals to be the spokespersons for Aggregators or Moralists in specific situations, without presupposing that environmentalists are always and permanently arrayed in two exclusive camps.

Muir's and Pinchot's respective successors in the modern environmental movement have more recently cooperated by maintaining an uneasy coalition. In general the environmental movement achieves its greatest unity when confronted with a sustained attack on environmental policies and programs, such as the one mounted by the President and his Secretary of the Interior James Watt in the early years of the Reagan presidency. The divergent elements also unify to defend specific resources and natural areas against threats of environmental degradation. In spite of these broad agreements on policy, however, the environmental movement still faces a dilemma: There has emerged within the movement no shared, positive understanding of the human relationship to the natural world; consequently, environmentalists lack a consensually accepted set of ideals and values. They therefore ricochet back and forth between two apparently exclusive worldviews and sets of value assumptions.

THE CHOICE between the legacies of Muir and Pinchot also presents itself to the environmentalist as a political dilemma: To follow Muir and grant rights to rattlesnakes is to embrace a radical ideal, one that appeals deeply to a small but committed minority that rejects the thoroughgoing anthropocentrism of our Judaeo-Christian tradition. This ideal, which elevates all nature to moral standing, calls into question the very idea motivating the American faith in Adam Smith's invisible hand, the idea that the path of economic development should be guided by a free market. Since nature has no dollars to spend, its voice cannot be heard in a marketplace; on any

easily intelligible theory of the rights of rattlesnakes, these rights will limit the free choices of industrialists and consumers to buy and sell, to exploit and make profits. Embracing rights for rattlesnakes therefore damns the environmentalists, at least until there are fundamental changes in the value system of mainstream American society, to appealing to a very small audience of quacks and cranks, who are out of step with the economic values of our period of history.

But to follow Pinchot, to forget Muir's impassioned moral rhetoric, reduces environmentalists to a role as one more interest group, fighting for clean air, for clean water, for protection of the National Parks. These activities appear, politically, as no more than spirited support for strongly felt preferences. Clean air must be "balanced" against jobs and economic growth, and if consumers want clean air, they must be willing to pay for it in forgone jobs and dividends. On this side of the dilemma, environmentalists have lots of company. Everywhere there are interest groups shouting to protect their piece of a limited economic pie, and environmentalists are in danger of being entirely drowned out in the frantic melee, as everyone from profiteers to moral zealots attempts to focus governmental resources on social problems both real and imagined.

The environmentalists' dilemma, then, manifests itself in a number of ways. Among those who have opted for one or the other horn of the dilemma, it manifests itself in factionalism and distrust of those perceived to have joined the other camp. Other environmentalists remain uncommitted and uneasily embody both factions as internal personnae. The resulting theoretical schizophrenia can paralyze us with inarticulation and humble us in a debate with an eight-year-old in the sand dollar business.

The dilemma is especially evident in accounts of, and commentaries on, the progress of environmentalism. Historians, social scientists, and philosophers who have discussed the movement have been quick to see dichotomies and polarities. For example, the historian Stephen Fox emphasizes that Pinchot derived his strength from professionals, scientific forest managers and bureaucrats who made their living in exploiting or regulating resource use, while Muir drew upon the enthusiasm of amateurs motivated by an almost-religious zeal for the preservation of nature. Political scientist Lester Milbrath notes that environmentalism is a value-oriented reform movement but insists that "we must make a distinction between environmentalists who wish to retain the present socio-economic-political system and those who wish to drastically change it."[9] Philosophers who have discussed environmental values have concentrated almost exclusively on the dichotomy between anthropocentric (human-related) values and biocentric (nature-oriented) values.[10]

While these dichotomies do not all draw precisely the same distinction, they emphasize the polarization of environmentalists and suggest that the polarization derives from essential differences regarding values. For better or worse, these diverse but related dichotomies were given a generic characterization by Arne Naess when he distinguished a "shallow" from a "deep" ecology movement.[11] Naess's categories generally serve to characterize clusters of individuals who largely fit the Pinchot/conservationist mold and the Muir/preservationist mold, respectively. We must leave it an open question whether this dichotomy corresponds directly to our separation of Moralists and Aggregators. When pressed for an essential difference marking this generic distinction, Naess and his followers emphasize that shallow ecologists retain the anthropocentric view that the natural world exists as resources for the use of humans, while deep ecologists adopt the biocentric view that nature, as well as man, has intrinsic value and that it should be preserved for its own sake.

