

The Sovereignty of Nature? Environmental Protection in a Postmodern Age

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Recent postmodern international relations (IR) scholarship threatens to undermine global environmental protection efforts. Global environmental protection is fundamentally about conserving and preserving nature. It involves safeguarding the quality of the earth's air, water, soil, and other species. Postmodern critics have shown, however, that "nature" is not simply a given, physical object but a social construction—an entity that assumes meaning within various cultural contexts and is fundamentally unknowable outside of human categories of understanding. This criticism raises significant challenges for global environmental politics. How can societies protect the nonhuman world if the very identity of that enterprise is cast into doubt? How can states cooperate to protect nature if the meaning of the term is socially and historically contingent? This article argues that postmodern criticisms of "nature" do not undermine global environmental protection efforts—as many IR scholars suggest—but rather provide their own guidelines for practice. Postmodernists value the so-called "other"; they aim to give voice to the poor, oppressed, and otherwise disadvantaged in an attempt to limit hegemonic tendencies of the powerful. The article calls on postmodernist IR scholars to take their own concerns seriously and stand up for the paradigmatic "other," the nonhuman world in all its abundance and diversity. It calls on postmodern IR scholars to extend their concern for the "other" to the realm of plants, animals, landscapes, and so forth, and work to protect the radical "otherness" of the so-called natural world. The article, in other words, uses postmodern criticism against itself to ground commitment to global environmental protection.

[C]ertain contemporary forms of intellectual and social relativism can be just as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chain saws.

Michael Soule and Gary Lease (1995:xvi)

Postmodern scholars of international relations (IR) make a living by exposing the constructed quality of those things we take for granted in the study of world politics. The discipline of IR grew up in the modern world and thus developed certain theoretical and conceptual assumptions of the period that, until recently, have gone largely unquestioned. Much of the discipline has, for example, assumed that world politics operate according to certain laws and that one can discern these laws to varying degrees of accuracy. As a consequence, many IR scholars have come to believe that one can arrive at universalist understandings of the world that are valid for all times and places. Additionally, the discipline has long assumed that language itself can serve to represent accurately real-world events

and has consistently used dichotomized frames of reference, such as fact/value, self/other, domestic/international and realist/idealist, to understand world political events and the enterprise of IR itself. For postmodernists, these kinds of assumptions need critical reflection, for they misunderstand the activity of social inquiry and lead often to inappropriate political practices.

Postmodern IR scholars use a number of strategies to dislodge modernist tendencies. Some deconstruct key concepts in the discipline to destabilize accepted meanings and reveal the contradictions and assumptions implicit in IR scholarship (Ashley, 1986; Walker, 1993; Stephanson, 1998). In a related strategy, some reinterpret classic IR texts to show that the universalist lessons these works supposedly teach are not transhistorical insights or part of a linear progression of knowledge but, rather, simply narratives constructed within sociohistorical contexts by thinkers committed to certain political orientations (George, 1994; Walker, 1989). Finally, some perform genealogies on conventional political practices to undermine the sense of historical necessity that scholarship often associates with contemporary diplomacy or other international action (Der Derian, 1992, 1987; Milliken, 1996). Behind each of these strategies is an attempt to show that knowledge about world politics is not a matter of accurate representation of, or penetrating objective insight into, political reality, but rather a form of political practice. These strategies aim, in other words, to expose IR as a discursive practice, “a process by which identities are formed, meaning is given, and status and privilege are accorded—a process of knowledges *as power*” (George, 1994:216). This is important because, otherwise, the “knowledge” proffered by IR can become reified and thus placed outside the realm of criticism.

