

On the Meanings of "Nature"

by CALVIN W. STILLMAN, *Professor of Environmental Resources Cook College, Rutgers - The State University, New Brunswick, N.J.*

ABSTRACT. All peoples known to science have a concept of "nature" which forms part of the world-view of the culture. The relative importance of "nature" differs among cultures. In our own Western culture, ideas of "nature" are mentioned from the earliest written records, and are related to concepts of the autonomous individual and of hierarchy and order. At certain times these concepts have had particular usefulness in achievement of personal emotional balance. These values should be explored and defined, that they may be made more widely available.

CONCERN WITH ALL that is around us is as old as man's humanity. Whether we call it "nature", or "City Hall", or "environment", or the system", or just "the way it is", each of us must make up our own mind first on the structure of all that is "out there", and second, on what each of us can do about it.

Robert Redfield (1962) pointed out that each culture has a world-view that deals with the proper relations of Man, Nature, and God. The world-view of his culture helps each individual comprehend the reality he sees, his potentials for action, and his liabilities to injury. Cultures differ widely in their emphasis upon Man, God, or Nature, as Redfield told us. This difference is between peoples, over time, and within social groupings such as that of the United States.

Many books have been published in the last decade that profess to explain Man-Environment relations. Fewer books have appeared that are as clearly devoted to Man-God relations, though a century or so ago this situation was reversed. Fewest books of all relate Nature to God, though this may be the strongest single affinity in the minds of men. Hidden here are the themes of hierarchy, propriety, and status.

Margaret Mead told our group that differences between peoples of the world are never qualitative; they are only quantitative.

This is very true of ideas of nature. All peoples of the world have them, and have had them as far back as we can find records. For certain peoples at certain times, nature has been a major esthetic and emotional resource, under one name or another. For even longer periods this esthetic value has been hard to find. Right now the value is in the ascendant, and this paper is an attempt to take a good look at it.

Enthusiasm for the values to be found in nature underlies the existence of this symposium. The fact of contemporaneity will be discussed later; the enthusiasm among intellectuals I attribute to the discovery by disciplined minds of new areas for release and exploration. Just as the anthropologists discovered Freud 30 years ago, now physicists, lawyers, and others with rigorously trained minds are discovering the beauties of nature as seen through romantic poetry, and finding transcendental uses of the notion of ecology. The anthropologists used their broadened perspectives to deepen their understandings of people; they incorporated their new tools into their major undertaking. All too few of the recent converts to the beauties of nature have internalized their new asset into a strengthened ability to get on with their jobs. These enthusiasts have called to us all to jump in and enjoy the water; they have not yet emerged from the experience, refreshed and ready to

proceed. Wordsworth did not stop in midstream. Neither did Emerson, nor Thoreau.

We can look for ideas of nature back through time, and around the world. Brian Sutton-Smith has told us that children's play in the contemporary world differs in character with latitude; that play in the tropics is consistently different from play in the temperate zones. I have found similarly a profound difference in attitude toward nature (as we usually define the term) between the tropics and the homelands of peoples who originated in northern temperate zones (this includes, of course, all lands in the southern temperate zone; all are controlled by Europeans).

I find attitudes toward nature in Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu cultures associated with those of the tropics. I find North-South a far more useful dichotomy to explain such cultural differences than East-West. With the exception of a few residual arboreta and preserves left over from the days of colonialism, there are no evidences of concern with nature in South Asia, North or Central Africa, Indonesia, or Oceania.

NATURE IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

Nature is a matter of concern throughout our Western tradition. Nature appears also in the parallel tradition of Eastern Asia, but its lesser importance there I relate to the parallel lesser tradition of the individual.

Among the oldest uses of natural symbols are the notions of the tree, and of open space. Both of these are important in the Gilgamesh Epic of the Seventh Century B.C. (*Heidel 1949*), a tale of intensely human problems. Events and situations from this epic turn up in the Hebrews' Pentateuch of some centuries later.

