Environmental Ethics

I. Definitions
   A. Environment - 3 possible definitions
      • Environment as surroundings - what surrounds me is my environment. This is a spatial definition. Note that this
draws a clear line between subject and object.
      • Environment is what goes on in a given place - how climate and other factors act on individuals within that
space. In this sense the environment becomes a life support system. In this definition environment is simply a
collection of materials with various physical and chemical interactions. This is a functional definition.
      • Environment as an organic entity. This definition focuses upon the ways individuals are interdependent by their
very nature. In this definition the individual is not an isolated atomic thing because its environment is part of
itself. Note how the subject-object relationship here has been rendered meaningless.

   B. Value
      • Instrumental value - something that is valued because of how it can be useful or serve a purpose.
      • Intrinsic value - Something that has value or worth in and of itself

   C. Anthropocentrism - This term refers to a human centered perspective. A perspective is anthropocentric if it holds that
humans alone have intrinsic worth.

II. Anthropocentric approaches to environmental ethics
   All anthropocentric approaches share one basic belief - that the environment or nature has no value in and of itself - its value is
instrumental not intrinsic.
   Anthropocentric approaches often find themselves in conflict with one another. For example both preserving Yosemite for its value to
us as a place of scenic beauty and cutting its trees down to make houses reflect an anthropocentric orientation, but they are also
mutually exclusive. The question then becomes - how to decide which instrumental use is of greater value.
The usual approach to weighing to instrumental uses is applying a cost benefit analysis. Cost benefit analyses involve three distinct
elements:
   • Assessment - A determination of the likely effects of taking an action.
   • Evaluation - The establishment of the relative value to people for taking one or another action.
   • Assessment of opportunity cost - establishing the value lost by taking one action over another

   The problem with cost benefit analyses is that it is often quite difficult to establish valuation for non-monetary commodities. For
example, what is the value of looking at the grandeur of Yosemite valley? Can this be calculated in monetary terms? How would we
compare this value to the value of damming the valley to provide electricity and water for millions?

   Valuation of nature relies on incomplete knowledge. While a protected species may have little direct value to humans, its value may be
comparable to the value of looking at the grandeur of Yosemite valley? Can this be calculated in monetary terms? How would we
compare this value to the value of damming the valley to provide electricity and water for millions?

   The capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a prerequisite for having interests at all, a condition that
must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way. It would be nonsense to say that
it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have
interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its
welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being tormented, because it will suffer if it
is.

   “If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into
consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its
suffering be counted equally with the like suffering - in so far as rough comparisons can be made - of
any other being. If a being is not capable of suffering, or of experiencing enjoyment or happiness,
there is nothing to be taken into account. This is why the limit of sentience (using the term as a
convenient, if not strictly accurate, shorthand for the capacity to suffer or experience enjoyment or
happiness) is the only defensible boundary of concern for the interests of others. To mark this
boundary by some characteristic like intelligence or rationality would be to mark it in an arbitrary
way. Why not choose some other characteristic, like skin colour?” (Singer)

b. The idea that all organisms are self maintaining systems and as such have intrinsic value.
   All living things “grow and are irritable in response to stimuli. They reproduce . . . They resist dying. . .
   They gain and maintain internal order against the disordering tendencies of external nature. They keep
winding up, recomposing themselves, while inanimate things run down, erode and decompose. (Holmes
Rolston)
2. Entire ecosystems have such value
   What is an ecosystem?
   A whole of interacting and interdependent parts in a given locale that possesses both unity and diversity
   Why should such a system possess intrinsic value? Aldo Leopold wrote in The Land Ethic in the 1940s that we
   should think of the land as “a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils animals and plants” (Leopold).
   Others have described ecosystems as “Biotic Pyramids” in which plants depend on the earth, insects on the plants
   and other animals on the insects.
   With this basic logic in place, Leopold did not think it amiss to speak of the entire system as “healthy or
   unhealthy”.
   From this logic, Leopold suggested an ethics that maintained actions were right if “it tends to preserve the
   integrity, stability or beauty of the biotic community” (Rolston in McKinnon).
   In this sense, ecosystems have worth based upon the same logic that Rolston argues any organism has worth (from
   the quote above)
   From this the entire earth might be regarded as a single system possessing integrity stability and beauty which
   ought to be maintained. This idea that began in the 40s developed in the 1970s into the deep ecology movement.

Deep Ecology
   Movement that distinguishes itself from “establishment or reform environmentalism” which deep ecology
   proponents call “shallow ecology” because it is anthropomorphic in orientation. (Devall and Sessions in
   McKinnon 360A)
   Founded by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess this movement argues that we must look for the root causes
   of environmental degradation and that our view of nature must be holistic.
   Deep ecology maintains that the root causes of environmental degradation are to be found in the basic value
   orientation of Western society - specifically reductionism, individualism and consumerism. Deep ecology
   maintains that each of the above values must be re thought:
   • Reductionism - Is all reality reducible to atoms and motion? Does this deny fundamental
     relationships? Can reality be conceived of in discreet units?(THINK ABOUT TAYLOR’S
     ATOMISM)
   • Individualism - Deep ecology asks us to re-think what it means to be an individual - are we many
     separate beings or are we inter-related parts of a whole? (Becoming more real by understanding
     ourselves in a truer fashion) (questioning subject object relationships)
   • Consumerism - Deep ecology argues that we must redefine what is meant by the “good life” away
     from the accumulation of possessions and satisfaction of wants and desires.

Some basic beliefs of deep ecology (see chart on p. 365 for a breakdown comparison of deep ecology with the
   dominant worldview)
   • Biocentric equality - “All things in the Biosphere have an equal right to live” and flourish - all are
     equal in intrinsic worth.
   • Any intrusion into nature to change it requires justification and this justification must be based
     upon the satisfaction of a vital need, not a desire or want.
   • The Flourishing of human and non-human life alike requires a “substantial decrease in human
     population.

Critiques of deep ecology:
   • Serves as justification for ecoterrorism
   • Violates the notion that man has more value than nature
   • Would require a complete change in our way of life

Eco feminism
   Philosophical orientation emerging in the 1970s that maintained we ought to look to social patterns to discover
   what is wrong with our relationship to nature. Ecofeminists argue that a strong parallel exists between the
   oppression and subordination of women in families and society and the degradation of nature through the
   transformation of differences into “conceptual binaries and ideological hierarchies” that serve to justify domination
   (Wikipedia - “ecofeminism”). Note the importance of subject object relationships in this scheme that serve to
   reinforce hierarchical patterns of interaction between dominant and subordinate categories:
   Subject                   Object
   Actor                    Acted upon
   Man                      Woman
   Humans                   The non human environment
   The developed world      The developing world
   Etc.

Eco feminism maintains that understanding our relationship with the environment (and correcting the problems
   that have arisen from this relationship) requires a rethinking of the entire conceptual framework (described above)
   of western society.

The structure of this outline follows (more or less) the discussion on environmental ethics found in:
   Other sources are noted.