

The "Unnaturalness" of Nature Conservation

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The “Unnaturalness” of Nature Conservation

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After an introductory survey of the concept of “nature” and “natural” it is concluded that the separative attitude of so-called western civilization is the foundation and basic cause of its apparent technological success, which is—like all superficial phenomena—Janus-headed: more and more its grim counterpart appears, which we call for instance the “crisis of our environment”. Our arrogance and self destructive behaviour seem to grow out from conceptual separations, particularly that of matter//mind and man//nature, but actually from the delusion that we consider our concepts to be reality.

Most measures for the protection of our environment are also offspring of this separative philosophy and attitude. Thus they are futile or their results are counter-productive. Nature conservation is taken as an example. Separative concepts result in separation: the globe is divided up between exploitation-devastation-cultivation-land and conservation-areas.

It is obvious that real advances are only possible on the basis of a principally different—not an opposite—attitude. The merging of east and west, or rather the counter infiltration of the west by eastern thought, and the rediscovery of ancient knowledge by modern scientists are signals that mankind is moving in such a direction.

Though their credibility and influence are declining, scientists are still the priests of our technological society. Therefore they have a particular responsibility. It is their duty not only to perform their craft, but also to engage deeply in the study of the background and the purpose of what they are doing. Particularly ecologists should deal with basic questions like: “What is life, what is nature, what is reality or to what extent can science describe reality?” It will turn out that the importance of ecological research to improve the difficult situation of our environment is much smaller than usually believed, at least as is believed by the ecologists themselves.

It will be clear that nature conservation is just a provisional and temporary phenomenon, but not an efficient solution to save an endangered nature.

The knowledge that man can be considered as well as included in nature as something separate will gain more and more practical impact in conservation models, which will raise their efficiency. The pessimistic attitude of conservationists and environmentalists will be recognised as environmental pollution, as it is contagious and besides that, invites the troubles it is expecting. This pessimism will be replaced by a realism that comes out from a deeper understanding of our role in nature. The non-separative way of thinking also will make clear to everybody that he or she is involved in the environmental crisis, not only as a victim but always as a culprit as well, so that she or he has to act instead of being satisfied to wait until “the others” or “the authorities” do something.

INTRODUCTION

Nature conservation and protection of the environment are important concepts of today and nobody will question their necessity and urgency. Nevertheless, at this moment, at least for me, the question arises whether the results of several decades of activities in the field of nature protection are adequate to the amount of energy expended. I think they are not! Quite contrarily I have the impression that the results of most of the efforts in this direction are minimal and discouraging.

For several years I observed the development and problems of nature conservation in Austria, its success and its failures and tried to analyze the basic causes of the latter. Roughly they could be summarized like this:

The biggest handicaps to an efficient protection of nature are not outward circumstances but within the environmentalists themselves:

- ☆☆ They are not really aware of their own deeper motivations.
- ☆☆ Their concepts are basically the same as those which they reject.
- ☆☆ Their final goals are vague.
- ☆☆ They have no clear idea of what it is, what they insist to protect.
- ☆☆ One of the consequences of the lack of understanding nature is **lack of confidence** in nature. The pessimistic attitude coming out of this deficiency is counterproductive to the aims of nature protection, because it produces the results expected and not those theoretically aimed and besides that, it is contagious to other people.

This pessimistic attitude can be illustrated for instance with the “official” answers to the crucial question: Have earth and mankind any chance at all to survive?

The usual answers given by ecologists are either:

- a) that there is no chance at all, and there is no doubt that in the long run “*the biosphere will loose*”,¹ as one of the pioneers of nature conservation in Europe put it; or
- b) that there would be a chance, if all the ignorant and greedy people would pay attention to what, the ecologists say. Nevertheless it is also clear in this case, because the probability that other people will become “reasonable” is guessed to be near zero.

What is nature?

The first task of somebody concerned with the protection of nature should be to start with the above question, or what is it that I want to protect?

The answer is easy to find or very difficult. You may start by looking up the definitions of “nature” in dictionaries. Particularly dictionaries of philosophy offer a vast overview of the different conceptions of nature since ancient times.

In our paper there is only space to summarise them very briefly.

1 WESTHOFF, V. (1983): Man's attitude towards nature. In, Man's Impact on Vegetation HOLZNER, W., WERGER, M. J. A., and IKUSIMA, I. (eds.). Dr. W. JUNK Publ., The Hague, Boston, London, p. 7.

