

# What is our duty to nature?

- by Holmes Rolston, III -

Environmental ethics seeks appropriate respect for values in and duties regarding nature. This starts with human concerns for a healthy environment. If people have a right to life, they also have a right to a quality environment, needed for human welfare.

Environmental ethics then turns in nonhuman directions. What about the whooping cranes or the sequoia trees, the myriad species with which we co-inhabit Earth? Is there some intrinsic value in their lives we ought to protect? Surely we, *Homo sapiens*, the wise species, the only self-consciously moral species, are less wise than we ought to be if we act only in our collective self-interest.

Western ethics, philosophy, religion, politics, and economics have been dominantly humanistic, or anthropocentric. Contemporary ethics seeks to be inclusive: the poor as well as the rich, women as well as men, indigenous cultures as well as modern ones, future generations beyond the present. Environmental ethics is even more inclusive, concerned about whales slaughtered, whooping cranes and their habitats, ancient forests cut, Earth threatened by global warming.

Science alone does not teach us what we most need to know about nature: how to value it. Still, biology confronts every biologist (researcher and student alike) with an urgent moral concern—caring for life on Earth. Somewhat ironically, just when humans, with their increasing industry and technology, seemed further and further from nature, the natural world has emerged as a focus of ethical concern.

Ought not biologists (above all!) celebrate and cherish Earth's biodiversity?

This concern arises, ironically again, despite somewhat uncertain relations between science and ethics, how to move from what *is* (description of biological facts) to what *ought to be* (prescription of duty). It is not simply what a society does to its women, racial minorities, handicapped, children, or future generations, but what it does to its fauna, flora, species, ecosystems, and landscapes that reveals the character of that society.

Animals hunt and howl, care for their young, flee from threats, value their lives. There is "somebody there" behind the fur and feathers. "Man is the measure of things," said Protagoras, an ancient Greek philosopher. But wild animals do not make man the measure at all. Human values may override animal values, but we ought to justify such overriding—especially if we eat animals, exploit them, or experiment on them. Biology teaches that we and they are kin; ethically, their pains and pleasures count morally, too.

Most of the biological world, however, has yet to be taken into account: Plants, lower animals, insects, microbes, all are quite alive with vital interests. Every living organism has a *good-of-its-kind*; it defends its own kind as a *good kind*. Maybe "life" is a better measure of value than "man," or "vertebrate."

Life goes on at multiple levels. An inclusive ethic will be concerned for any ongoing species, for lifelines regenerating. Extinction is a sort of super-killing, a shut-down of life. In threatening Earth's biodiversity, humans are stopping the historical vitality of life.

We reach a "land ethic" (Aldo Leopold) with concern for ecosystems, for living communities, for life processes. Individual animals and plants are what they



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are not as mere individuals (as though in a zoo or botanical garden), but they flourish in species lines and live in niches in habitats. An organism, a species, is what it is where it is, adapted for living in ongoing ecological and evolutionary systems. The most appropriate unit for moral concern is the whole system, the fundamental unit of development and survival.

Now we can put humans back in the picture. After all, ecology is about living at home (Greek *oikos*, "house"), the inclusive system again. Humans have entwined destinies with the natural world; their richest quality of life requires identifying with these communities.

Environmental ethics becomes Earth ethics. Humans are the only evaluators who can reflect at global scales. When humans do this, they must set up the scales. Animals, plants, insects, species, ecosystems, cannot take part in such inclusive and comprehensive concern for biodiversity on Earth, But they are what is to be measured. Earth (as seen from space) is quite a wonder. We Earthlings ought to care for this home planet.

## Discussion Questions

1. Are good biologists always conservationists?
2. Can environmental ethics always be "win-win," people and nature?
3. Does an environmental ethic need to be science-based?

4. In wild nature is there anything bad? Anything ugly? Or that ought not to be respected or conserved?

## Web Links

International Society for Environmental Ethics On-Line Bibliography  
[www.phil.unt.edu/bib/](http://www.phil.unt.edu/bib/)

Environmental Ethics, Systematic Works  
[www.cep.unt.edu/theo.html](http://www.cep.unt.edu/theo.html)

Environmental Ethics, Anthologies  
[www.cep.unt.edu/anthol.html](http://www.cep.unt.edu/anthol.html)

Environmental Ethics, Introductory Articles  
[www.cep.unt.edu/intro.html](http://www.cep.unt.edu/intro.html)