

The Forgotten Environment

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The environment today is viewed by many as having no end. It is an unlimited resource which can be enslaved and used indefinitely. It is this ignorance of nature's end that brings about an ignorance of nature's value. Just as it is death which brings meaning to life, so it is with nature. An infinite life, as is said by British philosopher, Bernard Williams, is meaningless and intolerable (Williams 1973). It has no value because it has no end, but is only cherished when its limitedness is acknowledged. In the same way, nature's believed infinitude results in its being undervalued and forgotten. *I will argue that the dichotomy between humanity and nature perpetuates a forgotten environment.* This will be done by firstly arguing for the existing prevalence of humanity's distance from nature, before entering into its potentially harmful anthropocentric tendencies, and lastly I will discuss what nature is, as well as humanity's perspective on nature.

In what ways has humanity become distanced from a finite nature?

As humanity begins to perceive nature as having an infinite quality, or simply as a foreign being, nature's presence in our lives begins to be forgotten. Even in our not-so-distant past, nature was an everyday part of who we were. If our crops did well, we did well. If a species went extinct, our whole ecosystem felt it. It was our place of solace that allowed for meaningful experiences beyond ourselves, whether it be in cultural rituals or medicinal remedies. Nature was entrenched in our innermost beings because on it we were so directly dependent. Over time, and specifically during the industrial revolution, we began to see nature in its abundance. But just as is true of a rare commodity being constantly thought of, sought out, and cherished, it is true that an unlimited resource is easily overlooked and forgotten. This is the case with our environment. This section will argue that our environment has been forgotten because of our distanced belief of its infinite resources, infinite time, as well as a lack of direct interaction with the environment.

Resources

Based on the expected standard of living today — that which we believe is merited to us — resources have been able to sustain the luxurious lives we feel we have the right to live out. Thus far, because our needs have been met (and exceeded) in the western world, it is expected that everywhere else in the world will be able to acquire and use the resources necessary to provide the same quality of life. This perceived right to luxury clouds our knowledge of reality — that our planet's carrying capacity is already being reached (Rees 2002). Even 200 years ago, the earth offered an abundance of resources to those who stewarded its land. With such a small population of less than one billion, the idea that each individual should be able to live in luxury was not so far off (Roser 2013). Our problem today is the belief that the same perceived rights should be given to the 7.5 billion individuals on the planet. While our planet obviously cannot continue to support the lives of so many in such a qualitative way, it is expected — and thus believed — to do so, and its finitude forgotten (Hardin 1991).

Time

Although awareness of climate change and its harmful effects to our environment are present, we see the issues as affecting the *future* generations, and not our own. We are distanced from the environment through time. While immediate threats are generally not forgotten, the impending doom of our planet, which is thought to be far in the future, is placed on the back-burner of our minds; as we allow our focus to reside on the seemingly justified distractions of our current quality of life, the reality of our planet's time limit is blurred. Robert B. Gibson has focused on this temporal distancing and has coined the term 'intergenerational equity' (2016). His idea is that in order to create a sustainable world for both our generation, and the future, we must 'build the integrity of socio-ecological systems, maintaining the diversity, accountability, ... and other qualities required for long-term adaptive adjustment' (Gibson 2016). So though this socio-ecological system must be brought to light in order to create a sustainable future, we must first acquire a sense of forward thinking, in addition to realizing our planet's finite being and its inability to continue to provide such quality to such a magnitude.

Regardless, it seems that we have tricked ourselves into believing that we may continue to comfortably live on without change, as there is enough of a time gap to not have climate change be a problem for today.

A decline in human-nature interactions

The way most of us live today not only views nature as an infinite resource with infinite life (thereby barely viewing it at all), but it also entirely ignores nature. In our economy, it is the companies, not the public, which work with (or perhaps against) nature to acquire our goods and services. The public is able to buy their goods and services from a company rather than acquiring it themselves. They do not see the environment, but instead are closed off to it. For instance, imagine if the public was told that from now on, the only way they were able to eat beef was if they raised the cattle and slaughtered them themselves. There is no doubt that a major portion of beef-consumers would cease to eat it. Our distance from the environment, even with the food we eat, is perpetuated by the middle man of companies, and it has caused us to forget that the environment is actually involved in our everyday life. Further, even the majority of the companies do not interact with the environment. It is only the select ground workers which have this experience, whereas those higher up in the business (and generally those with power) are likely to interact with the environment in the same way the public might. Instead, the majority of us begin to view our food through a monetary filter, also known as financialization. Jennifer Clapp, a Canada Research Chair of Global Food Security and Sustainability, believes that “financialization fosters new forms of distancing, in particular through abstraction of food from its physical to a financial form” (Clapp 2014). So while we not only distance ourselves from nature through distancing ourselves from the animal-to-food-process itself, but also through perceiving it solely as a monetary factor. It is through this cycle that we perpetuate the forgotten environment.

How might anthropocentrism harm our environment?

Humanity understandably favours and prioritizes humanity, and while this needn't have lasting problems or effects, the focus on humanity, as well as its choice to ignore nature can result in the mistreatment of our environment.

