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"How the Tail Wags the Dog: How Value Judgments Determine Ecological Science"

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Philosophers, policymakers, and scientists have long asserted that ecological science—and especially notions of homeostasis, balance, or stability—help to determine environmental values and to supply imperatives for environmental ethics and policy. We argue that this assertion is questionable. There are no well developed general ecological theories having predictive power, and fundamental ecological concepts, such as "community" and "stability," are used in inconsistent and ambiguous ways. As a consequence, the contribution of ecology to environmental ethics and values lies more in the realm of natural history and case studies than in the realm of general theory. Moreover, although general ecological theory is unable to contribute to environmental values in the way many philosophers and policymakers have hoped, environmental values can and do contribute to ecological hypotheses and methods. Using examples related to preservation versus development, hunting versus animal rights, and controversies over pest control, we show that, because ecology is conceptually and theoretically underdetermined, environmental values often influence the practice of ecological science.

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