Roughly speaking, “nature” is used in a fourfold way:

- (1) **nature** in opposition to “mind”,²
- (2) **nature** in opposition to culture (technology),³
- (3) **Nature** in a transferred sense as inner principle of something,⁴ and
- (4) **NATURE** as a transcendental principle of the world.⁵

Natural sciences are dealing with nature 1 and 3, the Nature (3) of nature (1).

In this paper, however, our topic will be mainly *nature* (2). “*Natural*” in this context means something not touched by man. It is the concept of scientific ecology⁶ but also that of nature conservation. It is also the nature meant by laymen when they use this term in an environmental context. In this common use nowadays, *nature* and “*natural*” have a strongly positive touch and everything which is taken as contrary gets automatically negative overtones: nature is good, man vicious because he is dangerous for nature, natural means paradisaical or healthy, artificial ugly or unhealthy, technology is responsible for the decline of the earth while biology and ecology deal with nature and are therefore considered some kind of doctrines of salvation.

These short remarks were made to point out that *nature* is on the one hand a concept, that implies strict separations between two poles, natural and artificial, and that these poles are assessed as positive or negative (good or bad) with a strong emotional touch.

Where is *nature*?

Before discussing the effects of this polarisation we must point to another problem. If we screen the landscapes of the world we will realise that *nature* (2), per definition the nature (1) untouched by man, actually is a lost paradise, because in a strict sense there is practically no corner on this planet without any human impact. But for nature loving human beings in Central Europe, and also for the average conservationist this is not the *nature* they have in mind (which means: it is not the wilderness which they do not even know – if they did, they wouldn’t like it). Their *nature* is the cultivated landscape inherited from their forefathers, the meadows full of flowers, the steppes, wetlands, hedges, and mountain pastures, all biotopes created by farmers and dependent on their activities. It is this “formed nature” that gives us warm feelings of beauty and homeliness, and the efforts for its preservation are therefore charged with strong emotional energy.⁷

2 *The epitome of all things, as far as they can be objects of our senses and thereupon of our experience.* KANT, I. (1986) *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaften.* (cited from M. DRIESCHNER, 1991, *Einführung in die Naturphilosophie, Wissensch. Buchges. Darmstadt.*)

3 *The whole reality as it is by itself, before it has been changed by the free action of man.* BECK, H. (1979): *Kulturphilosophie der Technik.* Spee, Trier.

4 *The first principle of all that belongs to the being of a thing.* KANT, I. (1786, cit. above).

5 *An understanding of nature lies beyond the reach of human intelligence.* FUKUOKA, M. (1978, cit. footnote 14).

6 e.g. NUMATA, M. (1974), *Seitaigakujiten (Dictionary of Ecology).* Tokyo.

7 It is important to realize this, because if we only use rational, scientifically-based arguments to support conservation issues, we miss the point and our argumentation is resting on weak foundations.

Nature//man = a theoretical separation

Of course, there are modern ecologists who are aware of the fact that most landscapes and vegetation have been in some way touched or even formed by man, that there are many species which have evolved under human impact (man as creator of *nature*) and that much which has been considered as “*natural*” up till now has turned out actually to be manmade.

The already cited Westhoff (1983, see footnote 1) tries to get around this contradiction including in his definition of *nature* the word “*largely*” (without human impact) and formulates three degrees of naturalness: “*Natural, subnatural, semi-natural*” versus “*cultural*”, a rather weak attempt to save the conception of man//nature and the naturalness of “real nature”.

Of course it is a legitimate process that scientists divide the world into pieces and that they imagine the phenomena of nature (including themselves) as discrete. This is necessary (for several reasons that cannot be discussed here) and useful. Otherwise, it would be impossible, for instance, to get an overview of the infinite abundance and variety around us, and to pass on our knowledge to others.⁸

But problems arise when it is forgotten that concepts and conceptions (that of science as well as that of other religions) are **just and only ideas**, allegories, pictures, names, fingers pointing to the moon, using a well-known Japanese allegory, not more. When the finger is taken for the moon, when the concepts are taken for reality, big troubles arise.

And in our case the big trouble is that the **narrow conception of nature leads to narrow minded actions**, which are in vain or even counter-productive, because they result in the destruction of that which should have been conserved.⁹

The oblique stroke between man and nature was put into practice in the form of barbed wire and other devices designed to keep man out. One of the consequences was little appreciation and a wrong understanding of the sense and aim of conservation among the public. Even nowadays many people believe that nature is protected for **itself**, or besides that, for the scientists and conservationists.