Prioritizing human interaction

Humanity's desire is to perpetuate itself into the next generation in both high quantity and quality. Often this attitude is labelled as being anti-Deep Ecology Movement. The DEM is a platform of eight premises, initiated by Arne Naess, which if followed would cause one to mindfully protect the environment because one recognizes the intrinsic worth and value of its life (1986). Often, the favouritism of one species over another is confused with a rejection of the DEM. This favouritism, however, does not necessarily indicate a refusal to regard the intrinsic value of other life; instead, it simply regards the intrinsic life of humans as having more value than that of other species. I am confident that the same goes for species of every other kind because it is a fundamental property of organism evolution by natural selection. Thus, I believe that this favouritism of humanity is not necessarily wrong according to the deep ecologist movement. More specifically, when exploring the first three points of the DEM, we see: *1) The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves. These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes. 2) Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves. 3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs* (Naess 1986). In believing that humans are the most important species, or caring most for them, one is not going against any of these points. The individual is still able to believe that human and nonhuman life have intrinsic value, independent of use, that the diversity of a species is valuable, and that humans do not have a right to reduce this diversity simply for the sake of it. However, it is very clear that issues may arise depending on how human favouritism is implemented,

and can lead to a harmful devaluing or exploitation of other life. Specifically, it is when that perceived value of other species is lost entirely that prioritizing humanity can lead to devastating effects.

The Choice to Ignore

While nature is everywhere, only a select few within humanity choose to interact with it out of their own volition. Still, as evident as nature is, we do not speak its language. A problem or complaint can easily be voiced, heard, and solved, for those with a voice. However, it is only from speaking up about a problem that a solution can be proposed. In this sense, it is only humans that are able to find solutions. The problem with human-nature interactions are that we choose to be deaf to how our actions are harming the environment. We do not understand the gravity of seeing the death of an organism or the extinction of a species. Instead, we choose to be blind and deaf to the things of nature because to ignore the problem is much easier than attempting to fix the problem — that is, of course, unless the problem infringes upon what we value. Humanity has chosen to ignore nature instead of attempting mutualism and companionship with the environment, and as a result, it and its complications have become forgotten.

What is Nature?

Dehumanizing nature (policy & rights)

In a human society, the individual is protected and given rights. These come through laws and policies such as an individual's right to live, their rights to necessities, and their right to have another reprimanded through the justice system if their rights are infringed upon. While this is the case for humans, nature seems to be given the short end of the stick. Time and time again we have separated ourselves from nature and made it to be lesser than humans, considering it not even worthy of keeping true to the policies put in place to ensure its preservation. Take for example the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. While the agreement is legally binding, in June 2017, the United States pulled out with the intention of either staying out, or renegotiating the agreement on their terms (Mindock 2017). The

controversy here is that there is no straightforward way to reprimand the U.S. for their actions, as they have waited the one year. A loop hole to the four year withdrawal-wait is to first back out of the 1992 UN treaty governing global climate talks. If a country does this, they are free to pull out of the Paris Agreement after just one year (McBride 2017). However, without withdrawing from this treaty, they are still legally bound to the Paris Agreement for four years, at which time they can choose to withdraw (McBride 2017). While the U.S. could be taken to international court if they choose to withdraw before permissible, there is no precedent of a nation bringing another nation to court for such a thing.

In comparison, were an individual or company in a similar situation in which one party chose to back out of an agreement prematurely, that individual could easily be taken to court and the wrong made right. Our environment, on the other hand, is left with no protection of the law. It is obvious that our willingness to commit to the rights given to our environment are minute in comparison to that which is provided to humanity.

Does nature still exist?

The environment today is viewed almost explicitly as a source of monetary value. Masses of land are owned in order to grow monocultures to sell crops, or to cut down trees for various reasons. Even protected parks are often protected as a tourist trap, through which the park can increase their financial wellbeing. So what is nature anymore? Where does it exist? Before, it was that nature is the wilderness and has to be protected so we could retreat into it and remember who we are as humans. Even those protected places are affected by climate change and are no longer the same. We have touched almost every nook and cranny of the world. Bill McKibben, in his book *The End of Nature*, even claims that nature as we know it has ended. We have assimilated the outdoor world with the indoor world (McKibben 1989). Not only has climate change affected our environment, but the presence of humans has become so overwhelming that we have lost the ability to get lost in nature, but are now forced to think about humanity's domination, whether that be through our cellular devices, our laptops, or even as McKibben recounts, the sound of a chainsaw while walking through the forest.

This distinct dichotomy between nature and humanity is not new, but instead it has been present since the dawn of the human species. In the past it was nature that was the threat. It could flood our homes, dry up our crops, or bring unbearable heat waves or lethal cold fronts. Today, we've done just the same to our environment and, in a way, stripped it of its nature. So does nature exist today? Perhaps because nature as it is supposed to be is no longer present, humanity has distanced itself from this foreign mimic — or at least from the little that is left.

Challenge Message

Humans today have allowed for their perception of an infinite, unknown environment, as well as their lifestyle — focused primarily on themselves — to distance themselves from nature. While humanity's desire to prosper themselves could ideally coincide with a DEM mindset and lead to a sustainable planet, it is humanity's skewed and forgotten perception of nature which has resulted in a forgotten environment, and the maltreatment of our planet, thus preventing the development of a sustainable world. Were we to acknowledge nature's finitude, how we treat and perceive our environment would change. It would cause us to prioritize the environment and make the most of what we have while we still have it. Our nature is fragile, and it is only through recognizing its end that we may remember its life and realize its value.

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