



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Benton, Ted. "Environmental Values and Human Purposes."
Environmental Values 17, no. 2, (2008): 201-220.
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6031>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 2008. 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/>

Environmental Values and Human Purposes

TED BENTON

*The Department of Sociology
University of Essex
Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK
Email: tbenton@essex.ac.uk*

ABSTRACT

Some writings by Alan Holland provide the starting point for an exploration of sources of environmental value in human social practices. It is argued that many practices both serve human purposes and also provide a setting for the emergence of environmental value. Such practices are ones in which activity is embedded in, and so both strongly constrained and enabled by, its conditions and media. Capitalist 'modernisation' has tended to erode these practices and associated values in favour of external purposes and instrumental values, especially in the farmed countryside. In the face of this, and partly on grounds of social justice, a re-valuation of urban open spaces is advocated.

KEYWORDS

Habitats, nature, sustainability, intrinsic value

INTRODUCTION

This paper is provoked by reflection on the dilemmas of practical action to defend 'nature' in the face of ever-intensifying pressures for 'development'. This is particularly acute in urban areas, where open spaces are frequently seen as unsightly, 'waste' ground or designated as 'brownfield sites', eminently suitable for development. Noting some of Alan Holland's reservations about some aspects of environmental ethics, I embark on an exploration of some ideas from environmental sociology in search of some sources for the emergence of environmental values in the course of human social life and practice. The loss of such sources of value as a result of agricultural modernisation has been bitterly and powerfully expressed by writers such as Marion Shoard, and her response to the transformation of the countryside provides the grounding for my own advocacy of a re-valuation of our remaining urban open spaces. But questions remain – what normative authority can such advocacy claim against competing demands for 'development', or for a tidy, domesticated and controlled urban scene?

THE PRACTICAL CHALLENGE: DEFENDING GREEN OPEN SPACES

As I write this I am also engaged in the dispiriting task of responding, on behalf of our local natural history society, to two public 'consultations' initiated by our Borough Council. One is the draft 'core strategy', setting the framework for local 'development' over the coming 15 years, while the other sets out the Council's plans for provision of parks and open spaces in the face of the challenges posed by 'pressure for increasing residential and commercial development ...'. The central 'vision' that shapes the first document is that our town will 'develop as a prestigious regional centre', a 'preferred destination for visitors, for business location and for investment'. It will also 'create a sustainable environment in which people will continue to enjoy high levels of health and well-being'.

The consultative document on parks and open spaces is confronted with a considerable challenge by the implications of the core strategy. Combining large-scale new housing developments, associated infrastructural provision (not that there has been much sign of this!), new industrial and business sites and tourist facilities with enhanced provision of high quality green open spaces seems a daunting prospect. Courageously, the document lists the reasons why it is important to do just this. There are, apparently, five. First is the economic value. House-buyers are willing to pay more to be near green spaces, so there is a positive influence on property prices and land values. Second, there are health benefits: levels of obesity, heart disease and mental health problems could all be reduced by exercise and 'access to the natural environment'. Third, places to play outdoors are important for childhood development. Fourth, better manage-

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES AND HUMAN PURPOSES

ment of open spaces can reduce fear of crime and enable people to make the most of their environments. Finally, open spaces contribute in various ways to community cohesion, as venues for social events, providing meeting places for people of different ages, ethnic origins and so on.

Running through this list and its elaborations there are arguments that do touch on real requirements for the living of satisfactory lives in an urban environment. However, what is unmistakable is a certain opportunism in the way that the case is made. Open space provision is pressed into the service of current governmental policy priorities and 'moral panics': obesity, 'anti-social behaviour', communal tensions. The emphasis on economic value is particularly interesting. It links to central government pressure for increased housing provision as well as the local 'vision' for a 'prestigious regional centre'. However, there are internal contradictions. Provision of open space is not a statutory requirement, so local authorities have to fund it by means such as 'planning gain'. In other words, developers have to be persuaded it is in their interests that green open spaces be provided. Increased property prices for 'prestigious' developments close to green open spaces should do the trick – maybe. However, the government's verbal commitment is to 'affordable' housing. On the face of it, providing good quality green spaces adjacent to new developments cuts against this. If we are to rely on the market to deliver affordable housing, then, according to this logic, green spaces should be obliterated and environmental quality degraded. On the other hand, if green spaces are to be provided in order to raise property and land values, then the association of affluence with a disproportionate share of environmental goods is reinforced: the link between 'sustainability' and social justice is broken.

The above list of reasons for providing green open spaces in the face of intense development pressures reflects a perceived need to make a strong, unsentimental case that will appeal to powerful political and economic decision-makers. At the same time, however, the document seems to acknowledge a more universal and democratic set of needs that should be addressed, and there are even hints at the compensatory role of 'access to the natural environment': obesity and heart disease, as well as high levels of stress and mental health problems are acknowledged as pathological symptoms of a contemporary mode of life and work. Fear of crime is acknowledged to inhibit people's use of public space. The presence of communal tensions is acknowledged in the advocacy of public open space to ameliorate them. Ironically, much of this social pathology can be linked to the very values and priorities at the core of the local development strategy: the competitive struggle for prestige and economic wealth.

