

Ecology is a White Man's Problem¹

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Abstract: A synthesis of statements and research is presented on different minority communities, and a response to the statement that “ecology is a white man’s problem” is examined. These characterizations provide insight into why ecology may be perceived as a “white man’s problem.” The common themes are then used to develop several suggested agency responses. These actions can help to make ecology or ecosystem management more relevant to minority communities and in turn foster more widely based acceptance and support.

Ecology is indeed a “white man’s problem” if it primarily benefits white men. A “white man’s” ecology or ecosystem management is a problem in a diverse society. It is a social problem if its solution raises questions of inequity and, through self-interest, divides and excludes classes and “minority groups” in our society. A limited definition of the problem and solution to ecology or ecosystem management problems may be better thought of as: “ecology, the luxury of white men”. If the pressing problem of ecology neglects the poor and those who do not have access to natural areas, then ecology is the concern of only a minority.

In a recent poll, Americans considered hazardous waste, solid waste, and garbage the most important environmental issues (NBC News 1991). Ecosystem management as often defined by the USDA Forest Service may miss the mark because the expressed concerns of ecosystem management are distant from the every day concerns of most Americans, and very far from the minds of most of the poor. National environmental organizations also neglect the needs of minorities and their agenda often conflicts with the interests of the poor. They have few minority group members on their staffs or boards of directors (Steinhart 1991)

At a meeting in southern California, the resource managers estimated that 70 percent or more of their visitors were from minority populations and almost 100 percent were from urban areas (Chavez 1992). In Lincoln Park in Chicago, USDA Forest Service researchers found that park users interviewed identified with 25 different ethnic groups. Conflicts in park setting issues—from discrimination to park equity—can generate anger and physical violence, and result in user displacement or non-use by some groups (Gobster 1992).

To understand the perspective of minority groups that ecology is a “white man’s problem,” characterizations for five major groups were constructed. These characterizations

are a synthesis of past statements of several outspoken representatives from a few major minority group, and a distillation of relevant research. The characterizations were developed as a communication device to bring together many related issues and help create better understanding on the part of the listener. They bring together differing values and world views to expose the thinking behind what seems like unreasonable statements to many mainstream audiences.

This paper offers first-person characterizations of the perspectives of five minority groups responding to the statement that ecology is a “white man’s problem.”

Perspectives of Different Minority Groups

The following five characterizations are generalizations, and do not represent the opinions of all members of the five groups:

A Native American Responds

Ecology is a problem for white men. They worry about losing a snail and yet they have destroyed the Native American cultures and in some cases have committed genocide (Sale 1990). White men still are destroying our culture by deigning to us our own land and our own wildlife use rights. Yet we are still here. Already more than a third of the North American Continent has indigenous people as its majority populations (Anthony 1993). Indigenous people, who number about 300 million today, are the traditional guardians of the law of the Mother Earth, a code of conservation inspired by a universally held belief that the source of all life is the earth, the mother of all creation (Martin 1993). We are not part of and do not wish to be part of the mainstream of America (LaDuke 1993).

An Onondaga clan mother has spoken on the white man’s word ‘nature’: “there is no word for ‘nature’ in my language. In English, it seems to refer to that which is separate from human beings. It is a distinction we don’t recognize.” (Shenandoah 1991). Native people consider themselves part of nature. There’s no separation, like the one that necessarily exists in the industrial mind. The challenge faced by environmentalists is to de-colonize their industrial minds (LaDuke 1993). We still depend on the earth to care for us, we are saddened by the loss of salmon to cool office buildings in the dead cities. We have a relationship with nature, we need our hunting and fishing rights. We need to protect our sacred lands. The Lakota and other plains Indian tribes see the Black Hills as the heart of the earth mother. Large mining corporations see them as a place to mine uranium for electrical power and weapons (Swan 1986).

Your parks and reserves were often our lands. To us, these parks were created for white men, who can still hunt in the parks, who can go into parks and do whatever they want

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(Hanson and Ngankam 1993). You want to take both our land and culture. Your historian, Francis Parkman noted that if the Indian would not “learn the arts of civilization, he and his forest must perish together” (Frontenac 1915) That has been our history with you, why should we think it will change?

Why is it that you try to teach us ecology? Original forest inhabitants and pastoralists had never heard of conservation. But their culture and way of life depended on it, embodied it. Their life meant conservation (Martin 1993). The first Americans were indeed the first ecologists (Martin 1987).

