



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Jamieson, Dale. "The View From Princeton: American Perspectives on Environmental Values." *Environmental Values* 15, no. 3, (2006): 273-276.  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5965>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2006. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

## The View From Princeton: American Perspectives on Environmental Values

DALE JAMIESON

*New York University  
Steinhardt School, HMSS  
246 Greene Street, Suite 300  
New York, NY 10003-6677, USA  
Email: dwj3@nyu.edu*

The origin of this special issue is in my experience as Laurence S. Rockefeller Visiting Professor for Distinguished Teaching in the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University. Since one of my duties at Princeton was to teach an undergraduate class, I decided to teach a course on Ethics and the Environment. The class was taught in the Woodrow Wilson School for Public and International Affairs, and also cross-listed with the Philosophy Department. My suggestion that the course also be cross-listed with the Princeton Environmental Institute was greeted with surprise. After all, this was a course on ethics. What could it possibly have to do with the Princeton Environmental Institute? Environmental institutes are about science, not philosophy; at least this is what the administrator in charge seemed to think.

At that moment I decided to organise a workshop on environmental values bringing together humanists, social scientists and natural scientists to discuss this topic. I wanted to invite outstanding researchers in the area of environmental values, and subject their papers to the scrutiny of Princeton scholars. I hoped that this might have positive spillover effects on students and the university community at large. To a great extent, I think, these hopes were realised.

The workshop was held on 2 May 2005. Two panels were devoted to particular dimensions of environmental values, and a third panel analysed conflicting values in the climate change debate. For each panel there was a discussant, and Gustav Speth, the Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, gave the keynote address. With the exception of the keynote address and one paper presented in the climate change session, this special issue includes all of the papers delivered at the workshop. However, the papers have been revised, refereed, and revised again since their original presentation.

The papers by Emily Brady, Holmes Rolston III, and Dana Philips discuss aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of environmental values. Brady's paper is aimed at showing how aesthetic valuing is embedded in our relationships with

nature and how it underpins many of our attitudes toward the environment. For these reasons such values are and ought to be important to environmental policy debates. Philips begins with a careful reading of Thoreau, but arrives at an iconoclastic stance towards the role of nature writing in environmental valuation. While he grants that such writing has been important in the development of the American environmental movement (think Rachel Carson), he observes that such 'inspiration' risks producing 'both purple prose and poor doctrine', citing some examples. Rolston declares that ethics and religion are central to questions of environmental policy. For the sciences, including economics, cannot tell us how to value nature. He concludes with a frankly religious appeal: 'If anything at all on Earth is sacred, it must be this enthralling creativity that characterises our home planet. If anywhere, here is the brooding Spirit of God.' In her discussion of these papers, Susan Stewart observes that the assertion of the centrality of aesthetic considerations to environmental policy sometimes seems to be a matter of wishful thinking, at least when compared to the grim calculus of short-term economic gain. What is needed, Stewart suggests, is to free environmental policy-making from 'the short leash of necessity' and refocus it instead on the superfluity of experience given to us by nature.

Thomas Dunlap, Thomas Hill Jr., and Kimberly Smith focus on moral, political, and religious values. Chiming with Rolston, Dunlap claims that environmentalism is ultimately a religious movement, and that this explains much of its power and passion. Acknowledging its 'roots in secular faiths and conventional religion may be necessary' to reignite environmentalism, which has become stalled, at least as a political movement in America. Hill, by contrast, proposes to show 'without metaphysical obscurity or undue anthropocentrism, how and why it is good to value certain natural phenomena for their own sakes and to recognise and respond appropriately to the value they have ... independently of human rights and welfare'. Kimberly Smith surveys environmental political theory, focusing on the rising idea that nature is not just an object of politics, but also a subject. In his commentary, Michael Smith expresses scepticism about Dunlap's claims. He draws on Hill's paper to show that environmentalism may be justified on a number of different grounds, thus there may be no conceptual reason to advert to religious justifications. Moreover, even if it is true that environmentalism originated in a religious sensibility, it does not follow that returning to these roots would be most politically potent in forwarding the movement. A highly contextualised empirical argument about political tactics would be required to secure this conclusion. Finally, Michael Smith voices some suspicions about Kimberly Smith's idea of nature as a subject, and in particular her treatment of the social contract tradition.