The inherent tensions in this official advocacy of green open spaces and public access to the pleasures of nature are probably widely experienced and well-understood by anyone practically involved in environmental politics. Do you give the real, moral, sentimental, 'utopian' reasons for defending nature, or do you find a language and value-frame that you hope will articulate with that

of those with decision-making power? The former approach may (and to many of those individuals and organisations currently engaged in the field certainly does) seem naïve and futile. But the latter, pragmatic approach also has its limitations. As we abandon the deeper sources of our passion, the more instrumental discourses we adopt lose their sense of urgency and authenticity and, with that, their persuasive power. As to practical efficacy, it is worth noting that virtually all the laudable policy objectives proclaimed in the consultative document have already been over-ridden by planning decisions taken before the 'consultation' is over. Maybe a forthright rejection of the core vision of a 'prestigious regional centre' in favour of an enhanced quality of life, a more harmonious relationship with the local natural environment and a slower pace of life might at least have pointed to the possibility of an alternative?

AN ALTERNATIVE VISION? THE PROMISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

The problem is how to ground such an alternative vision. Is it just a matter of taste, or personal preference? Why should anyone, let alone the planners, building developers and councillors, take any notice? One place to look might be the recently formed discipline of environmental ethics. Alan Holland has provided us with some convincing arguments against the modes of thought that currently predominate in shaping decisions about the fate of environmental 'goods'. In a series of publications he has contested the prevailing reduction of value to price in the neo-classical 'take-over' of the notion of sustainability (see especially Holland 1999 and 2000). He has gone on to demonstrate the limitations of the utilitarian view of human nature and the good life as 'satisfaction of preferences' that underpins neo-classical economics. The transfer of this conception into dominant interpretations of sustainability undermines any serious restraining influence that the earlier vision of sustainable development might have had. The proclaimed distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' sustainability turns out, on his analysis, to have little or no purchase if the objective of 'sustained welfare', defined as satisfaction of preferences, remains unquestioned.

Holland's argument is that we need the means to make judgments, instead of supposing that objective measurement will resolve our dilemmas. Partly this is because, deprived of the false 'universal equivalent' of monetary calculation, choices have to be made between qualitatively different – often incommensurable – goods and priorities. This also means that questions of value – often of conflicting values – cannot be suppressed. A more institutionally situated way of putting this is to say we need to put ourselves in the position of putatively informed and empowered citizens rather than as mere consumers (or, as my consultative document puts it, 'customers').

So, how well do the achievements of environmental ethics to date equip us as active citizens? Here, Holland is again in critical mode. As a leading figure in the discipline he has some serious reservations about it. In one recent paper he lists five of these (Holland 2006). First, approaches to environmental ethics are often too closely dependent on specific ecological theories (Holland 1995). Second, there is a tendency to extend to non-human beings categories that have their paradigm application to humans, rather than to value nature for what it is, independently of any commonalities with ourselves. Third, the 'deeper' end of environmentalism makes use of the idea of intrinsic value in non-humans. Holland has some interesting reservations about this notion, and they will be discussed later. Fourth (and closely tied to his questioning of the idea of intrinsic value), Holland criticises the widespread neglect of the value of relationships in environmental ethics (though conceding that this is partly corrected by recent work in feminist ethics and increasing attention to the significance of place). Fifth, through its strong contrast between intrinsic and instrumental value, environmental ethics is inclined to undervalue the latter.

Although a sceptic about the concept of intrinsic value, Holland does defend the use of the concept of nature in environmental ethics. In a response to Vogel's (2002) argument that the natural and artefactual are so inextricably mixed that the concept of nature itself should be abandoned in environmental ethics, Holland offers a clear distinction. Against the view that nature is whatever remains uninfluenced by human activity, he proposes a distinction between the natural and artefactual in terms of deliberate or intentional acts on the part of humans:

But what makes it [a cultivated plant] an artefact is not that we planted it, and in that sense caused it to come into existence, but the fact that human ingenuity has gone into shaping the kind of plant that it is. Hence, a thing is artificial if and only if its nature is at least partly the result of a deliberate or intentional act, usually involving the application of some art or skill. Correspondingly, a thing is natural if and only if it owes nothing of what it is to a deliberate or intentional act. (Holland 2006: 130).

But precisely what sort of relationship between intentional acts and their outcomes is required to qualify something as an artefact? For example, oceanic pollution and climate change do owe something to deliberate and intentional human activity. However, we must suppose that the intentions involved were to do things like take journeys by car, or fertilise crops, rather than to cause pollution or change the climate. Since the context makes clear that Holland does not want to include such things as artefacts, it follows that 'result' in the above quotation has to be taken as implying more than a merely causal relationship.

So, perhaps an artefact is something that is the *intended* outcome of deliberate human activity. There is even some difficulty here, as anyone involved in creative activity will readily acknowledge that our creations often turn out quite differently from our first thoughts – indeed, that there is something about the

materials and conditions with and under which we work that exceeds, transforms or frustrates our purposes. However, as Holland's example of the cultivated plant implies, it is the relationship between human intentional activity and the *nature* of its outcomes that is crucial here. Avoiding the thicket of controversy over 'essentialism', I propose to render this as a matter of the kind, or sort of thing that is produced. So, for something to count as an artefact it should be describable as the *sort* of thing that was intended by its maker. For example, a garden may count as an artefact as the gardener did intend it to be a garden, even though the slugs got some of the plants and others were killed by drought, so her initial design was frustrated in some respects. This is, I hope, close to what Holland intended by his way of making the distinction, but it leaves a huge and diverse category of 'results of (intentional) human activity' that, while not, by definition, 'natural' are not artefactual either. These might include plants and animals, objects, relations, processes, environments and so on, all of which may have been significantly affected or shaped in some way as a result of intentional human activity but not as *intended* outcomes. These may be unintended consequences that are recognised and valued, ones that frustrate the intentions of the activity of which they are consequences, or other purposes, or they may simply be unrecognised and unacknowledged, but still causally significant.