Philosophically, the target of postmodern IR, like postmodernism in general, is the idea of nature. Reification takes place when we assume that something exists “by nature” rather than by human design or purpose. Reification, as such, is a handmaiden of power insofar as the history of power is largely the story of certain people or institutional structures ruling others in the name of what is natural. The idea of nature, in this story, serves as a justification. It invests legitimacy and necessity to the existing political order. Ever since at least Plato, people have been told that it is in the nature of the universe for society to look a certain way. Scholars of IR have long engaged in a similar practice by announcing that specific conditions throughout the world are by nature, that is, part of the fundamental character of world politics and unamenable to change (Wapner, 2000). Postmodernists reject such proclamations. They show that appeals to nature are no more than political moves aimed (often implicitly) at silencing alternative perspectives.¹ The project of IR postmodernism, then, is to unmask the reifying tendencies of IR as a discipline and thereby help “de-nature” the world.

While postmodern IR scholars have de-natured various economic, social, and political conditions, a number of them are now turning their gaze to nature itself (see, e.g., Fischer and Hajer, 1999; Luke, 1997; Kuehls, 1996; Litfin, 1994; Sachs, 1994). With the emergence of global environmental affairs, nature has recently become an object of study among IR scholars. Environmental dilemmas pose significant transnational and global challenges and thus are becoming standard fare for IR theory and international practice. Threats such as climate change, ozone depletion, loss of biological diversity, and acid rain are among the most important transnational collective-action problems. As various voices emerge to defend the earth’s biophysical systems—its air, water, land, and nonhuman species—they often talk about saving “nature.” It is “nature,” we are told, that is threatened by pervasive anti-ecological practices, and international environmental protection efforts and environmentalism in general have risen in nature’s defense.

¹ One sees here the close connection between IR critical theory and postmodern IR (see Cox, 1986; Hoffman, 1987).

Postmodern IR scholars are beginning to question the character of this defense insofar as it, by definition, entails constructing the meaning of nature rather than working with a universal, objective understanding. As postmodernists make clear, “nature” is not simply a physical entity but a human idea through which we encounter the nonhuman world. “Nature,” as such, is not merely “out there” or “given,” but is a social entity that assumes meaning within various cultural contexts and is fundamentally unknowable except as a social construct. Postmodern IR scholars look at the nonhuman world of plants, animals, rocks, trees, mountains, and rivers and show that, while we rightfully worry about its degradation, our notions of this world and the meanings we attach to its degradation are themselves socially constructed. They reflect values, world views, cultural sensibilities, and political orientations. This understanding was put particularly well by Raymond Williams when he wrote, “The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history” (quoted in Harvey, 1996:24). The point is that “nature” is not something the mind *discovers* but rather something it *constructs*.

This insight helps explain much about global environmental politics. One of the consistent mishaps in international environmental affairs is the assumption that all parties concerned with climate change, biological diversity, and so forth share the same understanding of the problem. To take the most obvious example: many northern states and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) work on behalf of wilderness preservation and biological diversity in the developing world. Yet, many in the developing world argue that one person’s wilderness is another person’s home, and that what is a valued endangered species to some is dinner, a threat, or potential income to another (Sachs, 1995). “Nature,” as such, is not a single realm with a universalized meaning, but an ideational canvas on which one projects one’s sensibilities, cultural attributes, economic conditions, and social necessities.

While helpful at explaining difference at the level of transnational environmental discourse and practice, postmodern environmental IR has its dangers. Environmentalism is fundamentally about conserving and preserving nature. Whether one is worrying about climate change, loss of biological diversity, dwindling resources, or overall degradation of the earth’s air, water, soil, and species, the nonhuman world is the backdrop for environmentalist concern. By removing the foundational ground of environmentalism, postmodern “eco-criticism”² opens the way for much anti-environmental argument and action. Indeed, many anti-environmentalists embrace postmodern eco-criticism and celebrate environmentalism’s anti-foundationalism (e.g., Rubin, 1998; Chase, 1995; Kaufman, 1994). They argue that without a foundational reference, human options are infinitely open when it comes to how to treat the nonhuman world, and this openness is often used to justify anti-environmental practices.

In this article, I develop a response to postmodern IR criticisms about nature that can retain their ability to analyze difference in global environmental politics but set limits on what is possible in terms of practice. I do so by showing that postmodern eco-criticism imposes its own limits on the relationship between humans and nonhumans. It does so through moral discourse.

