

Reasons for a reduction of humans' impact on the ecosphere

In a recent article in the journal *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* titled "Reasons to conserve nature", Pearson (2016) presents a framework for conservation that attempts to do justice to both the intrinsic and the instrumental value of non-human nature. Pearson is motivated by a pragmatic desire to harness the benefits of both anthropocentric and ecocentric arguments to achieve practical conservation successes. One of his crucial suggestions is to limit intrinsic value claims to higher levels of biological organization, such as species and ecosystems, denying the intrinsic value of lower levels such as genes, individuals and populations. Pearson's rationale is that a broader application of intrinsic value would prove too rigorous, "point[ing] toward a halt to human progress." With such a restriction on the scope of intrinsic value, the fate of individual organisms and populations would be determined solely with reference to their instrumental value to people.

Pearson's attempt to explicitly include consideration of intrinsic value in decision-making provides a welcome counterpoint to the growing anthropocentric conservation paradigm focused solely on ecosystem services, as recently critiqued by Silvertown (2015; 2016). However, the creation of a framework that obviates the need to call human progress into question ignores the single most significant practical implication of non-human nature's intrinsic and instrumental values: the human species needs to lessen its negative impacts on the ecosphere, not least through reducing the global birth rate so that the human population will decline from its currently unsustainable level (Cafaro and Crist, 2012). That humans themselves will suffer

from continued unsustainable demands on natural systems only serves to strengthen the ethical arguments for limiting human numbers and human economic demands on the rest of nature.

Value clashes as warning signals

When consideration of intrinsic and instrumental values point in the same practical direction, it is important to use this convergence to form the strongest possible arguments for the conservation of biodiversity (at all levels). On the other hand, there will be cases where anthropocentric and ecocentric concerns point toward different practical policies – hence Pearson references an 'infighting' between ideologies. Instead of trying to eliminate value clashes from our conservation philosophy, I believe that they should be used as warning signals, alerting us that compromises are needed. And to reach these compromises, the needs of the ecosystem must be placed above those of any single species, no matter how special – because the well-being of *all* species depends upon a flourishing global ecosystem (Curry, 2011).

Ecodemocracy as an alternative

I am aware that an insistence on acknowledging the full breadth of intrinsic value, when confronted with a framework that attempts to achieve harmony between different ideologies, might be seen as another example of 'infighting'. Thus, I feel obliged to point to an alternative to Pearson's framework: ecodemocracy (a contraction of ecocentric democracy; Gray and Curry, 2016). This involves creating decision-making systems that respect the principles of human democracy, while explicitly recognizing the intrinsic value

Joe Gray

About the author

Joe is a naturalist based in St Albans, UK, who is currently studying for a PhD on the conservation of insects and arachnids in temperate and boreal forests. He is a Knowledge Network Expert for the United Nations' Harmony with Nature programme and is Associate Editor of the Journal.

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“Consciously stepping back from our current position as planetary plunderers and learning to appreciate and respect Earth's ecological wonders now stands as the true path of human progress.”

of non-human nature and working to ensure that this value is taken into account in important economic and environmental decisions. Interested readers are directed to a recent article presenting a number of ways that ecodemocracy might be achieved in practice (Gray and Curry, 2016), including:

- discursive processes;
- human proxies for other species with voting rights;
- citizen juries;
- statutory enforcement of strong laws preserving the right of other species to continued existence.

Conclusion

To sum up, the real issue that Pearson (2016) raises is not the lack of clear practical guidance resulting from too broad an application of intrinsic value, since restricting intrinsic value claims as he suggests is both arbitrary and a failure to clarify our ecological choices. The real issue is the fact that recognizing non-human nature's intrinsic and instrumental values provides strong ethical grounds for redefining what constitutes human progress on a planet that we share with millions of other species, comprising innumerable populations and an immense richness of genetic diversity, and which we hope to pass on intact and flourishing to future human and non-human generations. While I agree that we need to find a way to move past ideological

infighting, a resolution that continues to define human progress primarily as rapid economic growth is a betrayal of our home planet. It is no real resolution to our difficulties, since human progress, in this modernist sense, is the chief force driving humanity to enact Earth's sixth mass extinction (Butler *et al.*, 2015). Consciously stepping back from our current position as planetary plunderers and learning to appreciate and respect Earth's ecological wonders now stands as the true path of human progress. ■

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Submit examples of ecocentrism

Joe Gray, Associate Editor

I am currently seeking details of ecocentric initiatives and projects from around the globe, as well as examples of where humans within modern society are living in harmony with nature, with a view to publishing a review of these in a future issue of the Journal.

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