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The Humanity of Global Environmental Ethics

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Over the past decade, scholars have begun to develop the discipline of global environmental ethics. In doing so, they have encountered two obstacles. First, much environmentalism cloaks itself in the discourse of prudence and security, and thus, ethical concerns are difficult to identify. Second, when scholars do recognize ethical issues, they explain them in terms of how people treat the nonhuman world and advance a biocentric or ecocentric moral sensibility. This is a problem to the degree that it neglects countless instances of environmental injustice that involve the way humans treat each other, using nature as a medium. This article illuminates the nonprudential dimensions of global environmental affairs and explains how a focus on the way humans mistreat each other can serve as a central ethical focus for understanding and addressing environmental injustice. Overall, it aims to provide a vocabulary for advancing an anthropocentric sensibility toward global environmental ethical concern.

Keywords: environmental ethics; global environmental politics; environmental philosophy; environmental morality

Ethical reflection on international environmental affairs is in its infancy. Although scholars have begun to introduce moral frameworks into the field, delineate cases in which moral issues seem to come to the fore, and discuss the relationship between legal and moral obligations in transnational environmental practice, environmental ethics is still the weak stepchild to the study of power and interest in global environmental politics. One reason for this is because most students of global environmental affairs understand ecological threats in prudential terms. They worry that, unless humans take action to protect the earth’s ecosystems, the quality of life—and, in the extreme, human survival itself—will be at risk. They are right to worry. Climate change, ozone depletion, water scarcity, loss of biological diversity, and so forth undermine the ecological foundations of life, and protecting against them is a matter of personal and collective security. This focus, however, can obscure a broader spectrum of moral sensitivities that can be accessed outside of a discourse of self-interest.

A second set of reasons why ethical issues get sidestepped has to do with the way scholars often frame moral arguments in global environmental affairs. Most
discussions of environmental ethics revolve around the way humans treat the natural world.1 Expanding on the concerns of pioneering thinkers such as Aldo Leopold (1989), scholars see the fundamental moral issues arising at the interface between humans and nature, and complain about how humans systematically exploit the natural world. Human exploitation of the natural world, however, is only one element of moral insensitivity as it relates to environmental issues. Also important is the way humans mistreat each other, using nature as a medium for doing so. This dimension of environmental ethics is harder to see because it is part of the broader challenge of global ethics in general. However, it is no less important for analyses of global environmental politics. This article attempts to advance discussion of global environmental ethics by drawing attention to the nonprudential dimensions of environmental harm and by highlighting the way humans mistreat each other through the medium of nature.

The attempt to advance discussion about global environmental ethics is a normative enterprise. We share the view of many international relations scholars that normative work is not ideological proselytizing but rather scholarly inquiry disciplined by principled concerns, aimed at changing certain political practices (e.g., Falk, 1983; Kratochwil, 2000). Readers should understand our focus on human–human relations in this light. By emphasizing the interhuman dimensions of environmental harm, we wish not to repudiate biocentric or ecocentric approaches that focus on human ill-treatment of the natural world (for this position, see Ferry, 1995). Indeed, as we will explain, ultimately discussions of international environmental ethics must find a meeting ground between anthropocentric and eco/biocentric orientations. (On such convergence, see Norton, 1991, 2005). Rather, it is a strategic move aimed primarily at heightening the importance of moral considerations as they relate to global environmental affairs. For better or worse, Western ethics has been about the way people treat each other. This has found expression in international affairs in the form of legal documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. By framing environmental ethics in terms of human–human relations, we want to tap into the rich Western tradition that reserves ethics for interhuman relations and build on the success of the international human rights framework.

We wish to do so even though we are aware of the limitations of such a framework. In fact, we wish to do so precisely because of such limitations. The current human rights framework is far from perfect. It has yet to enjoy universal acceptance and is often violated. It is, however, the most advanced ethical regime operating at the international level. By hitching environmental ethics to this regime, we hope to place discussion of environmental issues squarely in the orbit of international ethical thought and therewith both take advantage of the regime and contribute to its development. An argument could be made that, in doing so, one undermines efforts to sensitize people to the mistreatment of the nonhuman world at the hands of humans. In our view, however, efforts to advance such an orientation have made little
headway into international affairs, and we are doubtful of greater strides in this
direction without first ratcheting up moral behavior between humans. Put differently,
if we cannot treat our own species with dignity, we have grave doubts about the
likelihood of morality flourishing as it is extended beyond the human world.