The experts, trained to see the world in discreet clusters, often cannot see the real and basic cause of a problem, they just see the symptoms. Cures are tried here and there and everybody is happy, because something has been undertaken. The experts know best what is good for nature and you better “keep out, please”. They take what they call the responsibility and the others can relax – “We cannot do anything anyway, can we?” The results of this, once again a separative attitude is disastrous: most people declare themselves as helpless, which they really are (in that very moment) and leave everything to the brains of the experts and the hands of the government. On the

8 Contrarily it is very difficult to “teach” a complete and therefore complex understanding of NATURE (4, including 1 and 3) to others. To take an East Asian example: the history of Zen is full of anecdotes about mute teachers and baffled pupils.

9 To mention only two examples: so have nature reserves been spoiled because conservationists resisted against any management proposals, because they are “unnatural”. Many problems of biotopes in the cultivated (= “unnatural”) landscape have been overlooked.

one hand this is very convenient, on the other hand it is frustrating. The outcome is that not much happens at all. Real changes can be only achieved when you start at the roots and many people are **actively engaged**. Another result is that the mental image of a separated world is projected on the landscape, which is split up into conserved *nature* (nature-tins) and man’s land, which may be treated as before (or even worse, because now the bad conscience is soothed by a donation for nature conservation).

A further result of **separative thinking** is the formation of “**green elites**” which gather in groups that exhibit elitist behaviour, and see themselves separate from other people (and are thus separated). They do not realise or do not want to realise that they themselves, as **everybody** in our society, are **deeply implicated in the destruction of our environment**, and they silence their own bad conscience by endless, self-serving attacks mainly against abstract images of foes such as “industry”, “agriculture”, “technocrats”. The originally fictive separation results in real difficulties of communication with proponents of “the other side”. The resulting lack of understanding on both sides enhances the polarisation, makes the separation become reality and prevents communication and a solution to problems which can happen through joint efforts only.

Elitist (separative) thinking is very dangerous, as many examples in history will show. Besides that I consider the negative attitude and the pessimism of many “environmentalists” as environmental pollution, because it is contagious and invites the troubles it is expecting. The constant lamenting and panic-mongering of the “ecologists”, which is greedily taken up by the mass-media, results in an increasing insensitivity against environmental problems among the public on the one hand, and on the other in desperation among those who have still remained sensitive.

Conservation = manipulation

As already mentioned, basically the conception of nature is the same between those who want to conserve nature and those that destroy nature.¹⁰ A nature that can be protected, conserved or managed, analyzed or planned, can also be tamed, controlled, dominated and exploited and vice versa—it is the same image of the world, just the other side of the coin.

If the basis is still the old one, all efforts to move in a new direction will be very difficult or even in vain: you start, you try very hard but after some time you are back on the old road again and you do not even know why. The old powers still have been too strong, because you did not recognize them.

The nature of conservationists is just the other pole of that of the masters of nature.

Of course these two poles are inevitable, as they are produced by our way of dealing with the world. They belong to us like + and – electricity, but electric current only exists if there is an exchange between the poles—there must be dynamics, movement, fluctuation (☉). Also with human concepts there must be an exchange of opinions and mutual understanding or at least acceptance. If there is no flow of energy, there is

10 (Of course, such a distinction is a theoretical one, as we all take part in the destruction of our world in one way and the other, but its the classification that is usually held up by “environmentalists”.)

<i>What is nature?</i> Ignorance (What & → am Illusion I?)	FEAR	→ GREED &	↵ ← ← ← ← ← ← ←	destitution of
	FEAR	STRIVING	hectic	experiences,
	FEAR	→ FOR	excessive	boredom
	FEAR	SECURITY	consumption	↑
	FEAR	→	growth-mania	→ DESTRUCTION
	FEAR	→	ambition	OF THE
	FEAR	FLIGHT &	dogmatism	ENVIRONMENT
	FEAR	→ HIDING	lust for power	↓
	FEAR	→ HATRED	addiction	→ ↓
FEAR	DOUBT	stress	FEAR	
		hopelessness	↵	

no life, no change is possible. Our nature concept contains “making”: analyzing, influencing, taking into possession. There is no room for just watching and letting nature go its own way.

Nature//Man→fear

The conception of a nature distinct from man, or better the belief that this is not only an idea but reality, brings forth as already mentioned a nature that can either be dominated and exploited, or protected, conserved, managed and planned – in short: a nature that can be **manipulated**. The image of nature of those that spoil nature and those that conserve it is the same, it is just the negative side of it. This is the outer aspect of the problem.

