



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Brady, Emily. "Editorial."

Environmental Values 16, no. 2, (2007).

<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6004>

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Sense and Sensibility

Iceland's position on the mid-Atlantic plate boundary generates landscapes that are especially dynamic in character, with active volcanoes, vast ice sheets and several related features such as glacial rivers and lagoons, calderas, geysers and geothermal areas. I recently returned from a workshop based around a research project to classify, for the first time, the character areas of Iceland's landscapes. This classification is one step towards a better understanding of the great diversity and value of these landscapes and, importantly, will serve as a means for deliberations concerning their conservation (in addition to existing national parks). This classification has become urgent as recent plans to provide energy for Alcoa aluminium smelters are leading to developments that will have profound impacts on the environment. The most recent and controversial is the Kárahnjúkar project, the construction of the largest hydroelectric dam in Europe in a remote, wild area of the north-east highlands. This project has divided the country and sparked environmental activism on a scale never seen before in Iceland (INCA 2007; Jónsson, 2007; Lynas 2004).

I could write reams about why this dam project is a tragedy for Iceland's environment, but the topic of this editorial is, more modestly, to reflect on the contribution made by careful perceptual attention, or sensibility, for valuing natural environments. In many cases – but not all surely – sensibility of the perceptual kind leads to sense or sensibility of the more common sense, intellectual kind, as in having good sense or being reasonable. Something like this happens in various forms of natural scientific understanding which begin with close perceptual attention, and scientists often claim that their interest in insects, plants, animals, rocks and so on, originates in explicit forms of valuing nature that depend upon sensibility, such as wonder, beauty and sublimity. Given their etymology, it perhaps comes as no surprise that sense and sensibility are linked; however, there is a tendency to set the two in opposition, especially when aesthetic sensibility is contrasted with forms of rationality (as expressed in Jane Austen's novel, *Sense and Sensibility*).

Bringing these meanings closer together in practice is just what happened, I believe, during the landscape workshop in Iceland. The academics there came from backgrounds in biology, ecology, landscape planning, environmental ethics and aesthetics, and environmental politics. On the second day we were taken on a tour into an area in the southern highlands, where we had the opportunity to experience first hand the rich diversity of Icelandic landscapes. The journey mixed distant views of rolling black sand deserts, glaciers, green-blue lakes, grey moss-covered lava fields, tumbling waterfalls, and bright green moss-edged hills or streams with immediate sensuous perception of lava, fine-grained sand, soft moss, sulphur smells, the heat and sounds of boiling, steaming water and earth, as well as some extremely weird algae in the hot springs. These experiences were informed by a running commentary by our hosts, who explained

some of the phenomena in terms of their natural history. Our individual experiences were frequently combined with sharing our fascination with some view, colour or texture, and we searched together for the most fitting way to describe what we were seeing (which didn't always fit into the sensibility many of us had from past experiences, even for some of the Icelanders in the group). Was it interesting? Was it weird beauty? Was it unscenic? Was it ugly? Was it sublime? Just *what* was it? Well, probably it was all of that and more. In essence, we were trying to *make sense* of the new forms of life around us. Through a combination of immediate perceptual engagement and forms of interpretation and understanding, we developed a significant appreciation for these landscapes. This is an appreciation which will now inform our thinking on landscapes in different ways.

This experience confirms to me the importance of appreciating both sense and sensibility, not only as having value in themselves but also in their interrelationship: it is not a choice between one and the other even if the two are sometimes placed at odds. In this issue of the journal, Lewis and Sandra Hinchman (2007) show what current environmental thought owes to Romanticism, and especially relevant for my reflections here, the new sensibility for nature celebrated by Wordsworth and others. They urge us to reconsider the Romantic view of science as not mystical but simply disinclined to accept a reductionist approach to the natural world. Stewart Davidson (2007) challenges some of the assumed links between bioregionalism and deep ecology, and in doing so he brings out some of the tensions between subjectivity, relativism and identification with nature in deep ecology and bioregionalism's attempt to integrate culture via boundaries provided by particular ecosystems. The various problems inherent in ecotopianism are explored by David Pepper (2007), and they reflect, among other things, tensions between romantic idealist and scientific realist conceptions of environment.

It is disappointing to see the meagre role given to non-instrumental and aesthetic values in the vision and mission statements of international environmental organisations, which, as shown by Claudio Campagna and Teresita Fernández (2007) are largely preoccupied with a 'presentation of nature serving human needs according to the ethics of use and consumption' (2007). This may reflect that common avoidance of values that are difficult to establish for one reason or other and the ease of using resource-based arguments. The rigour of reason in H.L.A. Hart's rights theory is integrated with concerns for well-being and environmental protection in Aaron Lercher's article, which argues for an environmental moral right against pollution (2007).

Some of the articles here articulate a set of tensions that relate more or less directly to the debate between humanism and anti-humanism in environmental thought, a debate which has been explored a great deal in the pages of this journal and beyond (see, for example, Attfeld 2005; Hinchman 2004; Hepburn 1998; Ehrenfeld 1978). The two positions are not irreconcilable though: the connec-

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tions between sense and sensibility and the ways they feed upon one another may provide some promise toward reconciliation.

EMILY BRADY

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The environmental crisis requires us to think deeply about its causes and possible solutions. Although technologically driven approaches to these problems have been and will continue to be important, many commentators – from ecologists and environmental NGOs to political and religious leaders – consider that our environmental problems can only properly be understood and addressed at the level of the fundamental values that people hold. The MA Values and Environment (MAVE) provides an opportunity for students to deepen their understanding of how the values that have shaped our view of the world have emerged, what alternative approaches are being developed (or revived), and how these alternatives might be put to work to shape our global future. This is a philosophically oriented MA, but it is designed to be accessible – in both content and mode of delivery – and of use to people working in environmental careers.

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