While Naess's provocative and tendentious characterization of conservationists as "shallow" environmentalists represents an extreme example, it is generally true that academic and social commentary on the environmental movement has accepted and even reinforced the dilemma and the deep polarities it evokes. Historical and sociological accounts that emphasize the different training and backgrounds of conservationists and preservationists, as well as philosophical analyses that concentrate on the dichotomy between anthropocentric and biocentric value systems, conspire to reinforce these polarities. This emphasis on deep underlying differences in values forces us to wonder whether the environmental movement is a "movement" after all. If the individuals and groups often referred to as "environmentalists" embrace no common values, then why assume that the environmental movement has a true and lasting identity? If left unchallenged, these suspicions undermine the task at hand—to understand a movement. Presumably, it is a movement *toward something*. To emphasize only the disparity of visions pursued by the various contributing factions is, in effect, to deny that environmentalism is a movement at all.

The purpose of this book is to challenge the suggestion that environmentalists hold no common ground, and the associated suggestion that environmentalists represent at best a shifting coalition of interest groups. That suggestion is implicit in the persistent emphasis, among historians and commentators, on the competing worldviews and value frameworks that constitute the vocabularies in which environmentalists argue their political case. According to the thesis of this book, those who see only chaos and confusion, internal disputes and dissensions, and those who deny that environmentalism is a unified social movement, are looking in the wrong place for the unity of environmentalism. Environmentalists, I am admitting at the outset, have not accepted a common and shared worldview, and those

who look for unity in the explanations and rhetoric of environmentalists will be disappointed.

I will pursue a different strategy and look first for the common ground, the shared policy goals and objectives that might characterize the unity of environmentalists. To support this strategy, I will employ a useful, if somewhat arbitrarily drawn, distinction between *values* and *objectives*. An objective will be understood as some concrete goal such as a change in policy or the designation of a particular area as a wilderness preserve. Values will be understood more abstractly as the basis for an estimation of worth, which can serve as a justification and explanation for more concrete objectives. Thus two environmentalists might work together to achieve the objective of prohibiting strip mining in a wilderness area, while justifying their activities by appeal to quite different values. One of them might, for example, value the wilderness area as sacred, while the other wishes to perpetuate its recreational value for the use of the community. Differences in value may, therefore, lead to shifting coalitions regarding objectives; once strip mining is effectively prohibited, supporters of recreational values may find themselves allied with the local Chamber of Commerce in supporting a larger parking lot for access to the wilderness, while their former ally opposes both, insisting that ease of access will cheapen and degrade the sacred place.

Providing environmentalists can usually agree on what to do, a diversity of value concerns need not debilitate the movement. Indeed, freedom to appeal to a variety of value systems may ultimately prove the greatest strength of the movement, allowing environmentalists to appeal to the broadest spectrum of American voters.[12] Nevertheless, it is tempting to assume that one side or the other in the debate between Moralists and Aggregators is correct, and that there are some facts or theoretical arguments that will decisively vindicate one worldview or the other as expressing the correct vision to guide environmental policy. Most philosophers who have written on environmental ethics adopt this assumption, and have therefore debated the truth of "nonanthropocentrism," the view that nonhuman elements of nature have value independent of human values. Scientists, on the other hand, adopt the same assumption that we must choose between moralism and aggregationism, and expect that more scientific data and more sophisticated theories will determine what our approach should be.

The strategy of this book will be to think about environmentalism as a force in public policy first and to examine philosophical questions in passing, reflecting on questions of concepts, logic, and values and introducing ideas from philosophy only as they are necessary to understand policy debates, letting various ideal arguers—Aggregators, Moralists, and occasionally others—develop the best case they can for various policies and then examining their arguments. The book has three major sections. In Part I we will examine, in very broad historical terms, the first one hundred years of interactions of Aggregators and Moralists in the search for an environmental policy, a history that can be considered to have culminated in Earth Day 1970. Part II will examine current goals and beliefs of environmentalists in four broad policy areas: resource use, pollution control, protection of biodiversity, and land use policy. Based on the gradually developed philosophical ideas that have proved useful in discussing policy disputes in these areas, we will take a broad look at large-scale philosophical issues in the final part.

The most important consequence of this policy-oriented approach, and the rough distinction we have drawn between policies and the ideas that justify them, is that we will not miss examples where environmentalists pursue a policy by consensus in the policy arena, even while discussing and supporting these policies in quite different frameworks of concepts and values.[13] Another consequence of the approach is to hold open, throughout the inquiry, the possibility of a pluralistic integration of environmental values rather than an all-or-nothing decision between the Aggregators and the Moralists. It may be possible, given this approach, to escape the excruciating dilemma and construct an integrated approach to valuing the natural world.