The inner one is that a belief to be separated from nature, means a loss of faith in nature, a loss of the connection to one’s own source, a kind of homelessness, which creates fear. And this basic fear is the source of attitudes and actions that finally lead to the destruction of our environment which again promotes our fear...

Therefore, if one really wants to do something for nature and environment one’s first and basic task will be to deal with the question: What is nature?¹¹

Calculative and contemplative thinking

There are many ways to solve fundamental questions like this. Actually there are as many ways as persons trying to do this. It resembles to us the endless variety of nature already mentioned and a well approved method to deal with this variety is to construct clusters, to draw lines between them, which means to build up separations.

Thus since ancient times two fundamentally different modes of thinking, of perceiving the world and dealing with these perceptions have been distinguished. A

11 (which also means: Who am I?)

philosopher of our times, the German Martin Heidegger, used the words “calculative and contemplative” thinking. In this paper I used the words “separative and integrative” for the same purpose. Heidegger¹² attached great importance to the basic differences of the two modes of thinking and foresaw the “*greatest danger for the human race—even a greater one than another World War—in the possibility that one day the calculative thinking would stay as the only valid one in use*”.

As I said already these ideas are old. The conception of Yin/Yang represents this knowledge, and the well-known but little understood ideogram ☯ shows also the solution of the question of how to manage living with two principally different modes of thinking.

It is reported that the legendary Chinese sage Lao-Tzu uttered:

*“Who recognises ones male power,
and nevertheless stays in female weakness.
will be the riverbed of the world...”*¹³

The contemporary merging of female “eastern”¹⁴ and male “western”¹⁵ thinking shows that, according to Old Tzu, we still have a good chance!

The promising future lies exactly here and not in promoting one “way of thinking” against the other one. It is one thing to split up the endless continuum and infinite, always changing variety of NATURE for convenience, but it is another, nonsensical and perilous to take the so-received picture of the world as the only valid reality. Besides this it is impossible anyway to avoid one of the two modes, because both are inherent in our nature, and to suppress one of them means to suppress one part of us and to act against our better knowledge.

To receive the answer to our question “What is nature?” both ways are useful. There are only two important things:

1. Never forget that all denomination, nomenclatures, systems and classifications are just made for convenience, tools to circumscribe a NATURE which cannot be described directly, at least not with rational means.
2. It is not important to receive an answer to that question, the only thing important is to put that question again and again with the conviction that the answer will come, unavoidable by itself, because it is already inside ourselves.

Nature includes man

With this attitude all “ways”, whether it is a deeper understanding of scientific

12 HEIDEGGER, M. *Gelassenheit*. Pfullingen 1959.

13 Translated from the German translation by R. WILHELM (1915): Laotse. *Tao Te King*. Das Buch des Alten vom Sinn und Leben. Diederichs, Jena.

14 Nowadays “female” thinkers get more and more attention around the world. I am thinking of Japan’s Masanobu FUKUOKA and wondering whether he is so well-known here as in the rest of the world. He, originally a scientist himself, criticizes “male thinking” severely: “*The irony is that science has served only to show how small human knowledge is.*” M.F. (1978): *The One-Straw Revolution*. Rodale Press, Emmaus, USA. If most scientists also could see it that way this would be a big compliment because to know that one does not know anything is the knowledge most difficult to achieve.

15 THARTHANG TULKU (1977): *Time, Space and Knowledge*. Dharma Publ. USA.

results dealing with nature like those that have been achieved in different fields of physics, neurobiology,¹⁶ psychology, ecology, or animal ethology or ways of “the other mode of thinking”, like the thousand schools of meditation, lead to the same result: of course man and (the “rest” of) nature are inseparable, actually we **are** nature.

If we are aware that we are nature, we may use all our former concepts like “natural”, “semi-natural”, “unnatural”... and of course we may get involved in activities for nature conservation and we will see with a new attitude: we will become much more successful (as we do not fight against ourselves as before, we will act without fear and hatred). We will understand that we are deeply involved in anything that happens on our world, and that the destruction of nature and environment first of all happens in ourselves. This makes it all the more difficult or easier, as you like: it is easier to imagine the enemies being outside of us and to spend our energy and – apparent – activities, in attacks and criticism, however, it is not so easy but more successful to start with ourselves. As the only person over which we really have power, are we ourselves, if we want change, the only effective way is to start with ourselves. If you are aware that you are involved in the creation of your own reality, you will be also aware that the crisis of your environment is the mirror of your own problems. Each of us is fully responsible for his/her world. Everybody is involved as victim and culprit as well.