While critical of universalist moral injunctions, many postmodernists nonetheless espouse an ethical orientation. They champion the so-called “other” or subaltern in their writings. Recognizing that their own pronouncements about the world and those of their fellow intellectuals are not objectively true but rather partial insights emerging from particularist orientations, they value wide-

² I use the term “eco-criticism” as a shorthand reference to postmodern orientations toward “nature.” This is different from literary uses of the term, which simply mean an “earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty, 1996:xiii).

spread public discourse and argue for giving voice to the “other”—the poor, politically ineffective, or otherwise disadvantaged who are routinely silenced from public affairs. Keeping this in mind, the article argues that eco-critics cannot dispense with nature altogether, even though our ideas of it are social constructions, but we must privilege it to the degree that the nonhuman world represents the paradigmatic “other.” While humans interpret plants, animals, rivers, and forests in multiple ways, these entities are materially different from human beings. Giving voice to them, then, requires working to protect their existence. In short, the article demonstrates that even the most extreme eco-critic must support a minimum of ecological protection. While the eco-critic must balance this value against other concerns and social goals, a commitment to nature preservation must register on his or her moral compass.

The article proceeds in the following manner. The first section describes the privileged role “nature” has played in international environmental affairs and in environmental discourse in general. It seeks to show the ways that many scholars and environmentalists have essentialized the idea of nature and have used it as a backdrop against which to argue for various forms of environmental protection. The second section explains the postmodern critique of “nature.” It describes the argument for a social constructivist understanding of nature and outlines how this understanding destabilizes much of the conventional, environmentalist conception of the nonhuman world (including that of IR environmental scholarship). The next section reviews two main responses to the postmodern critique that currently animate much thinking. It does so to situate intellectually my own rebuttal, which I present in the following, fourth section. This fourth section outlines my response and explains what it means environmentally to take the “other” seriously. The argument here is that even the most ardent postmodernist must support some level of nature protection if for no other reason than nature is the paradigmatic “other” and thus deserving of protection. The fifth section elaborates on this by discussing what such nature protection should look like. It grounds a commitment to nonhuman abundance in the ethical stance of respecting “otherness.” The sixth and last section describes some of the policy implications of this type of analysis. It explains what postmodern eco-criticism contributes to contemporary environmental debates and IR, and points out parameters for that contribution.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to comment on the level of analysis. My concern in the article is the dangerous effect postmodern criticism can have on both the study and practice of global environmental affairs. The threat to which I refer, however, goes beyond international and global politics. It is, at bottom, a philosophical issue with implications for all levels of political life. For this reason, much of the article directs itself to philosophical and environmental literature that is neither clearly domestic nor international, but crosscutting in its concern. To me, this is par for the course for thinking about world politics in the contemporary age. The analytical boundary between international and domestic affairs has always been tenuous (Walker, 1993) and recently, in an age of globalization, it has come under direct scrutiny (Buzan and Little, 2001; Rosenau, 1997; Held et al., 1999). Many scholars of IR and of domestic politics try to police the boundary by claiming that a specific topic is of interest to one or the other scholarly community. As this article and many others hope to show, however, such policing is inappropriate and probably a dying style of scholarship. This is not to say that all disciplines now meld into each other; it is to claim, however, that disciplinary boundaries obstruct as well as illuminate understanding. Postmodern IR environmental scholarship is squarely concerned with transnational and global environmental issues. The philosophical and political arguments involved in the enterprise, however, clearly transcend the boundaries of IR as a discipline.

The Sovereignty of Nature

“Nature bats last” is a familiar slogan among environmentalists and a common assumption among scholars of international environmental politics. It suggests that no matter what human beings do, sooner or later the laws of nature will express themselves and take precedence over human activity. People can, for example, build houses in flood plains, pump excessive amounts of carbon dioxide into the air, or wipe out species at inordinate numbers. At some point, however, human activity will be vulnerable to the patterns of nature, patterns that are blind to the intentions or well-being of human beings. Environmentalists tout the slogan to remind people that ignoring nature’s ultimate sovereignty is folly: it imperils human life and the relative stability and health of the earth’s ecosystems.