NATURE, THE 'SEMI-NATURAL' AND THE EMBEDDING OF PRACTICE

Despite their varied and often tenuous relationship to human purposive action this large category of 'results of human activity', which yet do not count as artefacts, raises interesting and important issues for environmental philosophy. This is, to some extent, because, as some writers of the 'death of nature' school point out, there remain few if any areas of what we commonly regard as 'nature' that do not bear the mark of past human activity. The mountain peaks, open seas, arctic forest and tundra and the polar ice-caps come close, but even in many of these more remote settings, small populations of humans do (or did) manage a meagre subsistence. Even where this is no longer true, human-induced climate change, air pollution and other unintended effects of human activity are significantly altering the remaining icons of what the Romantic tradition valorised in its view of 'wild nature'.

Perhaps to recapture some of their sense of awe and wonder – even terror – in the face of nature's grandeur we need now to look out beyond the Earth itself to the immensity of the universe. This Romantic heritage (in those countries and cultural traditions where it has been influential) does offer important cultural resources for communities and individuals to discover something of the value of nature – as an inspiring presence, far greater than ourselves, worthy of our admiration and respect. Our contemporary deep ecologists' perception of the

intrinsic value of nature and of our moral responsibility for it owes much to this historical-cultural legacy (Hinchman and Hinchman 2007). So, too, arguably, did the establishment of the National Parks in Britain (and probably also in several other countries). The Act of Parliament that allowed for them, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949, set out two aims: to preserve the landscape, wildlife, architectural and historical value of selected areas of 'beautiful and relatively wild country' and to provide for 'public open air enjoyment'. The latter aim was to be achieved by taking into account 'position in relation to centres of population' in the selection of areas to be designated. In fact, of the first ten national parks to be designated, only two (the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales) satisfied this criterion, whereas all conformed to the Romantic vision of wild, mountainous, relatively unpopulated landscapes.

This Romantic legacy, where it has taken hold, has, then, been effective in preserving valued landscapes and sustaining such traditional ways of life that had long been associated with them. But – and this also finds expression in the notion of a 'death of nature' – the identification of the 'natural' with what is 'other', grand, 'special' and inspiring is complicit in a certain failure to recognise and protect the value of our more familiar, gentler, local and common environments – also often thought of as 'nature', despite the role of a long history of human activity in shaping their current character: chalk downland, lowland heaths, wetlands, old orchards, ancient woodland, flower-rich meadows and others (see O'Neill 2007). Such legislation as exists to protect these environments has been largely ineffectual in the face of intense pressure from agricultural 'modernisation' and urbanisation, and it has only been in recent decades (in the UK) that the deep sense of loss of these valued environments has expressed itself in social movement activity and come to be felt across wide sectors of the population – both urban and rural.

One of the most eloquent writers giving voice to this deep sense of loss has been Marion Shoard. In one of her books (Shoard 1980) she provides plenty of facts and figures to buttress her theme of the 'theft of the countryside', but perhaps more powerful is her narrative of agricultural change in the Kent valley of Alkham. Even after the ploughing up of much of the downs, the village of Alkham still, until the late 1970s, 'was virtually ringed by rolling chalk downland interspersed with oak and ash remnants of the wildwood'. However, despite the resistance of locals and some intervention by public bodies, the new owner of the land cleared it of its 'natural' vegetation:

The downland was ploughed up, bushes, scrubland and hedgerows were bulldozed away, trees were felled, and one whole wood was removed ... local people used to walking through a leafy lane now have to struggle across ploughed earth if they still feel it is worth taking the walk. Not many do. What was a particularly attractive flint-based track leading north from Alkham bounded by hedges and bordered with primroses, violets, bluebells, campion and many other flowers, is now impossible to find. The whole area has been made into one large field, the

wood and hedges have gone and the dip in which the track ran has been filled in. (Shoard 1980: 72)

The sense of loss experienced by many, and the agitation to conserve what little remains in the face of immense pressures for destructive economic exploitation has focused on the loss of traditional rural landscapes and habitats, but urban locales are also, and perhaps increasingly, subjects of passionate conservation interest: landscaped parks and gardens, as well as fine buildings, townscape, former industrial workings and so-called 'brownfield' sites. Some of these count as 'artefactual' in my revised version of Holland's definition – landscaped parks and gardens, fine buildings and the like are to a considerable degree the intended outcome of the work of their designers and builders. They come close to having the sort of value attributed to fine works of art, and to be fully appreciated have to be viewed through the medium of a historical-cultural understanding of their aesthetic and social meanings and historical significance. However, the townscape, disused industrial and brownfield sites are different again – they are certainly the consequences of human intentional activity, but not, in the main, the *intended* outcome of it. Presumably the builders of factories and diggers of mines and quarries did not set out on their enterprise with the aim of providing the tourists of the future with 'industrial heritage sites' to visit. So, they are neither 'nature' nor 'artefact' yet increasingly they are seen to have environmental value. Interestingly, a nature reserve recently established in Essex by combining several former chalk quarries, and entirely surrounded by dense, bleak, impersonal modern housing estates, is called 'Chafford Gorges', as if the steep sides of the quarries were to be imagined as a spectacular phenomenon of nature.

