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"Is Environmentalism a Humanism?"

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Environmental theorists, seeking the origin of Western exploitative attitudes toward nature, have directed their attacks against "humanism." This essay argues that such criticisms are misplaced. Humanism has much closer affinities to environmentalism than the latter's advocates believe. As early as the Renaissance, and certainly by the late eighteenth century, humanists were developing historically-conscious, hermeneutically-grounded modes of understanding, rather than the abstract, mathematical models of nature often associated with them. In its twentieth-century versions humanism also shares much of the mistrust of consumerism, instrumental reason, and "worldlessness" that marks environmentalist literature. Nevertheless, humanism is indeed committed to the principle that human beings are and ought to be free, and opposes theoretical approaches that suppress freedom. Reconciling humanism and environmentalism thus involves two steps: resisting the former's tendency to treat nature and freedom as metaphysical polarities, and drawing environmental theory away from flirtation with deterministic, biologistic worldviews. The essay concludes by suggesting Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac as the paradigm case of environmental thought with roots in humanist approaches.
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