In the Old Testament generally the world-view presents a triad of Man, God, and Nature distorted severely in favor of God. The triangle is long and thin; God is by far the most important vector. Natural environment enters as harsh wilderness, punctuated by oases and by the agricultural virtues of the Promised Land. The early Hebrews led a harsh life; their survival depended upon their ability to wring sustenance from a comparatively barren land, and to defend themselves from hostile neighbors. From the Hebrews we inherit their

concept of the individual, derived in part from their contact with the Egyptians of the XVIIIth Dynasty, and their concept of life under law, derived in part from their contacts with the Babylonians. From those days to this day, Western concepts of nature have been indissoluble from Western concepts of individual autonomy.

The Hebrews gave little thought to their environment as such, but they were very concerned about pollution. Here we see how an idea may seem to relate to one thing, for instance nature, but that on examination it relates far more powerfully to something else. Mary Douglas (1966) tells us that the dietary laws had nothing to do with sanitation or with public health, but everything to do with the Hebrew concern with order; with keeping everything in its proper place, according to the laws of God.

The Greeks saw things more cheerfully. They were relaxed enough to enjoy beauty, to talk about it, and to find it in natural situations. They enjoyed high places. As Mediterranean traders, the Greeks were very affected by the world's urbanization crisis of the fifth century B.C. (*McNeill 1963*). Local folk societies were thrown together into larger comities. Peoples came into contact with peoples. Urban centers grew. New ways of life, new ethical systems, and new religions were called for. Greek writers of the day mentioned problems of exhaustible resources, of soil erosion, of the virtues of country life and the evils of city life. Greeks wrote of the general decline of affairs from a wonderful Golden Age of the recent past. (*Glacken 1967*). In fact, the Greeks, 25 centuries ago touched every basic theme of the environmental movement of our time.

The Greeks did more: they celebrated beauty in nature. They wrote pastoral poetry. They struggled with pragmatic explanations of reality as they saw it; they laid the basis for empirical science. Their travelers' reports enabled their geographers to come up with environmental explanations of cultural differences, a notion that bobs up again in Montesquieu (1966) and in certain odd corners of American social science (*Klausner 1971*).

Mainland wars have destroyed most of the East Asian record for these early years. There are traditions, many substantiated by recent archeological digs, but the major vector is the durable bronzes that bring us evidence of Asian

interest in animals in art (*Reischauer and Fairbank 1960; Bunker, Chatwin, and Farkas, 1970*).

The Romans are remembered for having constructed a political organization so powerful that its effects last to this day. Only the contemporary Han Empire of China has so affected subsequent history. Neither of these power groups showed much official interest in esthetic values, in nature or in anything else. In the East Asian tradition, culture flowered only in periods of dynastic decline. This is evident in China and in Japan. The great landscape traditions of Chinese paintings were related to the periods between effective tyrannies, when Taoist and Buddhist elements of the culture were allowed to surface.

Central Asian disturbances and the associated population movements led to the dissolution of the Roman Empire in the first centuries of the Christian era, but the imperial Church did its best to hold things together. It did very well indeed, for a millenium. The jealous God of the Hebrews was represented by the jealous hierarchy of the Church devoted to His son, in the parlous times of the Middle Ages. Worship in none but the approved manner was permissible. St. Anselm in the 12th century "rated it dangerous to sit in a garden where there are roses to satisfy the senses of sight and smell, and songs that stories to please the ears." (*Clark 1956*)

There were leaks in the capsule within which the Roman church attempted to confine all thought.

One leak was the folk tradition of peoples long since conquered by Roman legions, living on under the intellectual domination of the Roman church. People had a feeling for living things; they sought ways of expressing this in their lives. Artists sought to express these feelings within the strict constraints of the iconography of Church art. An analogy was the persistence of folksong, and its insertion into the entr'actes of medieval morality plays, the major text always sung in the classical meterless *organum* of sacerdotal music. This pressure is seen in the stories of Saint Francis of Assisi (*Armstrong 1973*), and the insertion of landscape into the backgrounds of paintings of the Madonna. Little leaves and even domestic animals appear in the carved stones of the later cathedrals, particularly too far up for easy inspection by episcopal authorities.

Another leak was the influence of Persian art-emphasizing the garden as nature made safe and beautiful for man. This came to Europe through the commercial contacts with the Islamic world facilitated by the Crusades, and through Jews who accompanied the Moors to Iberia, and who independently established trading posts up the Danube and down the Rhine.

