Environmental ethics in a New Zealand context

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Abstract

Environmental ethics has many strands and roots but there is increasing support for a holistic approach. Such an approach, which is consistent with te ao Maori and tikanga Maori, is especially appropriate for New Zealand.

Introduction

Concern for the environment is nothing new, in New Zealand and elsewhere. The roots of the modern environmental movement (or movements) are many and diverse, including concerns about the loss of wild nature, the health risks of industrial society, the effects of large scale pesticide use, the misuse of animals in the fur trade, "factory farming", and research and product testing. However, the term environmental ethics is quite recent; the earliest reference of which I am aware is a 1973 paper by Richard Routley. He argued that the central flaw in conventional ethics is that because of its anthropocentric assumptions it cannot attribute value to anything except as a means to human ends. In particular, we lack an ethic "setting out people's relations to the natural environment" or in Aldo Leopold's words "an ethic dealing with man's relations to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it" (Routley 1973, p. 205, quoting Leopold 1966, p. 238).

The first half of this article consists of an overview of the main elements in secular "Western" environmental ethics; I then relate it to New Zealand, suggesting that a distinctive New Zealand environmental ethic is developing that in its way is almost as unique as our land.

Environmental ethics: an overview

Anthropocentrism is the view that human interests are all that matters. Environmental policies and practices are justified to the extent that they promote human interests. Only humans have intrinsic value - that is, are valuable as ends in themselves. Everything else, including animals, plants, forests, wetlands and mountains are *resources*, valuable only instrumentally, as means to the ends of humans. It is often argued that the Judaeo-Christian tradition is highly anthropocentric (White, 1967).

Newly arrived settlers are typically motivated by *short-term anthropocentrism*: they arrive, often from a deprived background, to find a land with lush forests and vast populations of game, and seas teeming with fish. Resources appear unlimited and are exploited accordingly. If there is gold, there will be a gold rush.

Colonial settlers typically fail to appreciate the special character of their new home. As Jared Diamond (2006) argues, they assume that land management systems that worked back home will work in the newly colonized land. Australia is perhaps the most egregious example of environmental disaster caused by an unthinking attempt to apply European land use patterns to a totally different environment. Today, most Australian farmers are technically bankrupt, surviving only because they are subsidized to engage in what is essentially extractive agriculture.

However, not everyone is interested only in short-term gain, hence the increasing influence of what may be called *long-term anthropocentrism*, *sustainable use* or *sustainable management*. Farmers and foresters in areas such as most of Western and Northern European, Bali, Japan, much of China, Tonga and areas of Central and South America have been operating on sustainable use principles for millennia. Nobody knows whether preliterate farmers and foresters had a conservation ethic; but certainly they learned early enough how to get it right. The first articulated sustainable use ethic (indeed, the first use of the term "conservation" in this sense) is in the writings of Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), who founded the US Forest Service and Yale School of Forestry. Pinchot developed the science-based view of conservation as "wise use" based on a utilitarian view of nature as a resource to be managed wisely so as to provide maximum utility in the long term. This greatly influenced the New Zealand Forest Service policy in the direction of multiple use and sustainable yield.

By a historical accident, the first publications on what became the branch of philosophy known as environmental ethics were not about "the environment" at all but about the welfare and rights of animals, as part of a historical moral progression, frequently called "*moral extensionism*" (Rodman 1983). This is based on the idea that ethical systems vary to just in their precepts or rules ("Do not kill") but also in who is covered by them or their extension ("Do not kill any human"). Moral progress in this sense consists not in recognizing new rights, but in extending existing rights to more beings. Moral status has progressively been extended to all humans regardless of race, colour, nationality, religion, sex or age, including future generations. More recently, some philosophers and others have argued for a further extension of moral status to animals.

The most influential living philosopher is Peter Singer. In *Animal Liberation* (1975) he notes that racism and sexism are justly condemned because such discrimination systematically ignores the interests of women and minorities in favour of the interests of the dominant group. There is no justification for refusing to take equal account of the interests of all humans; rather, there is a moral obligation to give equal weight to equal interests. Similarly, a being's interests should count equally, regardless of species. Utilitarianism, the ethical theory to which Singer subscribes, acknowledges that all sentient beings (that is, beings that can feel pleasure and pain) have an equal interest

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in avoiding suffering, and the wrongfulness of inflicting suffering on any sentient beings without justification. Our exploitation of animals for food and the like is therefore condemned as "speciesism".

