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Rögnvaldur Hannesson, *Ecofundamentalism: A Critique of Extreme Environmentalism*, Lexington Books, 2014,120 pp. $49.95 Hardcover.

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Abstract. Professor Rögnvaldur Hannesson, an authority on natural resource management, has written a well-argued, even if polemical, book against ecofundamentalism, which, for him, puts nature before man. He cogently discusses the difficulties in applying notions of sustainability and biodiversity to the human condition and suggests that in the foreseeable future mankind should continue mainly to use fossil fuels as energy sources. Hannesson regards models of global warming as scientific, but as too uncertain for mankind radically to alter its way of life.
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1 Introduction: Two Kinds of Environmentalism

Reasonable, decent people want to take good care of the environment so that we can live better, both practically and aesthetically. In this sense, most people are environmentalists. The author of this book, Professor Rögnvaldur Hannesson, contrasts such "wise use" environmentalism—with which he has no problem—to ecofundamentalism: the view that "nature" is above man and that we should sacrifice our way of life if it in any sense conflicts with "nature", as the ecofundamentalists conceive of it.

Hannesson, who specialized in and taught the economics of resource management at the Bergen School of Business before his 2013 retirement, is the author of six books in his field and close to 100 academic papers. He is convinced that ecofundamentalism is not only wrong, but also dangerous, threatening civilisation as we know it. Hannesson regards ecofundamentalism as a curious mixture of ideology and religion, where Nature has replaced God and where man is no longer a sinner and still capable of redemption, but something akin to an intolerable, destructive virus. In support of his claim, he quotes David M. Graber, a biologist (p. 16): "Human happiness, and certainly human fecundity, are not as important as a wild and healthy planet. I know social scientists who remind me that people are part of nature, but it isn't true. Somewhere along the line—at about a billion years ago, maybe half that—we quit the contract and became a cancer."The reader is tempted to ask, with Hannesson: Cancer? Where does Graber himself then fit in?

Even if such views may seem extreme, Hannesson points out that ecofundamentalists cannot be that easily dismissed. They have already had

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considerable political impact. For example, hardly any nuclear energy plants are now being built, and production of hydroelectric power has in many places been reduced, even if those two sources of energy, unlike fossil fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas, are sustainable in the long run. Another example could be added from Hannesson's native Iceland, where whaling is becoming ever more difficult despite the indisputable fact that the two species of whales harvested in Icelandic waters are plentiful (fin and minke whales), while whales provide nutritious, cheap food for mankind.

2. Criticisms of Ecofundamentalism

Having explained his distinction of "wise use" environmentalism and ecofundamentalism, Hannesson goes on to analyse and criticize different elements of the latter. One is the notion that modern society is unsustainable. Here, Hannesson refers in particular to the book *Limits to Growth*, published in 1972 to considerable acclaim. As he points out, the message of that book is fairly simple: If both population and production grow exponentially in a world of limited resources, then eventually society will collapse. Hannesson observes that the authors relied on highly simplified computer models and that they did not take into account self-correcting mechanisms such as the price system, innovation and entrepreneurship. Therefore, they were wildly off the mark in their predictions, as the record of the last forty years shows.

Hannesson (2014) gives a nice local example of the impact of technological innovation (p. 33): "About a hundred years ago there were concerns that ash trees, good for making skis, would become scarce in Norway, and ash trees were duly planted for future ski making. To little avail. Nowadays skis are made of synthetic material. Last time a world record was set on wooden skis was in 1970." Hannesson admits, of course, that some resources are not renewable, but he adds that the limits are flexible rather than fixed: they depend on price, technology and various other factors. Therefore, ensuring "sustainable use" is a much more complicated task than most environmentalists imagine.

Hannesson also criticizes the "precautionary principle" which implies that in decisions about alternative developments "nature" should enjoy the benefit of the doubt. To the extent that this principle is meaningful, it stops all experimentation and thus all progress. "Not for nothing has the precautionary principle been called the paralyzing principle" (p. 38). Tongue in cheek, Hannesson tells (p. 38) the story of the stone age woman who, in the late evening says: "Stop honing that flint stone, dear, you never know where it might end."