Behind the idea of nature’s sovereignty is the notion of necessity. Nature “rules,” as it were, because it represents that which cannot be otherwise. It is the “given” rather than the “made,” and operates according to preordained patterns that are indifferent to human life. As a matter of necessity, nature can be manipulated—and, indeed, always is as humans interact with it—but its ultimate physicality and fundamental structural characteristics are not up for negotiation. One respects the laws of nature or one is blindly at the mercy of nature’s power. In the end, nature sets the limits of human activity. Environmentally, this means that there are certain absolute features of nature that cannot be compromised without risking the loss of valuable environmental services or spoiling parts of the earth we find beautiful or otherwise valuable. When nature’s thresholds are crossed, populations crash, landscapes are defaced, air is polluted, climate changes. People can, of course, come to appreciate or at least tolerate these changes, but the ultimate authority is nature itself. In such cases, nature has “spoken.” It is nature whose parameters have been pressed and whose dynamics come to express themselves.

The sovereignty of nature sits at the core of conventional environmentalism. The idea that there is a self-subsisting realm of rocks, plants, animals, and other entities that operates according to its own logic and that this logic is not indefinitely manipulable without undesirable environmental change, has underpinned environmentalism from its earliest days as a preservationist movement to its more recent incarnation as one animated by social justice and the principle of co-evolution.³ For example, even though John Muir recognized the interconnectedness of all things, including human beings and the living and nonliving elements of the natural world, he understood that nature could be torn at the seams in the sense of causing significant, irreversible, undesirable change. The nonhuman world cannot always rebound, in a homeostatic manner, from excessive human interventions. Careless abuse of the natural world by humans can deface beautiful landscapes, destroy key species, and permanently alter whole ecosystems—nature’s sublime “cathedrals,” “monuments,” and “gardens” (Muir, 1911; see generally, Oelschlaeger, 1991:172–204; Cohen, 1984). Likewise, when Gifford Pinchot argued for sustainable, wise use of resources for human benefit, he warned against overly exploitative practices based on the recognition that nature’s bounty is not limitless, but rather that its reproductive capacities and abilities to maintain ecosystem health are finite and fragile. Nature decides the limits of human intervention, not the other way around (Pinchot, 1947; see also Shabecoff, 1993). One sees the same general orientation informing the work of later environmentalists such as Aldo Leopold (1987), Rachel Carson (1962), the authors of the *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972), Barry Commoner (1972), Arne Naess (1989), Paul and Anne Ehrlich (1996), and Paul Hawken and Amory Lovins and Hunter Lovins (1999). Each of these thinkers expresses the convic-

³ For a discussion of the progression of environmentalism from a movement animated by preservation and conservation to co-evolution, see Thiele, 1999. For support of my characterization of environmentalists, see Botkin, 1990.

tion that nature operates according to its own rules and humans mess with it at their own peril. Each believes, to one degree or another, that nature operates according to necessity.⁴ Nature's finitude and its "unfreedom" were expressed succinctly by longtime activist David Brower when he said, "At some point Nature's going to say, 'I'm sorry, but your credit's no good. You can't borrow any more from me.'" Explaining this remark, he added, "We're losing a species about every twenty minutes. We're poisoning the earth. We're losing forests, rivers, seas, and livable air" (quoted in Greenwald, 2000:37). Nature, for Brower and others, is ontologically separate from human beings and its material facticity sets the rules for life itself. Violate its rules and life diminishes. Ignore its imperatives and you experience land degradation, air and water pollution, species extinction, and potentially population "overshoot."