In Search of the Moral

Since its inception in the early 1970s, environmental ethics as a discipline has
focused on the way humans treat the natural world. It is generally acknowledged that
people care less about animals, rivers, plants, and mountains than they do about
themselves and each other, and thus it is no surprise that they exploit or otherwise
abuse nature. Much environmental ethics tries to figure out why this is the case and
what can be done about it. Why is it that many people demean, or at least fail to
respect, the other-than-human world? Why is it that people feel that they can mis-
treat nonhuman entities with moral impunity? Theorists provide various answers.
Some point to the Judeo-Christian tradition and its insistence that God gave humans
dominion over the earth’s plants and animals (e.g., White, 1967). Others blame
modernity for its emphasis on technological prowess and human control over nature
(e.g., Capra, 1997). Still others identify patriarchy and the consequential widespread
gendering and exploitation of nature (Warren, 2000) or capitalism and its commodi-
fication of nonhuman entities (Kovel, 2002). Each of these schools of thought offers
particular explanations for why people mistreat the natural world. All of them iden-
tify the mistreatment as a moral failing.

The moral failing stems from seeing nature in instrumental terms. The Judeo-
Christian tradition, modernity, patriarchy, capitalism, and the like encourage people
to value nature for what it can provide humans. They are, in a word, anthropocentric—
They privilege human life and relate all that happens in the world to human con-
cerns. Such privileging denies the intrinsic worth and moral considerability of plants,
animals, mountains, or ecosystems.

Environmental ethics cut its teeth rejecting anthropocentrism. Proto-environmental
ethicists, like John Muir, George Santayana, Albert Schweitzer, and Aldous Huxley,
criticized the way humans place themselves at the center of the universe and lord
over the natural world (Sessions, 1993). These critiques found poignant expression
in the writings of Aldo Leopold, who argued for extending moral consideration
beyond the boundaries of humanity to include all entities in the land community.
Leopold’s famous land ethic has long stood as one of the most eloquent and forceful
criticisms of anthropocentrism (Leopold, 1989).² These types of arguments were
picked up and further refined in the early 1970s by philosophers and legal scholars,
such as Naess (1973, 1990), Stone (1974), Passmore (1974), Rolston (1975) and
Singer (1975), who argued against the arbitrariness with which humans circumscribe
those deserving moral consideration and called for extending moral worth to (at least parts of) the nonhuman world.

In the early days of the discipline, rejecting anthropocentrism was a prerequisite for practicing environmental ethics (Light, 2002). Anthropocentrism disabled the central project of environmental ethics, as it was then understood, which was to cultivate a theory of intrinsic value that would give nature its due. Indeed, in a landmark essay, Richard Sylvan (2002) argued that traditional ethics may implicitly include some notion that one “is not always entitled to do as one pleases [to nature] where this physically interferes with others” (p. 48), but concluded that the point of environmental ethics is to go beyond this anthropocentric concern to establish the moral standing of the nonhuman world. A rejection of anthropocentrism still stands as the central point of departure for environmental ethics, although a number of prominent environmental ethicists espouse a weak anthropocentrism in which aesthetic or practical concerns, rather than strictly moral ones, drive ethical consideration (Hargrove, 1992; Light & De-Shalit, 2003; Light & Katz, 1996; Minteer, 2006; Norton, 1984). Importantly, these thinkers go to great lengths to show how weak anthropocentrism can be compatible with and often achieves the same aims as nonhuman-centered formulations of value. Environmental ethics remains focused primarily on the human–nature interface and seeks to develop compelling reasons to care about nature in its own right. Activist Dave Foreman captured the gist of this position when he wrote that there seems to be something fundamentally wrong about cutting down “a two-thousand-year-old redwood to build picnic tables” (Foreman, 1993, p. 192).

As mentioned, global environmental ethics is still in its infancy. Much of the work that does exist, unsurprisingly, extends the critical arguments about anthropocentrism to the international arena. Anthropocentrism abounds the world over and, to the degree that it is responsible for harmful environmental practices, it deserves criticism. One should applaud efforts to trace transboundary environmental degradation back to anthropocentrism and to fold biocentric or ecocentric orientations into discussions of international environmental law and practice (e.g., Burkdull & Harris, 1998). One should welcome studies that analyze different societal notions of ‘nature’ with the intention of demonstrating how people around the world interact with the other-than-human realm (e.g., McLuhan, 1994). Especially useful are works that compare ethical and religious traditions, and map them onto environmental practices in an attempt to show variance when it comes to how people think about and act in relation to nature (Ellen & Fukui, 1996; Torrance, 1999). Scholarship along these lines tests the strength of anthropocentrism in various contexts or labors to show the geographical circumscription of human-centered sources of value. In doing so, it offers cultural resources for cultivating alternative, nonanthropocentric orientations toward the natural world—something dear to the environmental ethicist project.

