

Why Is It Nature versus People?

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The environmental lobby in Washington is working overtime these days moaning over the prospect of reduced budgets and rolled-back regulation.

Don't get me wrong. I do not dismiss everything scary coming from ecologists. Human beings can be reckless and destructive, although I doubt our worry should be about the environment instead of ourselves. After all we can flourish only if there are no great disasters, whether of our own making or through climatic happenstance.

What makes me doubt the complete sanity of many environmentalists is their constant insistence on reading human life out of the rest of nature. As if we were not natural and did not belong with the rest of the world -- indeed, as if we had been dumped into reality by some runaway garbage truck disposing of unnatural trash.

The plain fact is that we are every bit as natural as are ants, snail darters, spotted owls, or wetlands. We are the crown of creation, the highest level of nature attained in the known universe. What's more, this means that housing developments, too, are part of nature. As are high-rise buildings, bridges, disposable diapers, and even nuclear waste.

Part of the rhetoric that gives environmentalists the apparent moral high ground concerns the supposed conflict between the sacrosanct natural versus the lowly artificial, technological, and "man-made." I am sure we all have heard instances of this blather, as when some program on the Discovery channel proclaims that some part of nature has been undermined by, you guessed it, "MAN!"

Yet, consider this: when a zebra is destroyed by a lion, it isn't depicted as the sad demise of some natural thing at the hands of an alien, unnatural force. When hurricanes, volcanoes, typhoons, or tornadoes wreak havoc across the globe, these are accepted as natural events, to be lamented as only minor disturbances, not ecological disasters. Oh, once in a while even these are traced in some incomprehensible, remote fashion to alleged human misconduct. (But just how that is conceived by the finger-wagging environmentalist crowd is rather bizarre. Most of these scientific types don't really believe in freedom of will, in the capacity of human beings to make real choices! So how then can they blame us for anything?)

In fact we are every bit as much a part of nature as those wetlands the environmentalists wish to protect from us. Why don't they go out to protect other parts of nature from, say, termites or floods? Why they are unwilling to read out of this world everything else that changes the surrounding environment is one of those puzzles these folks simply refuse to address.

What makes sense is that human beings are a different natural phenomenon from, say, volcanoes and foxes, to name just two natural beings that cause some destruction here and there in the universe. But remember, birds are different from fish, and fish are different from rocks, and so forth and so forth. The fact that human beings manifest even radical differences is by no means unprecedented. Nature repeatedly keeps introducing such variations, nothing strange about that any more.

But no. The environmentalist crowd keeps treating the novelty that we as freakish, alien, undesirable. Housing developments are not natural, nor are freeways, parking lots, or dams. Why? Well, there is no answer given to that question because the idea is obviously nutty. What a natural being does is by definition, natural. It happens that doing wrong is new -- other beings do not do the wrong thing, that's reserved to human nature. But it's natural, too. It is our task to avoid doing wrong, to keep doing right, but the problem is not between natural versus non-natural or anti-natural.

The whole rhetoric of environmentalism needs to be recast into terms that make better sense. Let's not exclude human life from the realm of nature. Then we can ask whether it is the right thing for us to build houses, bridges, dams, parking lots, or nuclear power generators. Those are real issues. The nature versus human beings story is a phony one, through and through. []

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