Finally, and perhaps least explored by scholars, was the contribution of the fearsome Norsemen who ravaged Northern Europe till blocked in the ninth century. These invaders promptly turned from raiding to trading. Their area of impact is today's Protestant Europe. Rosalie and Murray Wax (*1965*) tell us that the Vikings were ever curious about things of the natural world. These they never confused with mysticism. The Vikings never knew feudalism, and accepted Christianity only very late, and then on their own terms.

The Roman Church provided its communicants with many essentials of a happy life. Among these were an understanding of one's personal place in the order of things. Living and non-living things of the perceived environment were seen to be in an order essentially supportive. God may have been terrible and distant as He was for the Hebrews, but He had many delegates on earth to provide solace and guidance.

The Reformation in Northern Europe ripped away many emotional supports; some of the effects became apparent only years later. In England, dissatisfaction with Christianity led to the worship of nature, (*Clark 1969*). Nature alone can never be functional as a religion, however, since it contains no ethical system. In Germany Goethe wrote in 1815, "The Protestants feel a void; they want to create a new mysticism." (*Schenk 1969*)

In the England of this time we have Wordsworth writing poetry; Constable painting. Goethe studied botany, made excellent drawings of his specimens, wrote his great essay "Nature", and poetry besides. The Age of Romanticism was largely one of a search for new meanings. The Industrial Revolution was upsetting many settled relationships, and nature became a rediscovered recourse. All this had happened before, and would happen again.

NATURE IN AMERICA

Early settlers in Massachusetts Bay Colony practiced an Old Testament christianity in which God was retributive, Manville, and Nature a howling wilderness. Perry Miller (1967) has described the scene. Preservation of nature, so familiar in New England now, then implied preserving in his proper social place each member of the community.

The liberating forces of a cash economy, escape to the frontier, and the Enlightenment—however one wishes to rank them—made possible a Hellenic approach to nature in the 18th century. This is first visible among the aristocracies of Philadelphia and of northern Virginia.

The Bartrams established their arboretum on the Schuylkill (*Cruikshank* 1961). Benjamin Franklin established the American Philosophical Society. Thomas Jefferson conducted experiments on his farm. All such leaders were in constant touch with their fellows in England and on the Continent. When Audubon had some prints ready for sale of his paintings of American birds and animals, he tried first in England, as the better market.

America shared with the Hebrews one natural feature that was important in the myths that help shape character: the frontier. The American transmontane West—largely considered desert—seemed just as forbidding as the wilderness of Paran or Zin. For Americans as for followers of the patriarchs, this wilderness was a challenge to brave men.

Henry Nash Smith (1970) has told us of the tremendous importance in American literature of the Leatherstocking theme: the proud, lonely, self-reliant hunter who strides through the forest and out upon the plains. Smith tells us also of the psychological context: of Cooper's oedipal conflicts, and of his search for a role that would be at once manly and nonconflicting with his father. The ghost of Leatherstocking marches through Western stories, cowboy tales, cops-and-robbers picaresque adventures, down to dime novels and TV serials. This natural setting is less important than the character development that takes place within it. Leo Marx (1964) brings the story down to recent times.

The effect of unfenced pace on American character was not lost on Thomas Jefferson, who wrote (1955) "Those who labor in the earth

are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he had made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." A Hebraic analogy again, but an estimate of their worth gladly accepted by American farmers ever since, and used to justify astonishing Federal solicitude for agrarian welfare.

The economic status of farmers in American society peaked with the Civil War. It was thereafter eroded by economic changes that followed industrialization and, less evidently, by the mechanization of the world's merchant marine. As steam replaced sail, Australian wheat could reach Europe, and Egyptian cotton could reach Liverpool, all more readily than before. American farmers found unexpected allies in their discontent in the silver miners of the Mountain States; their prices were dropping too. Prices must move freely in terms of laissez-faire economic doctrine, but when incomes are affected to the degree that status is shaken, then political repercussions occur. Such was the background of the Populist party late in the 19th century (*Hofstadter* 1955).