Nature conservation is only a temporary solution – Nature cares for itself!

The **only beneficiary of nature conservation is man**, that means you and me. Until this is clear to everybody, it may be necessary to act as a protector, which means to protect the other “unaware” people. But it must be clear that in the long run this cannot work because it has never been fruitful to persuade or force other people, even if it was “for their own sake”. So one of the first tasks of a conservationist will be to spread the idea that nature must be protected for you and me (and not for itself).

A landscape is the reflection of the people living in it, as are our houses and rooms. The monotony and sterility of our land and settlements are just the copy of our inner state. The sharply separated nature-museums, the results of conservation, are an indicator for our ideas of *nature* and are in that sense natural – thus the answer to the title question will be: Nature Conservation is natural! It is the natural offspring of our conception of the world.

But it can be only a provisional stop-gap measure and it will be followed by a development where men naturally have an impact on their surroundings in a way that reflects their deeper understanding of themselves and their own **real** needs. In the future our environment will display our inner harmony and diversity, and measures for the conservation of nature will become unnecessary.

16 Many publications in this field prove nowadays that an answer to our question can be achieved by science, e.g. H. R. Maturana and F. J. Varela (1980): *Autopoiesis and cognition. The realization of the living*. Boston, 1980. and of the same authors: (1987): *Der Baum der Erkenntnis*. Scherz-Bern/München.

Our understanding of the fact that we are nature will reduce our fears or will show them in another light — fears will not be the motor of all our activities any more. The pessimistic, negative attitude of the environmentalists of today will be replaced by a “natural” attitude,¹⁷ which will spread and automatically will be followed by the development expected, in fact a development which is necessary for our survival.

The observation of nature will teach us that in the end it **cannot be destroyed**, this will give us confidence and security in the cosmic nature and in our own nature. The observation of the everlasting change from moment to moment will teach us not to take our momentary priorities too importantly, the vanity and minimal size of our belongings and activities will make us modest, the realisation that we are connected with the whole universe and its whole past and future will show us, on the other hand, that nothing we think or do will be without effect.

The knowledge of the relativity of reality will make us less proud of our own sight of the world and more tolerant to that of other people. Scientists, who know that their art is not the only reliable way to perceive reality, will be able to put their results into practice in a way that is really beneficial for mankind. Ecologists will not persist in maintaining that their science is able to save the world, they will admit that modelling is just playing and that predictions based on incomplete data (and it will be always incomplete!) are less than unreliable, and therefore dangerous if they are sold as prophecies that are “scientifically sound”, which means “true” in the ears of laymen.

CONCLUSIONS

* Nature **may** be defined as distinct from man. But you must not overlook that definitions are only **constructions** useful to circumscribe **one detail** of nature. If you take such constructions as reality they become reality for you. If you think you are separated from nature you actually are: and this view of the world has been the source of severe difficulties for mankind.

* Nature conservation and the destruction of our environment are the natural offspring of our separative attitude towards nature. As the belief that we can be independent of nature is only a theoretical one, we cannot understand why our impact on nature comes back upon us.¹⁸

* Modern science as well as age-old wisdom teach us that all phenomena in the whole eternal past and future are connected and that nothing can happen without influencing the “rest of the universe”. Knowledge of disciplines of biology as well as intuitive experience teaches us that **we are nature**.

* This means that each of us is as variable, everchanging and always-the-same, fragile and at the same time as indestructible and eternal as other natural phenomena. It is our **narrow definition of ourselves** that limits us, and it is our narrow view of the

¹⁷ see next chapter.

¹⁸ It is characteristic that in this case we usually say: “Nature hits back!”

world that makes us believe that we are on a dead end road. This pessimistic attitude is dangerous because it is contagious and bears the hazards of all self-fulfilling prophecies.

* This attitude can be replaced by one based on deeper understanding of nature, which is neither pessimistic nor optimistic nor neutral, but rather could be described as confident, trustful or imperturbable. Everything will happen in a natural way.¹⁹

* **Fear** is the basic source of all our problems. Understanding nature can help us to look at this fear, and to live with it without being harmed or even to get rid of it. Both possibilities will help us to keep our activities free of the energy of fear and thus free of hatred and aggression. Our activities for nature conservation will be more successful without these problematical energies.

* As attitudes are contagious, so this one will spread and gradually nature conservation will become unnecessary, because **nature** and environment **will be preserved** according to our **real** needs in a quite **natural way**.

¹⁹ which means actually nothing but: Everything happens as it happens.