Although not explicitly focused on moral issues, much work on global environmental affairs concentrates on the intersection between humans and nature, often
revealing how transnational forces and international institutions exacerbate human ill-treatment of the natural world. Some writers examine how consumption patterns erode the earth’s ecosystems (see generally, Dauvergne, 2008; Princen, Maniates, & Conca, 2002). Others point out how globalizing forces advance the discourse of human domination over nature and show the normative and economic pressures on local communities to consider their environments as marketable commodities (Kutting, 2004; Paterson, 2000). International political economists trace the ecological effects of structural adjustment programs (Finnegan, 2003). Most typically, many show how the state system is unable to protect common pool resources and use this to explain overexploitation of the natural world (Barkin & Shambaugh, 1999; Speth & Haas, 2006; Young, 2002).

All these works see the interface between humans and nature as the core subject of analysis. Focusing on the human-nature interface suggests that the authorizing moral question that frames this area of inquiry revolves around how humans treat nature (on the importance of framing, see Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2005). This is unfortunate because it limits the scope of ethical reflection in the context of global environmental affairs.

Although many moral issues arise with regard to the way people treat nature, much environmental harm involves people exploiting, abusing, or otherwise misreating each other. Nature is the medium through which they do so. This focus can help advance the discussion of international environmental ethics by linking into Western and international expressions of moral concern that see human beings as the only genuine moral agents.

**Toward an Anthropocentric Account of Global Environmental Ethics**

Environmental concern revolves around three sets of challenges. First is the issue of resources. Since environmentalism’s early days, people have worried that we will run out of things we depend on, such as oil, fresh water, and minerals (Ehrlich, 1968; Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 1974). Some resources, like wood, fish, and water, can replenish themselves quickly; others, such as oil, coal, and minerals, regenerate at much slower rates. Still other resources, such as the genetic material particular to each species, can be permanently lost (Wilson, 1992). In each of these cases, resource use can easily overshoot the earth’s regenerative capacity (Kunstler, 2005; United Nations Environment Programme, 2002).

The second issue has to do with sinks. Humans depend on the earth’s biophysical systems to absorb waste and otherwise cleanse the environment. When we dump excessive amounts of waste into the air, water, or land, or when the toxicity of our waste is so great that it cannot be easily neutralized, we overwhelm the earth’s absorptive capacity. Almost 50 years ago, Rachel Carson (1962) explained how our overuse of pesticides was making it difficult for the earth to break down harmful
substances such as DDT. Today, for example, carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions are overwhelming the ability of the oceans and forests to absorb such substances and of the atmosphere to wash them out of its system—thus leading to climate change.

The third set of challenges revolves around the transformation of landscapes and ecosystems. Environmentalists have always valued areas untrammeled by human beings (Philippon, 2004; Shabecoff, 2003). These provide places for recreation, spiritual renewal, scientific research, and refuge. Such lands include not only places largely devoid of humans, such as wilderness areas, forests, and deserts, but also farms, gardens, and other low-density areas that provide a visual contrast to urban life. Urban life and its industrial imperatives have increasingly encroached on the world’s so-called natural places, shrinking and often eliminating them. Environmentalism has long worried about this under the guise of preservation, which values the earth for its own sake and invites humans to enjoy the earth’s beauties in nonacquisitioning ways. This attitude has been complemented by more recent concerns about protecting the integrity of ecosystems, at whatever scale they are defined, because of the services they provide and the future value they represent.

Although threats to resources, sinks, and landscapes sound like assaults on natural systems, when people pull resources from the earth, dump waste into it, or misuse certain lands, they do so according to particular patterns (Peluso & Watts, 2001). These patterns match the geography of power in world affairs. The wealthy and politically powerful use resources and engage in practices that produce waste without experiencing the degradation that accompanies extraction or waste disposal. They divert waste onto the poor and weak. They exploit certain areas with little concern for others who may wish to use such places and protect lands in their own territories at the expense of other people’s lands. (Jacoby, 2001). Power draws lines between what could be called the environmentally advantaged and environmentally disadvantaged and, to the degree that such a distinction rests on differential treatment, it raises moral concerns (International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 2004).

At the heart of such concerns is the ability of the rich and powerful to displace environmental problems. Displacement involves transferring, relocating, or otherwise transporting environmental challenges to those who have little choice but to suffer them. Put differently, environmental injustice arises because people tend to redirect rather than resolve environmental dilemmas, conveying their burdens onto vulnerable others through the geographies of power. Such displacement takes place across both space and time (Dryzek, 1987; Wapner, 2005).