White man places the burden of his ways on us. In the Four Corners we live in the pollution of giant coal burning power plants. The hunting people, the Cree in Northern Quebec, have paid a great price for hydroelectric development in the region. Now, two-thirds of the total Cree population, about 9,800 individuals, have mercury levels that exceed the World Health Organization’s safe limits (Rhaphals 1992). While they struggle to survive, your culture’s animal rights groups fight the traditional animal trapping that their culture depend on. They also have a deep love of animals (Alexander 1993). But, live downwind of nuclear test sites. Fifteen of the 18 Federal research grants for Monitored Retrievable Storage Facilities (for nuclear wastes) went to Indian reservations (LaDuke 1993). Why is this?

An Inner City African American Responds

I wanted to walk through the redwoods, but I was afraid. Maybe this fear was self-imposed or it was fed by hints both subtle and overt? My timidity is colored by, I believe, our experience of racism and sexism in the nation. We fear people along the way (White 1991).

Many of us, due to the historical effects of slavery, learned to hate the land. It was a place of sweat and pain. Then there was the post-slavery segregation, we were limited in our outdoor recreation pursuits. Racial incidents were pervasive during the 1930’s and 1940’s. They would say, put all colored off the beach. I remember as a child being driven away by a group of white children when trying to swim at a local lake. Recreation was not safe for us. Your natural areas were not meant for us (Taylor 1989). Even now discrimination affects 1 in 10 of the minority users at Lincoln Park in Chicago (Gobster 1992).

In the 1960s we were involved in civil rights and perceived the environmental movement as a white thing. When we visited your environmental groups we found that differences in social backgrounds made things difficult and uncomfortable, fellowship was hard and you didn’t seem to care about the community (Taylor 1989). You do not represent our concerns.

There is a lot of talk in this country about recreation, about parks, about playgrounds, and camping sites. If you are rich, if you have got wheels, if you aren’t trapped by shanties or slums, maybe all that talk means something to you. But to the poor people of America, you might as well be talking about trips to the moon (Aberty 1968). If black Americans were as likely as whites to take vacations, the

number of adult vacationers would swell by more than 2.8 million. We go on about half as many overnight trips as whites (Simmons Market Research Bureau 1993). Poor people of color in the cities use up to 35 percent of our income to purchase energy; renters get none of the incentives to weatherize their homes, but we are stuck with big heating bills. We have a hard time affording to go visit these far away places (Anthony 1993).

The Commission for Racial Justice in 1993 found that the single most significant factor in the siting of hazardous-waste facilities nationwide was race. The National Law Journal found that the Environmental Protection Agency took 20 percent longer to identify superfund sites in minority communities, and that polluters of those neighborhoods were fined only half as much as polluters of white communities (Sierra 1993).

For example, in Emelle, Alabama, located in the heart of west Alabama’s economically impoverished “Black Belt,” African-Americans make up more than 90 percent of the rural communities. Emelle is home to Chemical Waste Management’s hazardous waste land fill, the Nation’s largest hazardous waste dump. Public opposition began after residents discovered the new job-generating industry was not a brick factory (as was rumored) but a toxic waste dump (Bullard 1990).

If you want us to support your ecological concerns, then you need to support our values (Taylor 1990).

Our guiding principle is that our work must be done from a grassroots perspective, and it must be multiracial and multicultural; it is a movement for justice. Social justice movements often leave spirituality out, but the environmental justice movement holds spirituality as a very key element. The denial of racism in this country perpetuates it. We should be impatient with justice: if you really want to conserve the earth, then join the environmental justice movement; this is the movement that is going to constrain the destroyers of the earth, because the destroyers of the environment are the destroyers of our communities (Chavis 1993).

A Woman Responds

As a woman and a feminist and ecological radical feminist I am angry. I am mad that the powerful white males and their corporate America has raped Mother Nature. But I have hope that as women rediscover their instinctual selves and their bonds with nature and gain an equal footing with men that we can begin to heal the earth. Rachel Carson thought that loving the world was what science had to be about. That is essential to love the world before you understand it. She knew it would be dangerous to undertake understanding without that love, as well as love’s classy child—awe—and its everyday child responsibility (Paley 1990). We seek a renewed stirring of love for the earth (Newhall 1961).

The control of nature is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man (Carson 1962). Environmental issues are women’s

issues, for women sicken, starve, and die from toxins, droughts, and famines. Their capacity to bear new life is threatened by pollution. They bear the brunt of care for the sick and dying, as well as for the next generation (Starhawk 1990). For ecologists and feminists the earth's house and the human house are habitats to be cherished. The home, where women and children spend much of their time, is no longer a haven (Merchant 1985). Do most ecologists care about the environmental safety of our homes?

The themes of some feminist writers parallel the ultimate norms and principles of deep ecology. The "Age of Ecology" was started by a woman who cared and wrote the book *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962).

Environmental issues cannot be intelligently approached without the perspectives of women, the poor, and those who come from other parts of the globe, as well as those of all races and cultural backgrounds (Starhawk 1990). This male dominated culture is an earth-alienated culture. We need to have rituals in earth bonding (LaChapelle 1985). We need to acknowledge the power, authority, and mystery of nature (Starhawk 1990). In each of us is a wild woman who can run with the wolves (Estés 1992).