I'll return later to the importance of such urban locales, but for now let us consider further the sorts of rural landscape and habitat whose loss was so powerfully lamented by Shoard. That is, downland, old orchards, ancient woodlands and heaths are more likely to be valued as 'nature' – or, in the terms of the planning document I mentioned above, 'natural heritage'. Although these are the outcomes of long-term interactions between human intentional practices and natural conditions and processes, they are not planned or intended outcomes in the way landscaped parks or buildings are. For the most part they are contingent by-products of activities carried on for other reasons – the products of coppicing, grazing of domestic animals, harvesting of fruit and so on.

What distinguishes these from other contingent outcomes of past practices, such as oceanic pollution, climate change, intensively managed 'farmscapes' that are not, generally, positively valued? One sort of answer (and one, as we shall see, emphasised by Holland himself) has to do with the relationship between specific past practices and our sense of our own identity and place in a wider set of historical and spatial relationships. This must be at least part of the picture, but it also applies to valued cultural products – works of art, fine buildings, landscaped parks and gardens and other artefacts.

So what, if anything, is *distinctive* about downland, coppiced woodland, fenland, lowland heath, grazing marsh and the rest that make them objects of positive environmental value? The term often used in nature conservation circles is 'semi-natural habitat'. The emphasis of nature conservationists on these implicitly acknowledges that, at least in the UK and most of Western Europe, 'pristine' natural habitats, ones whose natures 'owe nothing to' past human activity, are vanishingly scarce. Equally, it suggests that these largely unintended outcomes of sustained past human interaction with non-human nature continue to have conservation value. This is conservation value that cannot be easily assimilated, or reduced, to the category of 'cultural value' as in the case of artefacts.

At least one important source of value here may be that – as the use of the term 'habitat' rather than, for example, 'landscape' suggests – the material practices through which human activity has shaped these environments has favoured co-existence with significant populations of wild species. To the extent that numerous species of orchids and butterflies could flourish on chalk downland alongside, and even benefit from, the grazing of stock animals, the downland becomes an ecosystem in its own right, with its own distinctive features. The human role in determining stocking levels, the timing and intensity of grazing and so-on also plays its part, even if unintentionally, in reproducing the ecological requirements of the animal and plant communities of the downland. Something similar could be said about most, but not all, of our list of 'semi-natural' habitats.

Arguably, these are examples of a certain sort of embedding of human intentional agency within its naturally and historically given conditions and media. Elsewhere (Benton 1989, 1992, 1993) I have attempted to develop a way of classifying practices in terms of their different 'intentional structures'. By this I mean the different ways in which human intentional activity is situated in relation to its conditions, means, media and outcomes. 'Productive-transformative' intentional structures approximate to what is often called 'instrumental action'. A given raw material (which may be a product of a previous set of social practices) is transformed in such a way as to serve an intended purpose: a piece of wood is transformed into an item of furniture, or a piece of clay into a ceramic pot. Of course, enabling conditions and constraints are presupposed in such practices but the central concept of action as transformative hides these conditions from view, as if they did not need to be taken into account.

However, in what I called 'ecoregulatory' practices, such as agriculture, silviculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and others, human intentional action is embedded in ways that make acknowledgment of such enablements and constraints unavoidable. Of course, such practices as these have become established only on the basis of past transformative action to clear natural vegetation, introduce fencing or other barriers, provide irrigation etc. However, once established, and for the period of time that a given technical organisation of work prevails, the main transformative moment is not achieved by human agency, but by natural, organic processes of growth, development and reproduction. In the main, human

activity is devoted to optimising and maintaining the conditions under which autonomous organic processes that produce desired outcomes take place. For this reason, human intentional activity is constrained in important ways by external conditions which are not (immediately, and for any given phase in the development of the technical organisation of work) open to intentional manipulation. So, for example, climate, altitude, soil type and availability of water will limit the geographical range, and, within it, the localities where a particular strain of crop plant can be grown successfully. Where conditions do favour the crop plant, a mix of different labouring activities, distributed appropriately across seasons, will be needed to ensure success. The organic requirements and developmental rhythms of the crop, therefore, constrain the distribution of human activity both spatially and temporally.

There are yet other varieties of intentional structure – for example ‘primary appropriation’. This notion includes both activities such as mining, wind farming and quarrying which involve the bringing into human social use naturally given materials, substances and forms of energy, and others, such as fishing and hunting, which involve culling for human use from naturally occurring populations of wild species. In these cases, the limited ‘means/ends’ transformative model of ‘instrumental action’ is still less appropriate. Naturally occurring beings, substances, etc. are brought into human social use primarily by prospecting, detecting, capturing, extracting and re-locating, rather than by being materially transformed (though, of course, subsequent labour processes may, and usually will, involve transformative action – refining, skinning, cooking etc.). In these sorts of practice, human intentional activity is still more constrained by non-manipulable conditions. In the case of non-renewable resources there is an ultimate limit imposed by the sheer amount of resource, but, more mediately, constraints are imposed by its physical location, accessibility of deposits given current technologies, as well as geopolitical, military, infrastructural and economic processes and structures. The example of middle-east oil reserves is a vivid and intractable illustration of the significance of this complex of intertwined conditions of action. In the case of renewable resources, human intentional action is, again, severely spatially constrained – you have to hunt or fish wherever the game or fish happen to be (and you probably have to acquire quite a lot of scientific and/or experiential understanding of the behaviour and life-cycles of the species concerned), and the practice is self-defeating if ‘harvesting’ rates exceed the reproductive rates of the population.