**Displacement Across Space**

People displace environmental burdens across space when they pull fish, timber, minerals, exotic species, and so forth from other regions without fair compensation and when they spoil other people’s land in an effort to protect their own. Japan, for
example, imports significant amounts of wood from South East Asia but is unwilling to allow its own forests to be cut. Since the 1970s, Japan has established forest reserves on public lands in an attempt to safeguard what it considers to be a national treasure. Japan has not granted such status to forests abroad nor has it taken sufficient measures to ensure that Japanese demand is met through sustainable timber harvesting (Dauvergne, 1997, 2001). When countries import what they are unwilling to produce on their own soil or import in ways that lead directly to environmental degradation in exporting countries, they displace resource problems across space. Similarly, when countries preserve natural places within their own territory at the expense of other’s land, they displace land-protection problems across space. They are able to do so because of power differentials between exploiters and the exploited and because of a lack of moral sensitivity—and hence constraint or obligation—toward lands and resources beyond one’s immediate territory.

Displacement is a matter not only of shifting the effects of environmental degradation but also of moving people themselves. The history of protecting lands is full of cases in which marginalized people are removed to establish reserves and parks. This happened to Native Americans in the United States when the federal government created Yosemite, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, and Glacier National Parks and to rural peoples as the Adirondacks became protected (Jacoby, 2001; Spence, 1996). It occurs perhaps more frequently in the developing world when well-intentioned environmentalists (often from the developed world) wish to preserve biological diversity through creating reserves and parks without sufficiently addressing the needs of local populations (Brechin, Wilshusen, Forwangler, & West, 2003; Terborgh, 1999). For example, some 70,000 people were displaced, with no compensation, from the Koshi Tappu wetland in Nepal into an area virtually void of resources to create a Ramsar site (Matthew & Upreti, 2007). People are also displaced for large projects that transform landscapes, such as dam construction (Khagram, 2004). In such cases, displacement takes on an immediate human face.

In addition to resources, land, and people, sinks are also displaced across space. This occurs when people are unwilling to pay the financial and ecological costs of disposing their waste in their own territories and export it to other places. Britain currently uses nuclear power to generate one quarter of its energy needs and produces plutonium and other radioactive materials to service its nuclear weapons arsenal (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2003). Like other nations, it has yet to engineer safe ways of disposing nuclear waste. Since the 1960s, the Sellafield reprocessing plant in northwest England has discharged dangerous amounts of plutonium, technetium-99, and other radioactive substances into the Irish Sea (Tiscali, 2005). England’s energy needs are being secured at the expense of the ecological well-being of its neighbors, and both Norway and Ireland have complained bitterly about the practice (Singer, 2002).

Many states produce wastes for which they are unwilling to pay the costs of local disposal. This not only results in discharges that inadvertently drift to other counties...
but also entails deliberately exporting waste abroad. Over the past few decades, the international toxic waste trade has sent millions of tons of poisonous substances from developed to developing countries. The 1989 Basel Convention restricts some of this trade but has significant limitations. Waste traders, such as the United States, have yet to ratify the convention, and the convention itself allows waste traders to move dangerous materials through nonsignatory states and even export hazardous waste to signatories if any element can be recaptured and used as recycled material (Clapp, 2001).

Resource, land, and sink displacement across space is about the privileged ignoring or discounting the lives of the underprivileged living downstream. To be sure, there are complicated economic considerations involved in such displacement. Some countries find it hard to resist the financial advantages of serving as a waste dump or source of raw materials and seemingly invite displacement. In an often-cited case, waste traders offered Guinea-Bissau four times its gross national product (twice its external debt) for accepting 15 million tons of toxic wastes from industrialize countries (Sherman, 1999). Although Guinea-Bissau eventually refused the deal, other poor countries have found such offers hard to refuse. In the late 1980s, for example, Benin accepted $1.6 million and 30 years of economic assistance to import radioactive and industrial waste from France. It defended the decision to import the waste as a matter of survival (Trade and Environment Data Base, 1996).

When diverse interests—such as economic and ecological ones—conflict, moral issues become blurred and make it difficult to speak in definitive terms about environmental injustice. Nonetheless, in most cases of displacement, disproportional treatment is at work. Harvard University President Lawrence Summers expressed this disproportionality and inadvertently hinted at its moral implications when, as chief economist at the World Bank, he wrote an internal memorandum asking, “Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [Less Developed Countries]?” (Enwegbara, 2001). He explained himself by saying that, because life expectancy was so much shorter in the Less Developed Countries (LDCs) than in developed countries, it makes economic sense for LDC citizens to face the hardships and threats to life posed by toxic substances and the like rather than citizens of the developed world. Such are the rationales justifying displacement across space.