As a foundation for environmental ethics, animal liberation has not found wide acceptance, though it paved the way for the idea that morality is not just about relations between humans. To some, it has been condemned as simply substituting one arbitrary cut off point for another. Why should moral considerability begin only at the level of sentience? Many people value forests, shorelines and lakes and believe it is morally wrong to damage them but few regard them as sentient. Others (e.g. Gunn 1980) have noted that because species membership is irrelevant to moral status for animal liberationists, the theory cannot account for the special value that we attribute to members of endangered species. However, for most people, the rarer a species, the more we value each individual member. But the protection of ecosystems or endangered species sometimes requires management techniques that are unacceptable to animal liberationists. Hence, in the US, animal liberationists and environmentalists have frequently found themselves at loggerheads over issues such as control of pests or culling of excessive populations of herbivores in order to protect fragile ecosystems.

Aldo Leopold (1887 - 1948) a forester by training and an environmental manager by profession, is often regarded as "the father of environmental ethics". He was not the first to think holistically about land use and resource management - it is the normal worldview in traditional societies. His great innovation was to apply the science of ecology to ethics. Leopold did not simply extend ethical concern to the environment, but developed a new paradigm or worldview. Mainstream "Western" thought views ethics as concerned only with relations between individuals and between individuals and society. Moreover, ethics was based on the premise that humans are essentially egoistic: ethics is a device for restraining their egoistic desires in order that everyone may prosper. Leopold rejected individualism, proposing instead that we think in terms of the "biotic pyramid" and hence attach value to the "biotic community": "The Land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals or collectively, the land" (Leopold 1966, p. 239).

Thus,

> In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. (p. 240)

The land is to be valued not as a commodity, but for its own sake:

> …..quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. (p. 262)

Increasing numbers of philosophers are willing to ascribe intrinsic value, moral status or even rights to individual plants, natural features, lakes, rivers, mountains, and rocks (Nash 1977, Stone 1974, Taylor 1986). Others have argued that the whole approach of extensionism is fundamentally flawed. American philosophers Callicott (1980), Norton (1986) and Rodman (1983) have all questioned the legitimacy of attempting to understand and resolve environmental issues in terms of the value of individual entities, arguing that an environmental ethic should be concerned with the good of ecosystems or of the planet as a whole. For reasons noted above, the land ethic, and other holistic approaches, is usually seen as incompatible with animal liberation (Callicott 1980, Sagoff 1984). Thus its proponents have been criticized as ignoring the well-being of individual animals for the good of systems, and dubbed "environmental fascists" (Regan 1983, p. 362).

All the philosophers whose views have so far been presented are united in rejecting anthropocentrism: they deny that an ethic that takes account only of human interests can be the basis of adequate environmental policy. Anthropocentrism is central to the dominant paradigm of exploitation and therefore the main obstacle to be overcome. Some environmental philosophers explain this by distinguishing between "shallow" and "deep" ecology, terms coined by the influential Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1973, 1984). Shallow or reformist ecology is concerned with ameliorating the effects of environmental exploitation, for instance pollution control and landscape rehabilitation, the promotion of measures to enable us to continue our present lifestyles essentially unchanged via minor changes such as recycling and replacement of fossil fuels by biomass fuels, and the extension of the moral community to include favoured species such as animals that resemble humans, species that are cute, furry or impressive, and natural features that have special significance to humans. Like Leopold, deep ecologists advocate a change in our attitude to the environment from being consumers and exploiters to becoming members of the biotic community: not an extension of the moral community, but a paradigm shift, so that ecological wholes are valued in and for themselves. Naess (1984, p.302) explains his starting point thus: "The well-being of nonhuman life on earth has value in itself. This value is independent of any instrumental usefulness for limited human purposes." Only if we adopt such a view will we have any reason to preserve substantial areas of earth in anything like their natural state.

Over the past two decades, *ecofeminism* has become increasingly influential. Ecofeminists believe that there are essential features of our thinking and practice that are common to all forms of discrimination and exploitation. Patsy Hallen maintains that domination of women by men and domination of nature are closely linked historically, conceptually and psychologically.

Sexism is the expression of a basic pathology of

> domination and repression. Ecological imbalance is, in part, due to our mistaken belief that we can successfully dominate nature. So sexism (mind and body pollution) is fundamentally linked to ecological destructiveness (environmental pollution).
> Hallen 1987, p.111

She believes that because science is the dominant means of understanding the environment, science needs to be transformed by feminism. She does not believe that women "have a specific essential nature that differentiates them from men" but that "women's experience…has been more involved with nurturing than men's" (p. 109). Like other ecofeminists, she believes that more women scientists will ensure that a feminist perspective is brought to bear on our understanding of the world, but on its own this is not enough. The "ideology of detachment and domination" that is central to modern science needs to change. Most importantly, the experience of women emphasizes wholes and relations, rather than separate individuals and dualism, and is therefore central to the development of deep ecology.