This general notion of ‘intentional structure’ could be extended to other practices such as child-rearing, education, caring for the sick, artistic creation, cooking, scientific research, taking a walk and so on. In these very different sorts of case, too, the location of human action, as well as its timing and the sorts of skill and understanding required are both constrained and enabled by spatial, bodily, organic and developmental processes that have their own autonomous temporality and patterns of resistance/affordance to intentional interventions. However, here

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES AND HUMAN PURPOSES

too, action is both constrained and regulated by cultural and/or ethical norms and conventions, and may have affective or symbolic significance that makes it the kind of action it is, and so on. So, for example, emotional engagements between carers and cared-for may motivate but also may be *emergent from* the caring relationship, and, as socially recognised (and, often, institutionally embedded) practices, they are also governed by ethical and normative considerations. The traditions of sociological theory acknowledge this by, for example, distinguishing between ‘instrumentally rational’, ‘value-rational’, ‘affective’ and ‘traditional’ types of social action (Weber), or between ‘instrumental’ and ‘communicative’ action (Habermas). However, these typologies generally under-represent the extent to which action is constrained or regulated by the material or organic character of its conditions and objects. That is, the socio-cultural embedding of action is well recognised, but its material embedding is not.

NEEDS, VALUES AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

There are insights to be gained from the discussion so far which may help cut through the thicket of debate about the contrast between instrumental and intrinsic value. One of Holland’s critical comments on environmental ethics is its tendency to undervalue the instrumental. I understand his thought here as meaning that much human interaction with nature has been and still is ordinarily need-meeting, and to denigrate this in the name of intrinsic value in non-human nature is to risk being unable to reunite legitimate human claims to secure livelihoods with a proper regard for nature. He also argues for more attention to the *processes* of industry and agriculture, rather than their products:

... the value and dignity of work; the challenge and satisfaction of the exercise of craft and the application of skill; and, in the case of gardening and farming especially, the rewarding and productive engagement with other life forms and the opportunities to exercise virtues of nurture and care. (Holland 2006: 133)

Arguably, when understood in this way, our need-meeting interactions with non-human nature are not readily reducible to the concept of instrumental action.

My attempt to analyse and differentiate intentional structures involved in a variety of such practices illustrates the extent to which human activity is embedded in its external conditions, dependent in many ways on processes and structures that are not available for intentional transformation, and is thus constrained in time and space, and in the understandings and skills required for success. If we add to this the legacy of social theory in exploring the normative and affective regulation of social action then we have a more complex and adequate view of need-meeting activity. The conceptual reduction of this great range of different activities to the notion of ‘instrumental action’ under-theorises the forms of embedding of practice in both material and social conditions and relations.

Considerations of value enter into and arise from practices in various ways. Pride and satisfaction in the acquisition and exercise of craft skill, and rewarding interaction with other life-forms are two such values mentioned by Holland. These are, indeed, varieties of intrinsic value, but they are intrinsic to practice, as structured intentional action, not (at least, not directly) intrinsic to the non-human natural beings or objects encountered or worked upon. Equally, recognising the socio-material embedding of such practices precludes reduction of their media, conditions, objects and means to the status of 'mere' instruments of humanly imposed purposes: respect for the properties of material worked-on, patience, care and nurturance as well as recognition of socio-cultural norms, characterise much material practice.

So, if we still wish to call the forms of value that are emergent in such practices 'instrumental', in virtue of the relation of the practices to human need-meeting, then there is a good case to be made, as Holland shows, for re-valuing 'instrumental value'. However, an alternative approach would be to reserve the notion of 'instrumental action' and the value attached to it to those forms of material practice engaged in solely for purposes external to themselves – to practices engaged in through coercive power relations, or for purposes of money-exchange, for example. The contrast intended here is most powerfully expressed in Marx's discussion of the alienation of labour under relations of private property:

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labour? First in the fact that labour is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. (Marx [1844] in Marx and Engels Vol. 3, 1975).

If the notion of instrumental value is reserved for human practices that are, in this sense, alienated, then the tendency of environmental ethicists to disparage it is supported. Meanwhile, non-coercive, non-alienated forms of need-meeting practice can be understood as having their own intrinsic value as both self-affirming and other-respecting. This is more readily recognised in the case of what I called ecoregulatory practices. In the need for caring and nurturative skills in animal 'husbandry', gardening or pastoralism, there are parallels with human-to-human caring relationships, and commonly there emerge comparable affective ties and 'moral sentiments' between humans and non-human animals (and even plants). Also, in more traditional versions of these practices, the co-existence with non-domesticated species and forms gives opportunities to

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES AND HUMAN PURPOSES

develop understanding of their variety, their modes of life and their distinctive ways of coping with the challenges of organic existence.

Something similar, too, can emerge even in scientific work. Evelyn Fox Keller's vision of a practice of science which does not insist on strict boundaries between subject and object, but which adopts an attitude of receptivity, affection and reciprocity points in this direction. Instead of a science which seeks to subordinate its objects to its categories in its theory, and to human interests in its practice, she claims to find in a subaltern practice of science a version of 'objectivity' which fully respects the otherness of its objects and thus the inherent limitations of its own conceptualisations. She finds this exemplified in the work of geneticist and developmental biologist Barbara McClintock:

The crucial point for us is that McClintock can risk the suspension of boundaries between subject and object without jeopardy to science precisely because, to her, science is not premised on that division. Indeed, the intimacy she experiences with the objects she studies – intimacy born of a lifetime of cultivated attentiveness – is a wellspring of her powers as a scientist. (Keller 1985: 164)

We have, then, a very diverse range of kinds of practice in which human intentionality is embedded in its socio-natural conditions and contexts, and relates to its means and objects in ways that, although related to the meeting of human needs and purposes, are not readily reducible to the concept of 'instrumental action'. These practices, it is suggested, provide the experiential setting in which moral sentiments of affection and respect for the non-human elements/participants are liable to arise spontaneously. However, the emergence of these sentiments and the sorts of valuation which go along with them are readily subverted and eroded by externally imposed distortions and transformations.