**Displacement Across Time**

People displace resource, sink, and land problems across time as well as space. This occurs when people engage in practices whose harmful effects will not be felt until sometime in the future. At work is the same dynamic insofar as it entails the privileged (in this case, present generations) discounting the lives of those who cannot resist the adverse effects of current environmental practices (namely, future generations).
The earth’s diversity of species is a resource in that it provides a robust genetic base from which to develop new food crops and medicines, and a panoply of life forms for human enjoyment and scientific research. Human practices associated with habitat destruction, the introduction of exotic species, hunting, and climate change are wiping out vast numbers of species (Wilson, 2003). Many observers claim that species are disappearing so fast and at such a significant rate that we are witnessing the sixth great extinction on earth (Eldredge, 2001). Species extinction involves implicitly providing benefits for some members of the present generation (e.g., cattle ranchers, poachers, land developers, and those who use large amounts of fossil fuel) at the expense of others. The most significant impact, however, is on future generations. Loss of biological diversity permanently narrows the range of genotypes available for ecological stability and diminishes the variety of life forms that can be researched or enjoyed. Loss of biological diversity robs the future of opportunities open to present generations. It involves displacing the finitude of resources.

Resource displacement across time is a more general issue when one considers patterns of consumption. Many resources can regenerate themselves. However, extreme demand on these leads to unsustainable resource use. The world is pressing the limits of ocean fisheries, and resources such as fresh water are scarce in many parts of the world. The world’s rich do not intentionally hurt others with their profligate consumption and destructive practices, but this is nevertheless the effect. The average U.S. citizen uses roughly 70 times more energy than the average Bangladeshi, and this pattern pertains to most resources (McKibben, 1998). When we read figures like these, we often think about resource displacement across space—taking resources from others with whom we share the earth but without duly compensating them. The figure should also awaken in us a sense of moral outrage with regard to the future. For, we know that resources, while renewable, cannot keep regenerating at the speeds with which much of the world uses them. Rather than confront this problem, we displace it. When people overuse or at least unmindfully use resources in wasteful ways, they displace resources from the future for the sake of short-term overconsumption.

In addition to resources, people also displace land across time. Aldo Leopold once wrote, “Wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow” (Leopold, 1989, p. 199). He meant that, once it is altered, wilderness loses its integrity as a land untrammeled by humans. One could extend this thought to forests, farmlands, and even gardens in the sense that, once such areas are paved over or significantly altered, they can rarely grow back to their original state. Moreover, although we have set land aside for nonutilitarian purposes, such land is never secure. Governmental officials can decide to change its protected status, or economic pressures may lead to illegal encroachment on protected land. Once such safeguards disappear or are rendered irrelevant, unwise land-use practices can permanently change the land’s quality. Here land displacement takes place across time insofar as
land can be stolen from future generations. One sees this constantly as governments rescind policies guarding previously protected lands—such as the recent Bush administration decision to reverse earlier executive efforts to protect roadless areas—and as economic pressures encourage needy people to exploit otherwise protected areas. Ongoing attempts to open up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil and gas exploration and extraction represent attempts to displace land across time.

People also displace sinks across time. One sees this, for example, with regard to climate change. The buildup of greenhouse gases has already altered the global climate system, and many predict that this will become more dramatic as global average temperatures rise even higher, sea levels climb, agricultural yields decrease, biodiversity diminishes, and storms become more violent with the continual buildup of greenhouse gases in the future (Flannery, 2006). When we burn fossil fuels that contribute to the buildup of greenhouse gases and overwhelm the capacity of water and forest sinks to absorb carbon, we implicitly choose to displace the sink problem across time. Unwilling to pay the costs—economic as well as social—of reducing our fossil-fuel consumption, we pass on the experience of climate change to future generations.

Displacement across time is no surprise. It happens because, like displacement across space, there are people available to be exploited. Just as the poor are unable to ward off resource, sink, and land displacement from the rich, future generations are also unable to do so. Future generations do not vote or have an authentic voice in contemporary affairs. The only chance they have is to be represented by current generations. This is the challenge of much environmentalism. As David Brower explained, “We don’t inherit the earth from our fathers, we borrow it from our children” (Brower, 1995, p. 1), and borrowing it in a meaningful way means ensuring that future generations have the same opportunities that we do.