Most studies of global environmental politics share this same view of nature's sovereignty. Recognition of environmental problems necessitating global action is itself a statement of humanity's servitude to "nature" understood as a singular, uncompromising entity. Indeed, those calling for political action to alleviate global environmental problems typically begin their arguments by recognizing that "the raw material of the environmental debate is the deleterious effects of human activity on the planet" (Garner, 1996:2). In IR, authors such as Miller (1995), Elliott (1998), Porter, Brown, and Chasek (2000), and many others begin their studies with a similar orientation. Moreover, this view, especially with its emphasis on the self-regulating character of the nonhuman world, finds expression in the translation of environmental policy into international environmental law. For example, Gillespie grounds his study of international environmental law and ethics in the claim that "homeostasis is the objective of living things" (1997:167). That is, while biological systems demonstrate variability, the global environmental system is thought to have an "underlying objective of stability or overall limitation of dramatic change" (Ibid.:168). Gillespie uses this orientation to frame all thinking about international environmental law and ethics. Al Gore presents a similar view in his appropriately titled book *Earth in the Balance* (1993).

That nature operates according to necessity leads many environmentalists to endow it with a moral component, and this is where one *clearly* begins to notice nature's constructed quality. If nature is that which operates in an unreflective, necessary manner or, put differently, if nature is "given" rather than "made," it easily assumes normative privilege. The natural world not only operates in a certain manner, but it seemingly *should* operate in this manner. Moreover, by being separate from human affairs and seemingly nonchanging in its fundamental character, it represents a realm to which people can look for moral authority. As Cronon explains, "When we speak of 'the natural way of doing things,' we implicitly suggest that there can be no other way, and that all alternatives, being unnatural, should have no claim on our sympathies. Nature . . . becomes a kind of trump card against which there can be no defense . . ." (1996:36). When environmentalists invoke nature as something to be protected, then, they often justify their stance on nature's sheer "naturalness." Nature is not simply the way of the nonhuman world, it is also, for many, the preferred state of affairs. Nature, to put it more accurately, often possesses some uncorrupted moral purity that humans seek out and measure their lives and enterprises in terms of, and thus, according to environmentalists, it must be protected (Golley, 1994; Capra, 1997).

Nature as "moral imperative" (Cronon, 1996:35; see also Pletsch, 1994:87) assumes significance beyond something to be protected; it also represents some-

⁴ This is the case also with thinkers associated with environmental justice issues. They see the biophysical rules of nature as powerful, and point out that the disadvantaged often disproportionately experience the ill effects of environmental degradation due to current political and economic dynamics. (See Bullard, 1990, 1994; Wapner, 1997; Schlosberg, 1999.)

thing to be emulated. Environmentalists often celebrate nature's systemic masterpieces—photosynthesis, recycling, self-assembly, natural selection, and autopoiesis—and call on people to adopt such designs in the human world. Janine Benyus (1997) explores this explicitly in a book, appropriately titled *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired By Nature*, that is representative of many environmentalist tracts. Benyus explains how environmentally inspired inventors are looking to nature to find ways of harnessing energy, manufacturing goods, growing food, and healing their fellow human beings.⁵ The idea is that nature has perfected ways of operating that have withstood the test of time, proved ecologically efficient, and thus stand as models for human enterprise. At a broader level of analysis, this notion finds its roots in our earliest philosophical and religious expressions. Many thinkers, from Plato, forward have privileged the nonhuman world, seeing it as an “external source of nonhuman values against which human actions can be judged without much ambiguity” (Cronon, 1996:26). Much environmental IR shares this orientation insofar as many authors see nature as the good around which to organize global political life (see, e.g., Ophuls and Boyan, 1992; Sands, 1994). Nature, by standing outside of human enterprises, represents the norm, the foundational reference for a healthy, fulfilling life and an efficient and sound society. This was put quite well by Vaclav Havel when he said, “We must draw our standards from the natural world. We must honor with the humility of the wise the bounds of that natural world and the mystery which lies beyond them, admitting that there is something in the order of being which evidently exceeds all our competence” (quoted in Benyus, 1997:1). Nature, as order of being, not only inspires but informs. It represents, in many ways and for many an environmentalist, the good to be protected and imitated.