The issue concludes with papers on climate change by Steve Gardiner, Michael Toman and Michael McCracken, and a commentary by Peter Singer. Toman reviews the debate over the role of economics in setting climate change policy. He goes on to sketch a way in which technical economic analysis and

## THE VIEW FROM PRINCETON

public dialogue might be combined. McCracken wants to explain more generally why, in the United States at least, there is so much political controversy over climate change even in the face of growing scientific consensus. The reason, he claims, is that both the public and policy-makers are subjected to diverse interpretations of the evidence. Different communities 'spin' the science in ways that suit their own interests. Gardiner argues that climate change is a 'perfect moral storm' that presents us with almost insuperable obstacles to our ability to make the hard choices necessary to address it. Most disturbing, this perfect storm makes us extremely vulnerable to moral corruption. Singer agrees with much of the diagnosis presented in these papers, but he thinks that McCracken lets the Bush administration off the hook too easily. Sometimes the best explanation for bad policy is bad policy-makers who have bad values. Singer sketches his own version of a just solution to the climate change problem, and concludes by speculating that self-interest may yet provoke the United States into acting responsibly.

Many people helped to make the workshop and the publication of this special issue possible. Princeton University in various guises provided funds, space, and organisational resources. Several members of the faculty, especially William Howarth, Stephen Macedo and François M.M. Morel, were unflinching in their support and generous with their advice. The editors of *Environmental Values*, particularly Clive Spash who oversaw the production of this issue, have been both enthusiastic and efficient, while ensuring that the issue conforms to the highest standards of professional scholarship. Hovering in the background are those anonymous scholars who reviewed the papers and made many suggestions for improvements, as well as the administrative support staff at both Princeton and *Environmental Values* who helped bring the event and the issue into existence. Finally, I would like to thank the contributors both for their cooperation and contributions.

In my opinion, almost anyone can find something to learn from each of these papers. However, the best way to read them is not singly, but in light of each other. Taken as a whole, the papers in this issue approach questions about environmental values from various perspectives, backgrounds, and concerns. Whatever else may result from the publication of this issue, I hope that it will constitute one small step towards making clear that environmental questions are not narrowly confined to particular disciplines or departments of knowledge, but are best approached from multiple perspectives, drawing on a wide range of materials, methodologies and expertise.

## REFERENCES

- Brady, Emily. 2006. 'Aesthetics in Practice: Valuing the Natural World'. *Environmental Values* 15: 277–91.

- Dunlap, Thomas. 2006. 'Environmentalism, a Secular Faith'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 321–30.
- Gardiner, Stephen M. 2006. 'A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 397–413.
- Hill, Thomas. 2006. 'Finding Value in Nature'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 331–41.
- MacCracken, Michael C. 2006. 'Climate Change Discussions in Washington: A Matter of Contending Perspectives'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 381–95.
- Phillips, Dana. 2006. 'Thoreau's Aesthetics and "The Domain of the Superlative"'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 293–305.
- Rolston, Holmes, III. 'Caring for Nature: What Science and Economics Can't Teach Us but Religion Can'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 307–13.
- Singer, Peter. 2006. 'Ethics and Climate Change: A Commentary on MacCracken, Toman and Gardiner'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 415–22.
- Smith, Kimberly K. 2006. 'Natural Subjects: Nature and Political Community'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 343–53.
- Smith, Michael. 2006. 'Environmentalism: Spiritual, Ethical, Political'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 355–63.
- Stewart, Susan. 2006. 'Response to Brady, Phillips and Rolston'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 315–20.
- Toman, Michael. 2006. 'Values in the Economics of Climate Change'. *Environmental Values* **15**: 365–79.