Global Ethics of Displacement

Some students of international environmental affairs explore the ethical components of displacement (see, e.g., Elliott, 2005; Rowlands, 1997; Shue, 1999). Most ethical thought revolves around the relative contributions to environmental harm from the global North and South. As mentioned, the typical U.S. citizen uses many more resources than the typical Bangladeshi; he or she also generates significantly more waste. This mimics a larger pattern whereby those in the developed world in general contribute more to environmental degradation. This is not to say that the poor have no impact on the earth. Some analysts maintain that the rich and the very poor each exact a hefty toll on the environment compared to those in the middle (Conca, 2002). This observation must not be allowed to obscure an important ethical concern, namely the amount of resources and waste for which each person,
individually, is responsible. When calculated on a per capita basis—which, for many, is the only fair way to understand environmental impact (Agarwal & Narain, 1991; Athanasiou & Baer, 2002)—the globalized rich are overwhelmingly more responsible for environmental harm than the localized poor (Agarwal, Narain, & Sharma, 2002).

One of the first and most persuasive criticisms of the imbalance between contributions to environmental harm was made by Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain (1991) of the Centre for Science and Environment in India. They argued that most calculations attempting to assign responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions are ethically skewed to the degree that they measure emissions in national terms. Most data calculate emissions by country, and these data provide the measurement standards used in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol, and associated agreements. According to these measurements, the United States emits roughly 30% of the world’s greenhouse gases, whereas India emits little more than 5%. When calculated on a per capita basis, the imbalance is even more striking. India’s per capita emissions are 22 times less than those of the United States (Energy Information Administration, 2004). Today, the United States, with more than 293 million people, emits roughly the same amount of greenhouse gases as 2.6 billion people in 151 developing world states (Speth, 2004). Through emphasizing the growing emissions of China and India, developed countries can try to displace their fair share of the responsibility for addressing climate change onto those who have clearly contributed less.

This takes on particular resonance insofar as the greenhouse gas contributions by those in the developing world tend to be associated with meeting basic needs. Agarwal and Narain distinguished survival emissions of the global South from luxury emissions of the North. They argued, for example, that methane gas emissions from rice paddies are fundamentally different, in a moral context, from carbon dioxide emissions associated with automobiles and that international environmental treaties should recognize this. It must be said, of course, that although the Kyoto Protocol does not rely on per capita emissions data nor distinguish between survival and luxury emissions, it nevertheless acknowledges the unequal contributions between developed and developing countries and rightfully requires developed countries to act first in stabilizing and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, it is worth noting that even this basic gesture toward equity was the cause for the U.S. Senate to go on record saying that it would not ratify the protocol, and it served as one of the reasons the Bush administration removed the United States from the Protocol’s requirements.

The moral implications of measuring contributions to environmental harm nationally rather than on a per capita basis has led some ethicists to think in terms of global ecological space and the rights to use such space. Imagine if the earth’s waters, soil, air, and species belonged to everyone. Imagine if everyone had an equal right to use the earth’s resources, sinks, and abilities to provide ecological services.
How would displacement look through such a vision? This is the question a number of thinkers have begun asking with regard to climate change (Rowlands, 1997; Singer, 2002), biological diversity (Wilson, 2003), and ozone depletion (Agarwal, Narain, & Sharma, 1999), and one can imagine asking it for any number of environmental issues. Everyone has an ecological footprint. Everyone uses natural resources, produces waste, and occupies land. The footprint of the globalized rich is much bigger than that of the localized poor. If the earth’s carrying capacity was infinite, this might not be a problem. However, given that the earth’s ecosystem does have limits, distributing rights to its bounty becomes a challenging moral issue. The issue becomes urgent insofar as humanity is already pushing against the earth’s limits by allowing the privileged to avoid feeling the effects through displacement. Today, justly distributing ecological rights is a dream because victims of environmental harm cannot stop displacement, convince perpetrators that they are due compensation, or transform the practices of those most responsible to prevent harm in the first place (Elliott, 2005). Those downstream are too poor and politically dispossessed to avoid becoming the extractive space or the dumping ground for the rich and powerful. Such inequality is nothing new, and the moral challenge it poses has received some attention at least since the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987.

The Brundtland Commission famously defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 19). In many ways, one would be hard-pressed to find a more direct articulation of how to overcome displacement than this. The emphasis on needs suggests that rich countries cannot simply pull resources from, dump waste on, or protect land in poor regions without at least ensuring that the poor’s basic needs are met. Likewise, the emphasis on future generations suggests that one cannot use up critical resources, overwhelm sinks, or despoil land if this undermines the ability of our progeny to meet their needs.

Sustainable development emerged out of a familiar moral sensibility as well as a prudential concern for avoiding global risk. Prudentially, people embrace sustainable development because they recognize that the global South cannot develop along the same lines as the global North for the simple reason that the planet cannot handle this. If the consumption levels of those in the global South grow to match global North levels, many suggest that we would need four planets’ worth of resources and sinks (Folz, 2002).