After sustainability, Hannesson's next target is biodiversity. He is not worried about "alien species" threatening biodiversity. In North America, most of the buffalos roaming around on the prairies were replaced by cattle and cereals, enabling food production for much of the world. Some buffalos still remain. Did anything go wrong? Sheep and cows were brought from Europe to Australia and New Zealand, coffee from Ethiopia to Brazil, tea from China to India, and rubber from Brazil to Malaysia. Everybody benefitted, except, perhaps, in the short run some monopolists.

In the second place, Hannesson reminds us that the existence of some species is not generally welcomed, such as that of flies and lice that people busily try to kill on their own bodies with chemicals, not to mention other parasites, pathogens, weeds and predators. For whose benefit should such species be preserved? It is true that ecofundamentalists would like to preserve some predators that pose a threat to, or inflict a cost on, other people. In the French Alps, the wolf was hunted to extinction in the 1930s. Then, late in the 20th Century, the European Union made it

a protected species. It invaded the French Alps again from Italy in 1992 and the wolf population is now growing fast and killing a lot of sheep. The European Union compensates farmers for their lost sheep. Hannesson comments drily (p. 46): "So the wolf is dining at the expense of the French taxpayer." Hannesson also refers to (p. 45) Norwegian ecofundamentalists who insist on protecting bears and wolves in the mountaineous countryside, disregarding the costs thus inflicted on sheep and reindeer farmers. An Icelandic example would be the majestic white tailed eagle which delights birdwatchers, but which preys on the eider bird, valuable for farmers on the coast because of its eiderdown. Perhaps the white tailed eagle belongs to a category which Hannesson mentions: "Charismatic mega fauna" are big animals, such as whales, elephants, rhinos, tigers, lions and other large predators which many people find fascinating and would like to preserve. But at whose cost?

3. Fossil Fuels and Global Warming

In a chapter on energy, Hannesson points out that fossil fuels provide around 90% of our commercial primary energy, and for a good reason: they are much cheaper and more convenient to use than other energy sources. Hannesson identifies two problems with the much-touted alternatives to fossil fuels: wind and solar energy. These problems are intermittency and dispersion. Intermittency means that the flow produced is not steady, so such energy sources have to be backed up by other kinds of sources, most often fossil fuels. Dispersion means that such energy sources require enormous space which consequently has to be transferred from other, and more profitable, uses. The problem of dispersion also applies to another proposed energy source: biofuels. For example, replacing 10% of the American consumption of oil with ethanol from corn would require 10% of all currently used farmland in the United States.

For these reasons, Hannesson favours continued use of fossil fuels as energy sources, arguing that we could hope in the foreseeable future to live off this inherited capital of mankind. If an alternative is needed in the long run, it will be nuclear power which could last thousands of years. Meanwhile, presumably, we would also have discovered new energy sources and new ways of using the existing ones. Hannesson cites studies showing that the accident rate for nuclear power is much lower than for coal or oil and that the waste can be satisfactorily dealt with.

But if we have to rely on fossil fuels in the near future, what about global warming? Hannesson's position there is that the elaborate climate simulation models used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Changes, IPCC, cannot be dismissed as unscientific. Behind them are large groups of scientists whose work has been thoroughly criticized and tested. These models are not "wrong" and they do not represent a deliberate conspiracy amongst scientists seeking to obtain research grants. But the problem, as Hannesson sees it, is that the predictions based on these models are not well grounded in actual experience (p. 67). "Despite all rhetoric to the contrary, this science is not at all settled." Basically, his position seems to be that we should only cross that bridge when we come to it. Hannesson also reminds us of past worries about acid rain killing forests and the disappearance of the ozone layer, both of which have been laid to rest.