What good is environmental ethics?

Bryan Norton (1991, p. ix) writes, of the diversity of views among environmentalists,

> *This babel of voices leaves environmentalists ill equipped to build a unified conception of environmental management and it hampers them in communications with the general public. How can they propose a unified and integrated conception of environmental management, a blueprint for living in harmony with nature, if they cannot accept a common language in which to express it?*

Norton is sceptical of high level theorizing and argues for a pragmatic approach, emphasizing the need for agreement about environmentally sound action. An insistence on "getting the theory right" can be an obstacle to "getting the practice right". In his keynote address to the *Melbourne Environmental Justice Conference* in 1997, Naess used a striking metaphor. The environmentalist frontier, he said, is a very long one, and needs every soldier who is willing to defend it, whatever their reason for wanting to do so.

For an environmental ethic to be effective in guiding the behaviour of billions of people, many of them living in poverty, it will need to be seen to offer them some benefit. However, what is largely missing from the literature is a concern for the well-being of humans, especially deprived people in poor countries and indeed in most rich countries. Developing nations are urged to preserve their rainforests and reduce CFC and carbon dioxide emissions in the interests of preserving the "global heritage" of biodiversity and the ozone layer and preventing global warming. But many people in those countries consider anti-development arguments that begin with the premise that tropical forests are part of a global heritage to be no more than neo-colonialist attempts to promote Northern economic interests under the pretence of concern for the global environment. An environmental ethic should surely take account of the needs of all humans. [2]

[2] *This paragraph originally appeared in Gunn 1994.*

Unique New Zealand

The issues mentioned in the introduction - loss of wild nature, pollution and health risks, factory farming - of are concerns in New Zealand, but the focus has been particularly on the loss of undeveloped coasts, native forests, biodiversity, wetlands and scenic and amenity values. This is probably because we have stronger ties to the outdoors than do people in most other developed countries. Most New Zealanders live within an hour of the coast, and are reasonably close to at least a semi-natural area of native forest.

Moreover, the development of a New Zealand environmental ethic has been unique, because of the many features that make New Zealand itself unique. I regularly lecture internationally on environmental ethics in New Zealand, and most of the audience is surprised to learn that New Zealand:

- Is the most isolated and longest isolated large land mass.
- Was separated from the rest of the world before marsupials. mammals and birds evolved.
- Is the most recently settled, and most recently colonized, large land mass.
- Within a similar area to Malaysia, the UK or New Mexico, includes a range of environments that includes sub-Antarctic islands, taiga and sub-tropical islands, as well as the mountains, beaches and forests that feature on travel posters.
- Has unique fauna such as alpine parrots and sub-tropical penguins.
- Has lost more species than any other large land mass and has the highest proportion of threatened or endangered bird species.
- Is under relentless threat from a bewildering variety of introduced pest fauna and flora.
- Is mostly highly modified, with only 25% of its original forest, and 10% of its original wetland remaining.
- Apart from possibly a few offshore islands, has no areas that have not been substantially modified.
- Leads the world in restoration ecology, especially island restoration (including, increasingly, "mainland islands") and captive breeding and release of endangered species.

Environmental ethics in New Zealand

As in all colonies, European arrivals to New Zealand were generally motivated by short-term anthropocentrism, the goal being to exploit the available resources as profitably as possible. This worldview is sometimes referred to as a "cowboy" or "frontier" ethic (Schrader-Frechette 1981, p. 31). Many colonists intended to make their fortune in New Zealand and return "home". Timber, gold and whales were valuable resources but forest (especially lowland forest) clearance was desirable to make land available for agriculture. Wetlands and other vegetation cover (widely referred to as "scrub" or "rubbish" when I arrived in 1969)

was negatively valued and again clearance and drainage were necessary in order to make the land "productive".

At first glance it appears that Maori were similarly motivated. They burned off around 25% of the forests, including almost all lowland forest of both North and South Islands (Grayson, 2001: 9). It is not known how much was deliberate, for horticulture and to encourage the growth of ferns, and how much accidental. It seems clear that Maori hunted Moa (and other bird species) to extinction: at one South Island site the remains of up to 90 000 birds have been found (King, 2003: 63) and between 100 and 150 years after their arrival, "the big game was almost exhausted" (King 2003: 66).

The documented effects of Maori on the indigenous fauna provide one of the main bases for the overhunting theory of the extinction of Palaeolithic megafauna.