CAPITALIST 'MODERNISATION' AND THE DISENCHANTMENT OF WORK

This relates to the concerns of Marx in the above-quoted passage on alienated labour. Marx was there speaking of what he later characterised as 'formal' subsumption of labour under capitalist relations. This is a process in which the labour process itself is not transformed, but is distorted by its being pressed into the service of employers who seek to profit from the sale of its products. However, under capitalist economic relations, competitive pressures lead to technical innovations and subsequent reorganisations of the labour process, reducing labour costs, often by de-skilling, and rendering the labour process itself more open to managerial control and predictability. This is 'material' subsumption of the labour process.

Although the central concern of Marx, and most subsequent theorists of labour processes, was with the consequences for the human workers involved, these

recurrent technical transformations also have implications for the non-human conditions, beings and relations involved. Of most relevance to our concerns here, is the long-run tendency of technical reorganisations of agriculture and other ecoregulatory practices that renders them ever-more free of constraints imposed by particularities of time, place and socio-cultural context. Locally adapted strains of crop plants have been replaced by standardised high yield hybrid varieties with associated transformations of local agricultural ecologies, and application of the chemical inputs and mechanisation that they require. Typically these technical reorganisations have also entailed extensive changes in rural class structures, increased unavailability of sustainable rural livelihoods, and a range of sometimes catastrophic socio-ecological side-effects (see for example Berardi and Geisler 1984, Conway and Pretty 1991, Shiva 1991, Magdoff, Foster and Buttel (eds) 2000 and Pretty 2002). Some of these unintended and often self-destructive consequences have led to political and economic pressures for further transformations, of which the currently deeply contested deployment of transgenic organisms in agriculture is the best known.

In summary, the long-run tendencies of capitalist 'modernisation' of eco-regulatory labour processes are towards forms of intensification and 'disembedding' of working practices from local particularities, and replacement of experientially acquired skills by routine implementation of standardised scientific-technical routines. Here, and in other fields of practice, the intrinsic value and satisfaction in work is eroded, and the opportunities for 'rewarding and productive engagement with other life forms' is limited to the point of extinction.

HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND PRESENT PLEASURES

As newer disembedded and disenchanting forms of working practice become pervasive, remaining fragments of the forms they displaced acquire a new and greater significance. This does, perhaps, add to our understanding of the contemporary conservation priority accorded to semi-natural habitats such as downland, heath, and ancient coppice woodland. Not only do they remind us of former ways of engaging with non-human nature that favoured the flourishing of populations of other life forms, but they also represent almost-lost labouring practices that called for skill, experience, and understanding and were worthy of respect in their own right.

Again, this brings to attention Holland's insistence on the importance of our ability to situate our own lives in a wider historical context and narrative. On the value environments have for us, Holland says:

... they constitute our home and the familiar places in which everyday life takes place, from which it draws its meaning, and in which personal and social histories are embodied. (Holland 2006: 133)

However, the twin dynamics of agricultural intensification and urbanisation have led in a few decades to an abrupt loss (in the UK and large parts of western Europe) of this setting for the living of the personal and social lives of successive former generations. Any sense of one's place in a long-running historical narrative has been rendered inaccessible to the majority of us. This is more than the loss of a sense of one's place in an historical narrative. It has also meant the loss of a whole range of everyday pleasures that were formerly taken for granted. Again, Marion Shoard on Alkham:

The existence of so much rough down, scrub and wood within easy walking distance was one of the village's main attractions. Tussocky, hummocky grass with numerous anthills, interspersed with bushes of wild rose, wayfaring tree, bramble and hawthorn, made the hills behind the village a favourite playground for village children; many older people made these hills the start of a circular walk up around the village. On the opposite, more gentle side of the valley it used to be possible to walk for miles through a belt of rough chalk downland lying between farmland in the valley bottom and woodland on top. This belt of downland provided good blackberrying land and plenty of flowers, birds and butterflies; one length of it was always known as 'Paigle Meadow' because of the creamy drifts of cowslips ('paigle' is an old Kent word for this flower) that used to grow there ... [Sunny Hill] ... facing southwards across the valley was a particularly favourite spot for blackberrying, picnicking or playing hide-and-seek, all of which activities could be pursued on an aromatic carpet of wild thyme, marjoram and wild carrot, eyebright, rock-rose and harebell, pyramidal and spotted orchid. Butterflies – the chalkhill blue, common blue, brown argus, Adonis blue and brimstone – would dance among the flowers, while children played hide-and-seek among the bushes of wild rose, wayfaring tree, hawthorn, blackthorn and gorse. (Shoard 1980: 71–72)

So, the downland is not only a reminder of past, more intrinsically valued, and more nature-friendly labour processes, but it also has a present value as the arena within which valued relationships are lived, in which childhood memories are formed, and the sounds, sights and scents of non-human nature are enjoyed and recognised. It is this latter aspect that most differentiates the value of these 'semi-natural' environments from the cultural value we attribute to artefacts. These environments provide to a greater degree the opportunity to appreciate the diversity of other living species, to learn to identify butterflies, orchids, ferns or birds, to appreciate the amazing variety of ways they sustain life, often against apparently overwhelming odds.

