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"Democratising Nature? The Political Morality of Wilderness Preservationists"

Mason, Michael

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Deep ecological appeals for wilderness preservation commonly conjoin arguments for participatory land use decision-making with their central championing of natural areas protection. As an articulation of the normative meaning of participatory democracy, the discourse ethics advanced by Jurgen Habermas is employed to highlight the consistency and justifiability of this dual claim. I argue that Habermasian moral theory reveals a key tension between, on the one hand, an ethical commitment to wilderness preservation informed by deep ecological and bioregional principles that is oriented to a naturalistic value order and, on the other, the procedural norms of democratic participation. It is claimed that discourse ethics thereby raises critical philosophical and practical questions concerning the political legitimacy of deep ecology. In examining the progressive claims of environmental philosophers and wilderness activists embracing this perspective, I draw empirically upon Canadian arguments for natural areas protection and associated radical prescriptions for a democratisation of land use decision-making.

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