

Journal of Political Ecology 8(2001), pages 88-90

Connection on the Ice, by Patti H. Clayton. Philadelphia: Temple University Press (1998), xxiv, 303 pp.

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Clayton uses the rescue in October 1988 of two whales at Barrow, Alaska, “one of the most remarkable animal rescues in history,” as a window into the human relation to nature, our “connection” as she puts it, as “a microcosm of the human-environment interaction” [pp. xviii-xix]. She sets her window against a generally modern worldview in which, she thinks, humans have too much “detached” themselves from nature.

Clayton enjoys a story-telling environmental ethics. Her ethics is one that is lived--a pragmatic one (to use a word now much in vogue); but she steadily pursues what theory can justify the actions practiced in the story she recounts. The whale rescue was a quite public event, involving governments, even U.S./Soviet cooperation, and worldwide media coverage for three weeks. It caught up hundreds of individuals in the rescue effort and millions with a concern for animals. There is ample “connection” here between ethics and policy.

Clayton explores various ways of making sense of the whale rescue, as this might fit into a larger framework making sense of humans on the planet. She worries about “the possibility and the difficulty of building a more generalized concern from such localized concern” [p. 145]. The two schools of thought (“conceptual lenses”) that

help her most are that of the ecofeminists, with their sense of caring, and that of Martin Heidegger, a phenomenologist.

She sets these alternatives over against what she calls the dominant view, although, since she sketches a number of such views, there is no single dominant view. Still, she finds that these dominants all contain family resemblances: too much reason and not enough emotion, too much dualism and abstraction, too much universality, impartiality, too much conflict and resolution seeking justice and fairness [pp. 66-74].

A repeated problem, however, is that the "dominant view" is, on the whole, more pluralist than Clayton can contain. She finds within it for example simultaneously the conviction that the rescue "was grounded in respect for inherent value" in the whales [p. 76] and that "anthropocentrism is still the dominant mindset guiding our interactions with nonhumans" [p. 85]. The former certainly sounds close to some form of "caring," as espoused by the ecofeminists, and the rescuers were almost entirely men, maybe trying to show off what they could do, but many seemingly genuinely concerned for the suffering whales. So the format of two alternatives against a dominant view gets somewhat forced at times.

Clayton's study has the advantage of being concrete, particular, relevant, real-life, or "existential," as the phenomenologists she favors sometimes like to put it. (Accompanying photographs take you there.) Her approach also has, as she can recognize, all the disadvantages of moving from the particular to the general, troublesome "connections."

One worry is that such events soon become dated--history. If used in class now the main event happened when the students were in diapers. This introduces, right at the start, another "connection" problem. One has to ask whether this episode is a timeless window into some larger truths, like some Biblical parable or historic legal case. Or maybe this once-upon-a-time story is an isolated particular that cannot be extrapolated too far, a partial truth, which becomes untrue if we try to abstract out some whole truth. The "connections" could be weaker than that. A single event is seldom rich enough to reveal the full story. Maybe it is almost the other way round: whales live too rich a life; one cannot generalize from a charismatic species to an ecosystemic ethics.

Clayton is steadily concerned to find "connections" between humans and nature, as our concern for these whales shows. So far so good; every environmentalist seeks more harmony between humans and nature than we now have. We can phrase that as sustainability, or conservation, or environmental protection, or stewardship, or respect for nature. But this search is also going to involve recognizing the human uniqueness; we are both part of and apart from nature. The "disconnections" need to be distinguished, often couched as differences between "nature" and "culture."

Probably most of us think that there is not much "politics" or "ethics" in wild spontaneous nature, little of either one and certainly of both combined. These appear in human culture, where ethics and policy can be debated, as Clayton is here doing. It is true, of course, that behavioral studies in animals, and especially in whales, reveal that they are social animals, more so than we previously knew. But the cumulative transmissible culture that has given us a deliberated environmental policy ("The Marine Mammals Protection Act") or a debated environmental ethics ("biocentrism," "ecofeminism," "anthropocentrism," "intrinsic value," "environmental justice") does seem to be distinctive to the human genius.

There are some, myself included, who worry that an ethic of "caring," too disjoined from rational, "principled" analysis, may in fact lead us to do the wrong thing--to rescue the whales, when in fact, the better course (following "principle") might have been to let nature take its course. Perhaps the thing to do is to draw ourselves back and remain "detached," to observe and admire this struggle for life in which the fittest survive. (We chased off polar bears that came in to try to eat the dying whales; more "caring"?) With such drawing back, we might then realize that nature is not culture; we do rescue humans fallen into the ice; we do not rescue wild animals in distress. The human ethic is disconnected from the animal ethic.

The whale episode is set in wild nature; we act on that principle in those kinds of environments. We care enough to leave them alone, in their own integrity, death included, not enriched by our rescue, meddling in nature. But little if anything of principle transfers to how we ought behave on most of our inhabited, domesticated landscapes, hybrids of nature and culture. The "connections" are different. None of the main issues on our millennium agenda: escalating populations, development, environmental justice, global warming, sustainability, are much affected by decisions to save the whales. The focus here is on what to make of wild nature.

"For almost everyone involved, leaving the whales to die painfully was never an option" [p. 77]. Clayton too seems throughout to assume that rescuing the whales was the right thing to do; the open questions are why. But maybe a let-nature-take-its-course ethic should have been the number one option. It would have been not an option but the enforced policy had the story been bison drowning in freezing ice in Yellowstone--as shown in a celebrated case there (reported in *Natural History*, January 1984). This option is never adequately considered; all the ethicists

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surveyed can only glance at it [cf. pp. 85-86; pp. 143-144].

One might have thought that Heidegger's emphasis on "letting be" [pp. 181-183] would commend non-interference, but not so. Through this "lens," we want an ethic, a policy "allowing beings to unfold in their own Being without interfering," but that gets overwhelmed with "actively promoting their Being themselves by acting concernfully on their behalf, by preserving and protecting them" [p. 182]. Well, maybe part of the being of whales in their niche is to serve as winterkill food for the bears; the ecology that supports both forms of being is what we ought to preserve and protect.

Clayton is right; the whale rescue is an intriguing and revealing story. Her thorough analysis of it can help us in a "paradigm shift: toward an ecological world view" [p. 255]. She is wide-ranging; we get summaries (quite pithy and competent ones) of most of the principal positions, alternatives she canvasses en route in the search for a framework within which to make the best sense of the whale rescue. The story of a developing environmental ethics and policy is advanced by her work; her tale is well told, and she is amply reflective and self-conscious about it. The analysis deserving its place in the growing environmental literature. I put it down concluding, as she must surely agree, that this on-going story is still unfinished