A number of thinkers have characterized this general viewpoint as “ecologism” (see, for example, Bookchin, 1990).⁶ This is the idea that humans must harmonize themselves—not just physically, but socially, culturally, and politically—with the natural world rather than the other way around. Nature has not only biophysical imperatives that defy transgression without catastrophic consequences for living entities, but also characteristic features that call for emulation and moral rectitude. Human beings would do well, then, respecting nature's character and, at a minimum, not impinging on the fundamental workings of the natural world and, more positively, finding ways to mimic them. Whether one is contemplating issues of climate change, ozone depletion, threats to biological diversity, desertification, or water pollution, the idea that nature has its own ways sits at the core of most environmentalist concerns and scholarly treatments. And this assumption provides the justification for protecting remaining areas that are largely undeveloped by human beings and searching for ways to live that dovetail and even support nature's dynamics.

Beyond Sovereignty

The problem with ecologism is that, as soon as one talks about the “ways of nature” and the necessity of adjusting human life to harmonize with them, it becomes imperative to ask, “Whose concept of nature does one have in mind?” Environmentalists and scholars often talk as if there is universal agreement on the character and meaning of “nature.” Yet, this deserves critical reflection. The ideas that nature is a model for human community or that it represents an

⁵ For similar orientations, see Hawken, Lovins, and Lovins, 1999; Schmidheiny, 1992; Chiras, 1992; Hawken, 1993; Soule and Piper, 1992.

⁶ It should be noted that Bookchin refers to ecologism in a negative way. Bookchin's social ecology framework argues explicitly against privileging nature's imperatives above the needs of humans. It should also be noted that Bookchin's use of the word “ecologism” and the meaning that I wish to emphasize differ from that of thinkers such as Dobson, who use the word to refer to *radical* (in contrast to reformist) green politics. (See Dobson, 1990.)

independent measure of the good, or even that it “bats last” (thus assuming a unified, stable, and largely predictable entity) are, after all, ideas. As such, they are worth questioning. Indeed, when we do so, we find that it is difficult to have confidence in any one of these, or even all of them, if for no other reason than many other conceptions present themselves. And this forces us to think carefully about the author of our notions of nature.

A guiding dimension of our conventional understandings of nature—and the backbone of ecologism—is that nature is “given” as opposed to “made.” The natural world is that which we find ourselves in rather than the realm of our own making. This understanding can be traced back to the ancient distinction between *physis* (nature) and *nomos* (law, custom, or convention), in which the former is unconnected to any consciously purposeful activity—and thus fundamentally independent of human agency—while the latter is a product of human thought and purpose (Torrance, 1999:xiv–xv).⁷ This distinction is captured in today’s parlance through the dichotomy between nature and culture, in which the former refers to the nonhuman world and the latter to the human one. The boundary between these two concepts, however, is difficult to locate, for human beings can never come to know nature in any direct perceptual manner but always come to it with cultural or social categories of understanding. As Steven Vogel puts it, humans “can have no access to anything like a presocial nature in itself; the very idea is incoherent, because all access is socially mediated” (1997:184; see also Vogel, 1996). Our categories for understanding nature, in other words, are social through and through, and thus nature is not separate from human life but part and parcel with it. All is *nomos*, as it were, because humans can never escape *nomos*. “Nature,” therefore, is not something humans simply discover in the world but rather something we construct.

To say something is socially constructed is not to say that it doesn’t exist or that it is a figment of our imagination. Drop a brick on a postmodernist’s foot and it still hurts. The meaning of the pain, however, is not preordained, and it is the meaning of human experience that is at stake for postmodernists. Put differently, postmodernists do not question the fundamental substratum of material reality—as Berkeley and idealists do—but, rather, they question the way people make sense of that reality (Rorty, 1989:4–5). People do so through narrative. Narratives or discourses are not matters of individual interpretation but are ways of talking that emerge in, and have an effect on, social context. They are both the product of people talking with each other and the forces of socialization that organize human experience. Postmodernists point out that we always interpret things in terms of *some* narrative. That is, our perception of reality is always mediated by some story or set of stories that situate our experience and conceptually provide meaning. The problem, however, is that we often assume that our particular understandings accurately capture reality. Thus, instead of operating as if we see the world through one perspective among many, we make our own view into a single, grand narrative. We, as social entities, believe our understanding is objectively true instead of inter-subjectively so.