The same rapid industrialization of America upset the stability of social order in the older East. First, the basically merchant and professional-oriented aristocracy was thrust aside by the new wealth and power of the manufacturers. These in turn were pressed by the financiers and operators of the end of the 19th century. Each elite clung to the symbols of its status, and each rising class sought to claim these symbols for its own. A bellwether of status was an association with the land: an estate, a farm. Here an aristocrat challenged could repair to sulk—as Jefferson did when out of power—and to complain about the bad manners and the worse ethics of those who had taken his place. Late in the century, some ruffled aristocrats even flirted with the idea of an alliance with the radical farmers—since they, also were attached to "the land" (*Hofstadter* 1955, 1965). Mugwumps, they came to be called. In the process of asserting their interests, these persons first articulated the esthetic values in natural environment for their fellow Americans.

Hays (1959) has told us of the early history of the conservation movement. The term was invented by hydrologic engineers between the Rockies and the Sierras, concerned over the in-

applicability to these dry areas of the settlement limits of the Homestead Act of 1862. These technicians formed an early alliance with Eastern citizens concerned over preservation of natural beauty. Such a topic has always been dangerous in our achievement-oriented society. From the start, American nature-lovers have sought technical cover for their goals. This they found first from the water engineers.

Within a range of a decade or so were founded the Sierra Club, the American Forestry Association, and the Federation of Garden Clubs. Arbor day was instituted. Women's clubs, and the Daughters of the American Revolution, joined in the cause. A young scion of an eastern merchant family traveled to Europe to study scientific forestry. His name was Gifford Pinchot.

The alliance of technicians and esthetes could not long hold together. The split usually is dated back to the Hetch-Hetchy controversy in California, which rent the friendship of John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. For Muir the preservation of natural beauty was paramount; for Pinchot, more mundane uses of natural resources were to be included in any calculation of total public interest.

The proclivity to hide esthetic sensitivity in practical, if not scientific, arguments has appeared recently in the arguments set forth by the Sierra Club against Forest Service policies on clearcutting.

Recourse to nature has been with us as an established value since the late 19th century. Its spokesmen have been the traditional groups—the Audubon Society, the American Forestry Association, the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society. At least twice, in the years since, there have been upsurges of interest in this area of feeling. Each was associated with a period of social stress. Each spawned its organizations, a few of which continue.

During the New Deal the United States faced unprecedented human problems, among them widespread rural distress. By a shift of emphasis perhaps facilitated by his own country-gentleman status, Franklin Roosevelt was able to transfer much of the attention from rural people to the land they struggled to live on. The Soil Conservation Service, the revitalized programs in the national forests and parks—underscored by the mission of the Civilian Conservation Corps—caught public imagination far less for what they did for people, than for

what they did for “the land”. This could have been one of Franklin Roosevelt's greatest strokes of political skill—but I suspect that it was never intentional. Roy Stryker, Dorothea Lange, Pare Lorentz, and Russell Lord have left beautiful documents of those years. They spread upon the national press many photographs of reclaimed strip-cropped land. The pictures and their associations have lasted much longer than did strip-cropping itself.

The 10 years through which this country has just lived have been remarkable for evidences of concern over “environment”. The period has been remarkable for two reasons: first, for the marked revival of interest in the esthetic values of nature, and second, for the absence of hard data to justify the claims of environmental degradation which have overlain the esthetic consciousness. The major thrust of policy urged upon us by the environmentalists has been, it seems to me, to halt change. We have been asked to preserve—in the name of “ecology”, or history, or pollution—almost anything outside a city's limits and some things within.

These 10 years have been marked by unusually rapid social change. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 set off a major reconsideration of the status of American Negroes; they became “Blacks”, and proud of it. Change in the status of blacks threatened members of many other ethnic minorities. Across the land economic prosperity claims that had never before been actuated: entry to resort areas, expensive restaurants, suburbs, jobs, foreign vacation spots. The environmental movement, I submit, was in large part a reaction of the upper middle class to these social changes. As it subsides, I expect that its leading supporters will shift their allegiance to conservative political organizations.

The Greeks found words for it 25 centuries ago. The pattern seems to be the same throughout the world of Northern cultures: personalities under stress find solace in natural phenomena.

If this hypothesis is valid, I suggest that we refine the tonic and make it available through our schools and other public institutions to all of our citizens. If nature is good, it must offer something to all.

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