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Most environmental philosophers have had little use for “conventional” philosophical and political thought. This is unfortunate, because these traditions can greatly contribute to environmental ethics and policy discussions. One mainstream concept of potential value for environmental philosophy is the notion of the public interest. Yet even though the public interest is widely acknowledged to be a powerful ethical standard in public affairs and public policy, there has been little agreement on its descriptive meaning. A particularly intriguing account of the concept in the literature, however, may be found in the work of the American pragmatist John Dewey. Dewey argued that the public interest was to be continuously constructed through the process of free, cooperative inquiry into the shared good of the democratic community. This Deweyan model of the public interest has much to offer environmental philosophers who are interested in making connections between normative arguments and environmental policy discourse, and it holds great promise for enhancing environmental philosophy’s role and impact in public life.
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