A Hispanic Responds

For centuries, people of color in our region have been subjected to racist and genocidal practices, including the theft of lands and water, the murder of innocent people, and the degradation of our environment. Your organizations continue to support and promote policies that emphasize the cleanup and preservation of the environment on the backs of working people in general and people of color in particular (Moore 1993).

Where my brother lives in Los Angeles, it's bad—just about every type of toxic fume is experienced there. Prevailing winds are toward East Los Angeles, so every night we have more than our share of impacts from the freeways and industries (Villalobos 1991). The root of the race gap is class difference—often minorities or recent immigrants experience the government as oppressive. They have little experience of political institutions working for them (Steinhart 1991). We often forget that there are more than 60 million people of color in the United States; soon we aren't going to be "minorities" anymore (Anthony 1993). The days when others determined our environmental future are over (Mauro 1991).

Who is it you are advocating for? In New Mexico, where I've lived 25 years now, there has been a history of problems and conflicts between our communities and environmental organizations. We're talking about land issues, water issues, regulations that environmental organizations have been pushing forward—for protection of who? for what? If it's for the protections of us then why haven't we been involved in it? If it is to protect our interests, then bring us to the table, because we do very fine at protecting our own interests. The Sierra Club has been responsible and a

co-conspirator in attempting to take away resources from our communities (Moore 1993).

Perhaps the greatest obstacle facing minority communities fighting for change was the fact we saw environmental problems as luxury issues. The environmental movement was full of hippies, middle-class housewives, and crazy white people tying themselves to redwood trees (Rivera 1991). How can a poor black or Hispanic mother living near a hazardous waste incinerator be concerned about saving the spotted owl? Minorities realize that the environmental health issue is a civil rights issue (Moore 1993). Issues of the environmental destruction are issues of our long-term survival (Sierra 1993).

A Poor Appalachian Family Responds

Rural America is in the final days of a profound transformation. Appalachian whites that once worked the land are now dispossessed. Although most people perceive racial minorities as distinct groups, they do not usually act like groups. Instead, like other people, each individual member makes decisions based on his best solutions to his own problems. What racial minorities in rural areas do share consistently is a common profile of poverty and deprivation. We are particularly vulnerable to economic and social changes. For two decades we have been reluctantly selling our lands and moving away (Deloria 1993).

Rural minorities are frequently fearful as well as distrustful of an outside authority, and may be afraid to challenge outsiders. That leaves us in a very vulnerable position. It is easy for the majority to perpetuate feelings of helplessness and inevitability in minority communities that keep them at the bottom of the social and economic pyramid. The cost may be protection of the affluent majority's lust for recreational health obliterating the rural minorities' security in the next two decades (Deloria 1984).

People aren't choosing between jobs and the environment; they're choosing between death—their jobs are killing them—and unemployment. It's a sick choice (Douglas 1993). We depend on the land. Our land is poor and has been abused. Now we are losing what is left. You do not seem to care about us. We seem less important than a rare fern.

In Reply

These five responses contain many similar threads that could be developed into a more inclusive model of ecosystem management. A model that includes many different communities of interest can generate greater public support for ecology in ecosystem management.

The first key to inclusion is the acceptance that other groups have valid environmental and ecological concerns and that these concerns are also the concern of the land manager. Each of the groups characterized expressed concern about the environment but not without reference to their group's quality of life and freedom for self determination. In our political environment, the activities of the government

require the support of groups outside the current main stream of the environmental movement. Clearly, minority communities are increasing their political mobilization on environmental issues (Taylor 1990). Land managers should consider the group's world view even if it may differ from the mainstream. Do not dismiss it in the planning process. Avoid setting up win/lose value conflicts but instead act to find mutual goal attainment in an atmosphere of respect for these differing values. Do not trade off the importance of a community's environmental health against the health of distant ecosystems; both of these should be considered important.

The second key is the inclusion of the human dimension in the ecosystem management framework. Positive work in this area is taking place by the National Task Force on the Human Dimension. The task force expanded the definition to include ecological survival values. It proposes the use of Maslow's hierarchy of motivational needs (Maslow 1968) to help understand the community level relationship to the demands from the National Forest system. This is useful because it expands the understanding of the human's community relationship to ecological processes to include physiological needs. The poor and minority groups are also concerned about these higher level needs (Taylor 1990). Also this view of motivation leaves out an analysis of the barriers between concern and ability to take action to meet those needs. An inner-city poor may have met his lower level needs, but may also desire relaxation at the distant forest; he may be unable to take action, however, because of many factors such as fear, or lack of knowledge or transportation. Also this model is based on a value system or world view not accepted by all.