Perhaps this is what Holland is getting at when he writes of the 'honouring of a historical legacy – cultural, ecological or evolutionary' (2006: 139), and it is true that to understand these other species as 'netted together' with us, as Darwin once put it, adds something important to our appreciation of them. Still, there is something special, irrespective of this historical connection, about the making

of direct contact with beings of other species. The immense public fascination with the TV series presented by David Attenborough – the oft-repeated sequence of his acceptance by a family group of mountain gorillas – is evidence of this (though, of course, the viewer's experience is highly mediated). Perhaps more telling are the huge numbers who regularly feed wild birds, or participate in garden bird surveys (over 400,000 in a recent one).

RE-VALUING URBAN NATURE

There is a narrow foot-bridge over the river close to my home, in our town centre. From the bridge, depending on the time of year, one can see the brilliant courtship dances of banded demoiselle damselflies, an occasional lurking pike, scores of tiny fish-fry, powerful hawking dragonflies – emperors, brown and migrant hawkers – even, if especially lucky, a brief glimpse of the iridescent blue and red of a kingfisher. On some days it is nearly impossible to cross the bridge as adults stop to answer eager children's enquiries, and excitedly point out to each other some new observation.

This takes us back to my starting point – the value of urban green spaces. Alongside a many-sided struggle to restore the almost lost values of a former sympathetically productive countryside, there is also available to us a compensation for what has been lost. Urban open spaces – including derelict former industrial sites, old mineral workings, waste heaps, boggy ground, abandoned orchards, the margins of playing fields, the banks of rivers and canals as well as more formally recognised open spaces – are accessible to our now overwhelmingly urban populations in a way that designated countryside access sites are often not. Moreover, many of these sites – precisely because they have not suffered the ravages of agricultural intensification, and because they have, for a host of contingent reasons, escaped 'development' – provide habitat for an immense diversity of living species. The site of an abandoned and partly built oil refinery on Canvey Island, south Essex, has a diversity of invertebrate life comparable with that recorded from Salisbury Plain, one of Europe's largest and most important calcareous grassland reserves. If environmental value is, as I've suggested, emergent from common experiences in one's working life and everyday pleasures then its sources may be nourished by a re-valuation of these urban so-called 'brownfield' sites, by a reversal of those policies that sacrifice them in favour of protection of 'greenfield' locales, and by fostering public access and non-destructive enjoyment of their natural diversity.

CODA: DEFENDING NATURE: INTRINSIC VALUE AND HUMAN PURPOSES

In the above I have shifted from an attempt to explore some of the sources in social practice of environmental value to the beginnings of an advocacy for others. These considerations are vulnerable to strong objections from (at least!) two, rather opposed standpoints. First, my exploration of the sources of environmental value is loosely sociological rather than directly philosophical – it doesn't adequately address the question with which we started – how are environmental values to be justified? Why should those in power take seriously my romantic waffle about kingfishers, mining bees, grayling butterflies or solitary wasps (the prospective developer of a site protected as the habitat for a rare solitary wasp was recently heard to say – 'if it is solitary then we just have to wait for it to die')? Perhaps as significant, what of those members of the public who explode with rage at the sight of long grasses and wild flowers as a local council reduces the frequency of its mowing of roadside verges? They, too, have an environmental consciousness, but it is one of order and control, of civilised domination over wild nature.

I have no clear answer to these questions. I have elsewhere (Benton 2004) disputed the arguments of some, notably Andrew Collier, for whom environmental values are objective: 'being as such is good' (Collier 1999). I certainly share this as an intuitive response to the world, but I can see no adequate secular argument for it – and a secular argument is what I would require. However, environmental value is not entirely subjective and arbitrary, either. There are established cultural traditions which enable judgments to be made, shared and discussed. These cultural traditions themselves have their sources in and are sustained by a variety of shared practices, as we've seen, and by discursive reflections on those practices. However, such cultural traditions are not universally shared (indeed, they have been eroded in ways discussed above) and they are themselves diverse and often contested. Our situation, then, is not significantly different from that of activists in any other field of ethical or political controversy. We have no conclusive proofs or decisive pieces of evidence to put an end to controversy. At the same time, we have a field of contestation in which evidence, experience, reasoning and dialogue have their place, and this might give us some hope.

For partisans of a slower, fairer, more convivial, more environmentally respectful and affectionate (and, in Holland's sense, more meaningful) mode of life, there is nothing for it but to enter into political engagement. For many, joining a pressure group, social movement or organisation will be the obvious first move. Whilst these are now in some cases large and influential organisations, there are limitations. One of these has to do with their (understandable) tendency to adopt the values and language of the powerful actors they seek to influence. The exploration in this paper suggests that deep and wide-ranging

changes in the patterns of people's practical ways of engaging with each other and the non-human world would be both needed for and presupposed by a thorough-going shift in environmental values. If this is so, then cultural advocacy and persuasion in civil society – including dialogue within the environmental organisations themselves – in favour of a more radically alternative project will be needed. More than this, prefigurative work in establishing alternative ways of interacting with nature in the interstices of existing society can give some glimpses of what might be gained from larger scale social changes. Popular demand for organic food, the spread of farmers' markets, consumer concerns for animal welfare and traceability are instances of grass-roots shifts in this direction. A small but promising instance of local community involvement in the reshaping of local derelict ground into a convivial green open space with flourishing wildlife is Mile End Park, in east London (see Hindley 2007).

