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Science and Soul: Protecting the Natural World

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Is it possible to hold two completely contradictory positions at the same time, and still retain one's integrity?

I only ask because I do. And I hope so! And the issue in hand is the debate that's currently raging about how best to protect areas of High Conservation Value, rich in biological diversity.

POSITION 1

Given the dominance of today's economic paradigm, many people believe that the best possible way to achieve this is to establish a market place for all such environmental priorities, determine an appropriate price for whatever it is that needs to be protected - in terms of biodiversity, carbon sinks - with forests or peat bogs, for instance - or other ecosystem services (as they're now described!). Then create the right financial mechanism for meeting that price in that market place, and rest easy that at least that little sliver of the natural world has been saved through the workings of the market.

POSITION 2

Others argue that much of what makes special places special is absolutely beyond price. They have 'intrinsic value', regardless of their economic value to humankind, and should therefore be protected absolutely for all time. In many instances, they are also places of special spiritual significance, and to seek to reduce that inestimable value to a dollar value is in itself a slippery slope from which there is no coming back.

People defend these two positions with equal passion - and correspondingly high levels of contempt for those who do not share their view. The lexicon of contempt grows by the day: grubby pragmatists, self-indulgent idealists, money-grubbing profiteers, sell-out merchants, tree-hugging romantics, and so on.

And you'd be right to think that the most vociferous protagonists on both sides are not remotely open to change! This debate goes back a long way. When Friends of the Earth launched one of the first ever international campaigns to protect the rainforests back in the mid-1980s, the principal metaphor it used was that of the treasure chest, overflowing with both current and future economic benefits for humankind - including a 'store-

house' of genetic diversity from which future drugs could be developed, as in the case of the rosy periwinkle from Madagascar's forests, which had already been put to good use in various cancer cures.

A number of Friends of the Earth Local Groups at that time were deeply aggrieved by all this talk of treasure chests and store-houses. For them, the work that Friends of the Earth was doing at the same time with indigenous people in both the Amazon and Sarawak in Malaysia was much more important; they felt that the worldviews of those people had a very different perspective from us: that no amount of economic benefit could possibly compensate for the forests' loss. They could only be seen as literally beyond price.

The outcome of this internal debate? Feeling slightly uncomfortable, a 'horses for courses' compromise was duly arrived at, with different positions advocated for different purposes and different audiences!

Fast forward nearly thirty years, and we're pretty much in the same place. Ever since the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment back in 2000, valuation techniques (for putting a price on at least some elements of the natural world) have become more sophisticated. The more recent TEEB project (The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity) made the most compelling case yet for developing financial instruments to help protect endangered habitats. And here in the UK, DEFRA's own ecosystem assessment proposes specific money values for places and natural systems at risk - to the utter and entirely predictable horror of those on the 'intrinsic value' side of the fence.

So that's the backdrop to this debate. My own personal dilemma right now derives from the fact that I think both positions are not just totally justifiable in their own terms, but absolutely legitimate in the ongoing war of attrition that our insane political leaders wage against the natural world. I see the two positions not so much mutually exclusive but as mutually dependent. Still riding those horses on different courses!

I was pondering this dilemma when out of the cloud dropped a fascinating article from the wonderful Alastair McIntosh on "The Sacredness of Natural Sites and their

Recovery”. He starts by examining the thesis advanced by some philosophers that the empirical / scientific approach and the spiritual approach to special places should co-exist in quite separate zones of experience. In that regard, he quotes directly from Stephen Jay Gould: “No such conflicts should exist between science and religion because each subject has a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority – and these magisteria do not overlap.”

But McIntosh goes onto challenge this idea of ‘non-overlapping’ zones of experience, looking again to the beliefs of the world’s indigenous people that sacredness of nature is absolutely central to the conservation of biodiversity - even as those indigenous people manage and make full use of that biodiversity to sustain their way of life.

Which reminded me in turn of the Japanese notion of “shinrin-yoku”, which translates literally as ‘wood-air-bathing’. This is a familiar concept for the millions of Japanese people who feel the deepest spiritual connection with Japan’s cherished (and very strictly protected) forests. And for the majority of those people, the suggestion that there are good scientific reasons for their uplifted, wood-air-bathed spirits would be seen as either irrelevant or even inappropriate.



Japanese Forest

But why? There’s an increasingly compelling scientific hypothesis for why people feel good when walking through woods. All the volatile organic compounds given off by the trees (including well-known compounds like monoterpenes from pine trees) are taken in through people’s nasal passage-ways (even though we’re not actually smelling anything as such), sending sensory messages via our olfactory nerves to that part of the brain which deals with instinctive emotions.

So, take your pick: physically, trees and humans could be seen to be literally overlapping; spiritually, we feel ourselves to be inextricably interconnected.

But I’m very conscious that some people still feel quite uncomfortable at the idea of overlapping, mutually reinforcing empirical and spiritual perspectives. And sometimes it’s possible to push this too far. The Christian Ecology Link (CEL) invited me earlier in the year to speak at their AGM on the topic of ‘Spiritual Capital’ – a concept that stretches to the very limit the notion of mutually reinforcing perspectives.

The best definition I’ve come across of spiritual capital is in a book called ‘Spiritual Capital: Wealth We can Live by’, by Denise O’Hare and Ian Marshall:

We call spiritual capital the capital earned by serving deep meaning in society, discovering that purpose, exploring fundamental human values.

It’s the kind of capital measured not in dollars and cents, but rather in the achievement and the service we can give on behalf of other people. It’s the same kind of capital from a business perspective, earned by the great Quaker businesses like Clarks shoes and Rowntree’s chocolates, who used large portions of their profits to ensure safer working conditions for their employees, to build schools, hospitals and so on. It’s the same kind of capital earned by Islamic bankers, who refuse to charge interest for the money that they loan, but instead share the risk with their borrowers to create different enterprises.

I paused at that point in my talk (assuming that everybody still listening would be nodding along in agreement at that stage), only to go on and add the final sentence:

And it’s the same kind of capital earned by Coca Cola when it offers the Indian Government free use of its delivery trucks to distribute polio vaccines to the poor in isolated regions of the country.

At which point, about 99% of people in the room came instantly to the conclusion that if Coca Cola can be a legitimate creator of spiritual capital, then the concept clearly has no meaning whatsoever!

Definitions matter, whether we’re talking about spiritual capital or the value of the natural world. But in territory as keenly contested as this, a little bit of fuzziness along the way may be seen not so much as a sign of intellectual weakness as an empathetic acknowledgement that we have a lot to learn from other people’s perspectives. How else after all are we to remain open to change?

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