However, it would be a mistake to conclude that Maori were interested only in short-term gain. In due course they developed a conservationist way of life, presumably because they wanted to pass on resources to future generations. Moreover, as we shall see, te ao Maori, the Maori world-view, is not primarily anthropocentric; perhaps it developed partly in response to the realization that resources were not unlimited.

Although Australia has been called the lucky country, from a land use perspective New Zealand has been luckier. Our settlers were, no doubt, just as motivated by short term as were theirs. Our pioneer farmers would have been just as ignorant as theirs, just as prone to suppose that European land management practices would work in a totally different environment, and were even more inclined to introduce what would quickly become pest fauna and flora. But it has turned out to be much easier to develop sustainable management in New Zealand than in Australia. The long term anthropocentric ethic can be practised with more hope of success here. Much of our farming and plantation forestry and maybe some fisheries are sustainable, and it is even conceivable that some natural native forests could be managed for sustainable use. If so, this ethic would permit the harvesting of selected trees for luxury items with high added value. Of course, there are many other resources that can be managed and internationally marketed according to an anthropocentric conservation ethic, including niche products such as green lipped mussels, organic avocadoes, activated manuka honey and possum fur products.

Animal liberation has not made much progress in New Zealand. Singer's main influence in New Zealand appears to have been on diet - many of my vegetarian students have told me that reading Singer's work introduced them to the idea of ethical vegetarianism. However, animal liberation is incompatible with pest control. But most New Zealanders value forests and special individual trees such as Tane Mahuta, the best known tree in New Zealand. Far from respecting the interests of pests such as possums, rabbits, rats, mice and stoats, we place a negative value on them and support efforts to eradicate them even if the methods used cause some suffering. There is very wide support for the restoration of islands such as Tiritiri Matangi (Supporters of Tiritiri Matangi Inc. has over 1400 members) and the creation of mainland islands such as the Karori Sanctuary (with over 15 000 members) and Maungautatari Ecological Island (with 1350 members) - much of the resources for these and other conservation projects is paid for from taxation and donations, and much labour is provided by volunteers.

The only major pest control controversy is over the Kaimanawa horses. These animals cause immense damage to the mostly tussock environment that they occupy. However, this is a special case. New Zealanders value forests for reasons such as their aesthetic and amenity value, but they do not generally value the scenery of the Desert Road. Furthermore, for many people, the "wild" (actually feral) horses are romantic, iconic and beautiful, unlike rodents and possums.

According to the Report of the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification (2001), there are three main "worldviews" that are the sources of environmental values in A/NZ. These are the Judaeo-Christian ethic, secular environmental ethics, and te ao Maori. The Maori word used as a translation of "ethics" is tikanga. This does not mean the same as ethics in the Western philosophical sense, which is largely theoretical and critical. "Tikanga" means custom, habitual ways of doing things, though it is strongly normative. A person who does not obey tikanga does not merely act differently from what is customary but diverges from normal, acceptable behaviour. Respect for tikanga is a central feature of criminal justice and health policy and practice as well as environmental management in New Zealand (Ministry of Justice 2001).

Unlike the monotheist religions and traditional secular thought, te ao Maori does not separate humans from the rest of nature. Plants, trees, birds and humans were directly created by the god Tane, and thus are all related to each other. Fish and reptiles were created by Tangaroa, god of waters, and cultivated foods by Rongo, but since they and Tane are brothers it follows that all living things are kin. This provides a strong basis for care for the environment. The basic social unit in Maori society is the whanau or extended family, so in a sense all living things are part of our family. Moreover, Maori feel a responsibility not just to avoid harming kin, but positively, to help them. If a member of your whanau has helped a member of my whanau at some stage, and the opportunity arises for me to help a member of yours, I ought to do so. This is an aspect of utu, balance (Ministry of Justice 2001).

It follows, therefore that, based on kinship, we ought to avoid unnecessary environmental harm, and where possible to do good, to help our kin to thrive. We also ought to put right the results of past harms, even if we did not personally cause them, just as we have duties to help our human relatives who may have been harmed, regardless of who caused the harm (Patterson 1994)

Two key concepts in Maori ethics that have found their way into everyday speech are tapu and mauri. "Tapu" is often translated as "sacred" or "forbidden". Thus a waahi tapu is a sacred place, and a rahui tapu is a declaration that a place or resource not be accessed - for instance, if someone drowns

off a beach, a rahui tapu will usually be declared on fishing or shellfish harvesting for a period. The human head is tapu in the sense that it must not normally be touched. "Mauri" is often translated as "life force". A person or other being has mauri as long as he or she is alive, and death occurs when mauri departs. Still, these definitions are something of an oversimplification, and non-living things and ecosystems can also have mauri (Morgan 2004). What both concepts have in common (Patterson. 1994, thinks they are possibly interchangeable) is that everything has its own essence, nature or character which makes it what it is and must be respected. For instance, a carver planning to create a particular carving will seek wood that has the right grain and texture for the object it is to depict; conversely, one may find a piece of driftwood with sinuous grain that looks just right for a carving of a fish. This is its mauri (Toia and Couper 2006).