Morally, people look to sustainable development out of a sense of fairness. Much environmental protection is seen to be at odds with economic growth. According to many, environmental protection often restricts economic activity and thus dampens the surge toward growth. Developing countries have always been wary of environmentalism for precisely this reason. They believe it is unfair for the North, having developed without the constraints of environmental protection, to request that the South be held to such norms. The end result, according to many in the South, is a
form of neocolonialism in which countries in the global South are forced to stay underdeveloped in an effort to appease the global North’s concerns for the global environment (Agarwal et al., 1999; Najam, 2005).

The conflict between the environment and economic well-being appears not only in North–South relations but within countries as well. Many citizens in the developed world see environmental constraints as detrimental to job creation, industrial production, and economic productivity. The conflict is captured well in the title of Richard White’s essay, “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” (1995). As the essay suggests, many see environmentalists as economic elites who have little concern for the working class and for the health of a country’s or the world’s economy. At a more general level, the conflict has given rise to the environmental justice movement. To environmental justice advocates, the environmental movement has largely ignored the dynamics of power as they relate to environmental affairs. Focused more on plants, animals, sites, and so forth, the environmental movement has given short shrift to people and, as a result, has ignored the way the most vulnerable are exploited through the medium of nature. The environmental justice movement points out, for example, how hazardous waste sites and incinerators tend to be located in poor neighborhoods and, more generally, how the poor or politically weak tend to bear the brunt of environmental assaults, such as adverse health impacts (Cole & Foster, 2000; Newton, 1996).

Sustainable development speaks to the concerns of the environmental justice movement by calling for development that would bring economic capacity to those regions in need of basic goods and services, fostering less materialist forms of growth in richer areas, and bringing another focus to social justice (McKibben, 2004; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Although sustainable development means different things to different people, at its heart is the distinction between quantitative economic growth and qualitative betterment (Daly, 1997). For many, economic capacity provides the fundamental grounds for enjoying life. The more money one has, so the logic goes, the more ability we have to move beyond meeting basic needs and do other things we want to do. Economic growth often is framed as one of the few objectives the majority of people in a society can readily support because of its promise to provide all (or most) with better means for their individual or group pursuits of happiness.

The World Bank has long assumed this position as its annual reports have traditionally indicated the most developed countries in terms of highest GDP. (This is in contrast to the United Nations Human Development Report, which uses additional indicators to rank countries.) Sustainable development questions this logic as it envisions economic livelihoods for the poor that do not strip the land of resources or the ability to absorb waste and as it calls on the rich to pursue less materialist forms of development. Moreover, it recommends greater development assistance from the North to the South, especially in the form of debt relief and technology transfers, to enable the South to pursue meaningful economic productivity and greater efforts to conserve ecological
well-being for future generations. Such moves are sustainable insofar as they would utilize the earth’s bounty in ways that do not undermine its ability to regenerate resources and neutralize waste, and witness the end of its most spectacular and ecologically rich landscapes. Furthermore, sustainable development does not render those in the South as poor victims who need assistance but as agents who must be part of any meaningful development schemes. Sustainable development projects typically include local involvement and see such involvement as an important form of empowerment in the service of justice. Sustainable development, then, speaks to issues of fairness by extending moral concern across space—to those with whom we share the planet—and across time—to those who will come after us (Thiele, 1999).

Notions of shared equitable ecological space and sustainable development represent the beginnings of an anthropocentric global environmental ethics. They also provide useful categories for moral analysis. To advance such ethical consideration, students of global environmental affairs must further develop moral criticisms of displacement, and practitioners must find avenues into the policy world in which they can articulate and shape policy that is responsive to the moral lapses of contemporary environmental politics. A focus on displacement can advance such efforts.

Making Environmental Degradation Visible

Most displacement takes place inadvertently (Elliott, 2005; McKibben, 2005). Ecological degradation originates from everyday actions of individuals and collectivities going about their business, as it were. Those of us who drive cars, purchase items manufactured with poisonous chemicals, and build houses on undeveloped lands usually do not see the ecological and social effects of our actions. Likewise, businesses that pollute the air, water, or land; extract resources in unsustainable ways; and blot the landscape with factories and storefronts often are blind to the effects of their actions. This is because the chains linking the extraction, processing, transportation, sale, consumption, and waste management of materials are too long and complex for most people to understand and locate themselves within. Economic globalization exacerbates this as the linkages grow in complexity and as products and waste get shuttled about the world.