All people and culture should be included in decisions regarding integral elements of the ecosystem. As planners define the ecological communities and the desired future condition of these communities, the human element must be part of that definition. The kind of relationships and benefits for human cultures should be explicit.

The third key to an inclusive model of ecosystem management is the active pursuit of involvement by the minority or underprivileged community. This involvement needs to include education, dialogue, and information exchange focused on enabling groups to become engaged in land planning processes. This goal may require extensive out-reach. Part of this effort also requires that the organizations undergo change and diversify the cultural background of the decision-makers; employees with greater diversity of values should be sought, and long-term value investments should be made in diversity.

A recent outstanding example of local involvement occurred between the Chequamegon National Forest and the Lac du Flambeau, Red Cliff, and Lac Courte Oreilles Bands of Lake Superior Chippewa. A memorandum of understanding was signed between the groups to promote increased cooperation and understanding of ecosystem management. The Tribe Bands stated, "Whereas the forest and waters that

make up the Chequamegon National Forest have provided for the spiritual and physical needs of the Potawatomi, Cree, Winnebago, Lakota (Sioux), and the Anishinabe (Chippewa or Ojibwe) people for thousands of years....the original people believe all life is sacred and the woods are filled with consciousness, ... Since people are dependent upon all creation, we must live with and respect the earth and all living things." The Forest Service goes on to say, "It is the intention of the parties to this Agreement to Strive for Balance, Equity, Respect, and Harmony Between People and Environment across interests, across regions, and across generations by sustaining the land community, meeting this generation's needs and maintaining options for those generations who will follow in our footprints."

Finally, recreation, interpretation, and environmental education play a special role in providing a portal to direct experience of the non-human world. Agencies need to be active in providing greater institutional accommodations through not only physical design but through information systems as well. Agencies need to provide culturally diverse recreational and interpretation opportunities. Recreation should be emphasized that supports the cultural values of different groups and provides opportunities for people to get close to nature. Interpretation should address the concerns and issues of different groups. Relevant as the audience understands it or discovers it in the message is basic to interpretation (Tilden 1957) but may be confused by the internal agency understanding of relevancy.

An excellent example of a systematic approach to relevancy occurred during the development of a visitor center interpretive plan on the Caribbean National Forest in Puerto Rico. A team of specialists in psychology, sociology, anthropology and resource management carried out field observations and interviewed local and international visitors. This included a series of short, open-ended interviews for target groups followed by probing questions to elicit more information on different aspects of the interface between visitors and the local forest, or employees and visitors. The study also provided information on visitors' existing knowledge, cultural themes, and information needs associated with the development of a visitor center (Valdes 1992).

Interpreters could be considered as ambassadors of the non-human world. Interpreters help communication between the non-human community and the human community. The lack of direct experience and communion between human and the non-human is hazardous. It can promote a public that is uncaring about the non-human world as well as a public not grounded in the ecological realities of life and the abilities of the non-human world to survive in harmony with the needs of humankind. To become true community members, people need to understand that their citizenship involves the stewardship of the non-human world (Snyder 1994). Agencies need to be actively involved in creating an inclusive view of providing service to all and instilling the responsibilities of stewardship in all the citizens.

Conclusion

This paper treads on two sensitive areas. One is the problem of generalization about “minority groups” and speaking for them, and the other is an increasingly common generalization and attack on “white men.” The first was tread carefully. The second was not. In the general media, expressions of a hard-edged race and gender ideology (Leo 1993) have become common. There is a need to recognize that this serves very little purpose and is misleading. First of all, many different ethnic groups comprise the group ‘white men’ and many are not affluent nor privileged. By the year 2050, the nonwhite, non-Hispanic population will still only comprise about 25 percent of the U.S. population. Thus, divisions along race and ethnic lines most likely will not best serve these groups. Blame may relieve stress, but it is also disempowering and depressing (Andrews 1987). Minority groups need to empower themselves and work with the majority. The majority need to understand that to act to improve the environment for all and protect the rights of the minority benefits everyone. Mahatma Gandhi said, “No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive.” Likewise ecology or ecosystem management can not protect the natural ecosystems if it fails to include the concerns of the diverse publics.

Public land managers, communicators, and researchers have a responsibility to provide public service to all. Government land managers need to understand the concerns of different groups and the results of their management decisions on these groups. Managers need to take on the challenge to provide and actively encourage greater access to planning and decision-making processes. The government needs to actively create not only greater institutional accommodation for these concerns and needs as expressed by these ‘minority groups,’ but participation in public education as well. The ideal is not a parental relationship toward minority groups but participation in the empowerment of these groups. Land managers are stewards of every one’s resources and need to consider their decisions in that light.

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