Hannesson devotes the final chapters of his book to population and food production. He recalls some of the wilder predictions of Stanford University Professor Paul Ehrlich who in 1968 wrote: "The battle to feed humanity is over. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now" (p.78). Undaunted, Ehrlich has gone on

uttering more doomsday prophecies, and, perhaps more surprisingly, continuing to receive all kinds of honours and prizes, such as a MacArthur Prize Fellowship and a Heinz Award for Environmental Sciences. But while world population is still growing, its growth rate has gone down, especially in the more affluent nations. Moreover, food production has increased because of the "green revolution" and other technological improvements. Suddenly, India, which had been reliant on food aid from the United States, found itself exporting wheat. The green revolution depended on genetic engineering, which is not, as Hannesson points out, fundamentally different from long-established practices of selective breeding and breeding across species, only faster and more precise. Hannesson also describes the enormous food-producing potential of the oceans—covering 71% of the earth's surface. Already, aquaculture accounts for almost half of the fish produced in the world. The traditional problem in the offshore capture fisheries however was open access, leading to over-exploitation. With the general extension in the late 1970s of exclusive economic zones to 200 miles, individual countries were able to develop systems of managing their fisheries. Although Hannesson does not discuss this in detail, two countries did so successfully, New Zealand and Iceland, with a system of individual transferable catch quotas, amounting to private use rights of fish stocks in the ocean commons (Gissurarson, 2000).

4. Concluding Remarks

Hannesson's argument is robust, and the style is clear and jargon-free, even if not very subtle or elegant. Nevertheless, a few critical comments may be in order. In his discussion of biodiversity, Hannesson omits an interesting observation about the tropical rain forest. It is that biodiversity may be maintained on a much smaller area of land (or sea) than many envisage. For example, most of the Atlantic Forest which the European settlers found on Brazil's coastline has been cut down. But apparently, in the area remaining, biodiversity has not been reduced much, if at all, from what it originally was in the whole Forest. Therefore, it seems unreasonable to preserve the entire Amazon Forest just in order to maintain biodiversity: The same goal could be achieved by leaving intact a much smaller area (Stott, 1999).

In the second place, Hannesson writes (p. 24): "Whatever the methods, the one-child policy is likely to have been beneficial for the unprecedented economic growth in China after Mao. Few children means fewer mouths to feed, which is important for a poor country, and China is not exactly under populated." Was the one-child policy really beneficial? Probably the desired goal could have been achieved spontaneously, without all the human misery involved in trying to fit all into the same box. For example, from 1980 when the one-child policy was imposed in China, to 2010, the population growth rate went down from 1.3% to 0.5%, whereas in Sri Lanka—with no one-child policy—in the same period it fell from 1.9% to 0.8% (World Bank, 2015). Thirdly, Hannesson gives a brief account of the hostile reaction by some academics to Danish statistician Bjørn Lomborg's book (2001), *the Skeptical Environmentalist*, mentioning a decision by a panel of Danish scientists that Lomborg had violated rules of ethical scientific practice. Hannesson adds (p. 107): "The panel's support of its conclusion was not convincing; it bore all the hallmarks of political correctness." It would have been worth noting that indeed the Danish Ministry of Science invalidated the panel's decision.

No book is faultless. Hannesson is at the same time too hard on decent people genuinely interested in conservation and too soft on their leaders in the environmental movement. He tends to dismiss all environmentalists as fantasists instead of suggesting solutions to the first group and thus winning them over: Rather than fully demonstrating that environmental problems usually can be solved

by defining and protecting property rights and using the price mechanism, Hannesson has a tendency to minimise such problems. He should bear in mind his own notion of "wise use" environmentalism.

However, the real ecofundamentalists, the leaders of the radical environmental movements, are no innocents: They seek power to transform our lives according to their own radical ideas. Consider again the example of wolves preying on the sheep of farmers. This is not a conflict between "nature" and man. It is in fact an example of incompatible uses of a resource by two groups of people. The ecofundamentalists want to use the sheep in one way, by offering them as food to the wolves. The farmers want to use the sheep in another way, by growing them, shearing them and slaughtering them and then selling the wool and the meat to their customers. The problem is that the ecofundamentalists do not want to pay themselves for their preference which is to know of, and perhaps observe, wolves roaming freely around in the countryside. In the French Alps the ecofundamentalists have managed to send the bill to European taxpayers; in Norway they want the farmers to pay. Many of the other cases discussed by Hannesson turn out, on a closer look, to be like this and could perhaps best be analysed in the tradition of the Public Choice School. Be that as it may, Hannesson has written an instructive, concise book, successfully debunking many myths about the environment, with sober analysis rather than rhetoric.

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