Although most people do not see the forest cover in northern Pakistan eroding or the children in India twitching from long-term exposure to industrial chemicals, scientists regularly provide the public with reports documenting different forms of environmental degradation and linking them to human activities. Some people have responded with wide-ranging efforts to track the ecological effects of their actions, such as certification programs that provide standards by which to measure environmental impact. Timber certification programs identify growers and suppliers who harvest wood in sustainable ways. Tuna certification programs highlight tuna caught in ways that do not kill dolphins. Architects use the Leadership in Energy and
Environmental Design standards to build structures that minimize a building’s ecological footprint. In each case, an effort is being made to track and minimize the ecological effects of the products being produced.

These efforts are important and represent early tools of practice for making visible the human costs of environmental displacement. Nonetheless, these measures focus on human harm done to the nonhuman world and do not focus on issues of social justice, humane governance, or other human-to-human dimensions of environmental displacement. Although expanding moral consideration to other species or to nature writ large is important, this focus discourages many people from embracing environmental ethics. People are, after all, unlike the rest of nature in morally significant ways (Ferry, 1995). They produce culture and this culture is the medium for moral thinking and moral acting. Even though people also harm nature, it is awkward simply to push moral principles beyond culture and into the nonhuman world, and clearly not very convincing to many people. The extensions that work well—such as the prohibition on needlessly causing animals to suffer—are not grounded in a thick moral philosophy that is free of contradiction. The fact that people are generally willing to accept such constraints is not evidence of an ontological human–nature integration. In fact, acceptance is rooted in a mix of ideas and intuitions about things like the potential for cruelty to animals to escalate to humans and the affective bonds people develop for pets. In an ecumenical sense, it is nice when different ideas can support a shared moral practice, but the value of such convergence should not be overstated.

Thinking about environmental degradation in the human–nature terms enunciated by many environmental ethicists is also an approach that can readily be dismissed by much of humankind as Western and elitist, for reasons we outlined earlier (e.g., Guha, 1989). However, the most serious problem with this approach is that it leads to poor solutions. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that many conservation efforts focused primarily on protecting nonhuman entities, especially in the developing world, impose burdens on the poor and often therefore fail actually to safeguard prized animals, plants, or ecosystems (International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 2003). Although we are comfortable with the abstract claim that nature has intrinsic value and therefore ought to be regarded as an end in itself and treated accordingly, our goal in this article has been to underscore the extent to which nature is also a vital medium through which humans interact. The human–nature focus is not a trivial one, but insofar as ethical life is concerned, it is not a sufficient one either. In contrast, a human–human focus that appreciates nature as a primary medium for human relationships, and that grapples with the myriad problems of displacement, provides a promising framework for moral thought and behavior. It allows us to identify actors and practices within the chains of resource use, waste generation and disposal, and landscape despoliation. We can begin to name names and build institutional mechanisms that can hold us accountable for our neglectful actions.
Our intuition receives considerable support from the reorientation that is transforming the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, World Wildlife Fund, and other nongovernmental environmental organizations. For decades, these types of organizations focused on assessing damage to living (but nonhuman) systems and devising strategies to restore and conserve them. This began to change in the 1980s when the concept of sustainable development encouraged researchers and practitioners to clarify the linkages between conservation and development. The reorientation received further impetus as the environmental security literature of the 1990s gave rise to the argument that some conservation efforts placed such enormous burdens on weak and impoverished peoples—displacing them from their lands or denying them access to the natural resources they needed to survive—that they actually contributed to insecurity and conflict.

In response to these pressures, the World Conservation Union began articulating the concept of *pro-poor conservation*, which explicitly identifies nature as the medium for many human to human interactions. “Pro-poor conservation may be defined as an approach that optimizes conservation and livelihood benefits with an explicit emphasis on poverty reduction and social justice” (International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 2003, p. 40). The same can be said for other transnational environmental organizations such as the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF).

The reorientation of the world’s conservation community, which for decades was uninterested in people, highlights a possible turning point in global environmental affairs. Key to such a reorientation is making the linkages between, on one hand, extracting, processing, transporting, using and disposing of various materials, and, on the other hand, human security, well-being, and freedom. Industrialization and globalization have greatly extended the lengths and complexities of such linkages. Institutional tracking, labeling, and evaluating regimes could increase greater transparency and thus enable people to act in more ecologically just ways.

**Notes**

1. Although some scholars assign clear and distinct meanings to the terms *moral* and *ethical*, they are often used interchangeably, a practice that we follow throughout this article.

2. Leopold’s land ethic has been interpreted by some thinkers as ecocentric (see, e.g., Temple 1999) and by others as representing a weak type of anthropocentrism (see, e.g., Norton 2006). We emphasize his ecocentrism based on his notion of the land community and humanity’s plain membership in it. On Leopold’s complicated views, see, generally, Wapner (1996).

**References**


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