The second sort of objection to my argument above might come from an ecocentric perspective. Like Holland, I have situated environmental value in the context of human personal and social relationships to non-human nature. Does this make me (and him) vulnerable to the charge of 'anthropocentrism'? This brings us back to the opposition between instrumental and intrinsic value. Much of my discussion above, as well as Holland's own insistence on re-valuing instrumental value, is intended to soften that opposition. Like Holland, I find it difficult to make sense of values that exist independently of subjects (not necessarily human subjects) who assign value. On this view, environmental value is inseparably associated with communities of beings with enough sensory powers and psychological complexity to recognise, distinguish and establish preferences for and against aspects of their environments. Thus far, this might include a wide range of non-human animals, but in the full sense the presence of cultural traditions and means of discursively establishing and contesting value-attributions might also reasonably be held to be necessary to the existence of environmental value.

Does this reduce my (our?) position to a form of anthropocentrism? On at least one account of this concept it seems that it would. In her path-breaking early work Robyn Eckersley (1992), advocated a radically ecocentric environmental philosophy. In the course of her sympathetic criticisms of what she calls 'preservationism', she endorses Warwick Fox's characterisation of arguments for wilderness preservation based on its aesthetic, symbolic and spiritual value as anthropocentric. They are, for Fox and Eckersley, examples of arguments 'for preserving the non-human world on the basis of its instrumental value to humans'. However, this, it seems to me, misses a certain complexity in the logic of such judgments of value. It is true that only human (or human-like) beings could make judgments of aesthetic, symbolic or spiritual value. It is also true that a strong case can be made for the preservation of objects of such value-judgments in terms of human fulfilment and self-realisation. It is also true that such a case would be anthropocentric in the sense that it relates the

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES AND HUMAN PURPOSES

desirability of preservation to a human purpose. However, the fulfilment of that human purpose *itself* requires a non-anthropocentric orientation to its object. Only if I recognise, appreciate, or perhaps am moved or awed by the inherent qualities of the object of spiritual or aesthetic valuation will the experience of it contribute in the appropriate way to my fulfilment. If some sorts of human fulfilment are premised on non-anthropocentric orientations to the world, then any simple opposition between what is instrumental to human purposes and what has 'intrinsic value' becomes unsustainable.

To value nature, and opportunities to engage with it, for its aesthetic, spiritual or symbolic contribution to a fulfilled human life is therefore implicitly to acknowledge the importance of a non-anthropocentric orientation to the world. There is no contradiction, therefore, in valuing something for what it is and valuing it as something whose existence enhances a human life. On the contrary, human life would be poor, bleak and superficial if bereft of openness to and respect for the integrity of beings other than ourselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Clive Spash's editorial help and advice was much appreciated, as were the perceptive comments of my anonymous referees.

REFERENCES

- Benton, T. 1989. 'Marxism and natural limits'. *New Left Review* **178**: 51–86.
- Benton, T. 1992. 'Ecology, socialism and the mastery of nature: a reply to Reiner Grundman'. *New Left Review* **194**: 55–74.
- Benton, T. 1993. *Natural Relations: Ecology, Animal Rights and Social Justice*. London: Verso.
- Benton, T. 2004. 'Realism and the value of nature? Andrew Collier's environmental philosophy', in M.S. Archer and W. Outhwaite, *Defending Objectivity: Essays in Honour of Andrew Collier* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Berardi, G.M. and C.C. Geisler, eds. 1984. *The Social Consequences and Challenges of New Agricultural Technologies*. Boulder and London: Westview.
- Collier, A. 1999. *Being and Worth*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Conway, G.R. and J.N. Pretty. 1991 *Unwelcome Harvest*. London: Earthscan.
- Eckersley, R. 1992. *Environmentalism and Political Theory*. London: UCL Press.
- Hinchman, L.P. and S.K. Hinchman. 2007. 'What we owe to the Romantics'. *Environmental Values* **16**: 333–354, doi:10.3197/096327107X228382.
- Hindley, J. 2007. 'A park for the 21st century: observations on the transformation of Mile End Park'. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* **18**(4): 104–124, doi: 10.1080/10455750701705153.

- Holland, A. 1995. 'The use and abuse of ecological concepts in environmental ethics'. *Biodiversity and Conservation* **4**: 812–826, doi: 10.1007/BF00056189.
- Holland, A. 1999. 'Sustainability: should we start from here?' in A. Dobson (ed.), *Fairness and Futurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Holland, A. 2000. 'Introduction – sustainable development: the contested vision', in K. Lee, A. Holland and D. McNeill (eds.), *Global Sustainable Development in the 21st Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Holland, A. 2006. 'Must we give up environmental ethics?' in H.A.M.J. ten Have (ed.), *Environmental Ethics and International Policy* (Paris: UNESCO), pp. 117–143.
- Keller, E. Fox. 1985. *Reflections on Gender and Science*. Newhaven Ct. and London: Yale University.
- Magdoff, F., J.B. Foster and H. Buttel, eds. 2000. *Hungry for Profit*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Marx, K. 1975 [1844]. Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. In *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence and Wishart).
- O'Neill, J. 2007. 'Editorial: Beauty and the bees'. *Environmental Values* **16**(4): 413–415, doi: 10.3197/096327107X243204.
- Pretty, J. 2002. *Agri-Culture: Reconnecting People, Land and Nature*. London: Earthscan.
- Shiva, V. 1991. *The Violence of the Green Revolution*. London: Zed Books.
- Shoard, M. 1980. *The Theft of the Countryside*. London: Temple Smith.
- Vogel, S. 2002. 'Environmental philosophy after the end of nature'. *Environmental Ethics* **24**: 23–39.