Since natural objects and systems have their own character, they should be respected too. Thus, on the Maori view, they are not ours to do with as we please: we should work with nature and not try to turn it into something that is inconsistent with its character. This has implications for land use; for instance, respect for the character of steep volcanic slopes with light soil requires us not to clear the trees and cause erosion. If we nonetheless do clear the trees and plant crops or build houses, we will have upset the balance of nature. Eventually, we will suffer the consequences of our foolishness - our crops or buildings will be washed away by heavy rains - another example of utu (Ministry of Justice 2001).

Perhaps the most controversial concept is kaitiakitanga, usually translated, accurately, as stewardship or guardianship. A steward or guardian is someone who is appointed to take care of something by someone who has the authority (mana) to do so. For Maori, this authority ultimately comes from the gods, though usually, of course, through layers of intermediaries (Patterson 2000).

The controversy has arisen because in the Resource Management Act 1991 it is implied, and in the works of writers such as Patterson stated, that kaitiakitanga can be generalized as the responsibility we all have to be "caretakers of the systems in which … we work, live and play" (1994, p. 406). "Caretaker" is a synonym for steward. In the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, humans are stewards of the earth, having been appointed to take care of it on behalf of God, its creator and owner. Stewardship exists in a secular context - every company manager is a steward for the owners, commonly the shareholders - and guardians can be appointed by courts to take care of minors. But only if God or gods exist can humans be kaitiaki of the earth, since the concept depends on someone having the mana to appoint them. You cannot just declare yourself to be a steward. The Resource Management Act refers to kaitiakitanga as if it can be exercised by any resource manager, but many Maori lawyers are concerned that this trivializes the concept by removing its essential ties to tikanga Maori.

The Treaty of Waitangi (1840), between a number of paramount chiefs and the British Crown, guarantees Maori sovereignty - rangatiratanga. The rangatira was the chieftain of a tribe. Some Maori consider that this was meant to include political and legal authority, and advocate for a separate Maori legislature and judicial system. More commonly, it is seen as focused on control of the management of natural resources. Successful claims under the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 have been brought for the return of (or financial compensation for) land that was confiscated in the 19th century; a share of fishing quotas; and radio and television frequencies (which were natural resources in 1840 even though nobody recognized them as such).

Some Maori have therefore argued that, for instance, native species should be managed in the traditional manner, by iwi (tribal) authorities. The iwi was the highest level of authority; there was no pan-Maori authority. Because of NZ's distinctive topography - central mountains running north-south with river valleys running east and west - the boundaries of an iwi were usually catchment based, which made for holistic environmental management (and is the ecological basis of regional government).

The increasing presence of Maori concepts such as rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga, and especially of the principles of the Treaty of Waikato, in legislation, planning and management, the recognition of Maori customary rights and title, the number of kohanga reo (preschools where only Maori is spoken), the increasingly availability of culturally appropriate practices in the health system suggest that New Zealand society is moving towards at least a partial fusion of Pakeha and Maori culture.

Conclusion

In the writings of deep ecologists it is often implied that a concern to preserve nature is necessarily inconsistent with an anthropocentric view that puts a high value on the promotion of human well-being. But it may be that, in the long term, human well-being is best promoted by avoiding a complete transformation of the earth to suit short term human demands. Norton (1986) argues persuasively that most writers on environmental ethics have falsely assumed that conservation, in the sense of sustainable resource use, must be identified with anthropocentrism, a commitment to putting human interests first, while preservation, in the sense of protecting an area or a species from the disruptive consequences of human use, is identified with non-anthropocentrism. But intelligent anthropocentrists, to the extent that they take the long view, will acknowledge the need to protect the essential features of the biosphere - air, land, water and biodiversity - and therefore to preserve significant areas in their natural state rather than developing the whole earth for production. This is a requirement of sustainable management, the overriding goal of the Resource Management Act.

I believe that a distinctive New Zealand environmental ethic is emerging. It will be influenced by globalized ideas of environmental ethics (though not particularly by animal liberation) but will be shaped primarily by the cultural heritage and shared experiences of both European and Maori.

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