According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, postmodernism is marked by an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984:xxiv). It is skeptical of attempts to delineate the essential quality of any phenomenon or event because there is no Archimedean point from which to view the world. Notwithstanding this, humans still tend to generate and live their lives according to grand narratives that act as cognitive maps or ideational organizers that condition widespread thought and behavior.

⁷ The two, while distinct, can come together for some Greek thinkers in those instances when human laws or conventions accord with so-called “right” reason and thus are one with nature. Plato, and later the Stoics, understood the distinction in this way. (See Torrance, 1999:xiii–xvi, 272–276.)

That discourses determine how humans conceive of nature, finds its empirical justification in studies that show that the idea of nature varies between populations and over time. Social and cultural anthropologists, for example, often point out the cross-cultural variation of the concept of nature within the ethnographic present (see, generally, Ellen and Fukui, 1996). Environmental historians show the changing meanings of nature across time. For example, Oelschlaeger (1991), Nash (1967), and Callicott and Nelson (1998) chart how the meaning of wilderness, often a stand-in for “nature” itself, has shifted within the U.S. over the decades. Literary critics and philosophers do a little bit of both as they catalogue widely different interpretations of nature throughout history and across cultures (see Torrance, 1999; McLuhan, 1994; Evernden, 1992; Glacken, 1967). Scholars of IR similarly show how the meaning of specific, transnational environmental issues change at the hands of “knowledge brokers” (Litfin, 1994), “environmental activists” (Wapner, 2002), “research institutes” (Luke, 1997), and epistemic communities (Haas, 1992), and how these changes, which often turn on contested meanings of “nature,” motivate international action. “Nature,” as these authors of various disciplines demonstrate, is not simply a material substratum whose essential character we glean from study and observation, but rather is a repository for meaning. For this reason, it has meant and still means a host of different things to different peoples (see generally Schama, 1995). “Nature” as a concept, in other words, is dynamic in that it lacks any single transhistorical or transcultural meaning.

The problem with ecologism is that it fails to appreciate the socially constructed quality of “nature.” It naively assumes that we know what nature is and what we need to do to live in harmony with “nature’s” dictates. When this assumption gets problematized, a whole host of issues arise that are troubling to many scholars and environmentalists. For example, if there is no such thing as “nature” in itself, then how are we supposed to follow “nature’s” imperatives? If, as Leslie Thiele puts it, “nature is the mirror of the human mind” (1999:169), how are we to know *its* needs and imperatives? If “nature” is fundamentally socialized, where can we find an external source of judgment, measure, or standard for ecological protection? These questions stir up environmentalism and the study of global environmental affairs. They do so primarily by reminding us to ask whose concept of nature is being used when environmentalists call for “nature” protection, and when scholars and practitioners look to “nature” as the model for social, economic, technological, and political design in response to biophysical changes.

Crossing the Postmodern Divide⁸

So far, there have been two predominant responses to eco-criticism from traditional environmentalists and scholars of environmental affairs. The first comes from those who dismiss attacks on the idea of nature out of hand and simply reassert a modernist narrative about “nature” and its imperatives. Many see eco-criticism as a type of environmental relativism that is at odds with common sense and contemporary science. Yes, they assert, there is a social dimension to how we think about nature, but nature is fundamentally a physical entity and our understanding of it can be based on scientific description. The whole notion that nature is *constructed* is simply intellectual sophistry practiced by those who either spend too much time indoors or who work at such high levels of abstraction that they never genuinely engage the phenomenal world (see, for example, Waller, 1996/97; Sessions, 1996/97; Shephard, 1995). Others, more generally, see attacks on “nature” as simply the latest manifestation of a long antinature tradition

⁸ I take this subheading from Albert Borgmann’s 1992 book of the same title.

associated with what David Ehrenfeld (1978) calls the “arrogance of humanism.” Eco-criticism places human beings at the center of all phenomena and thus is overly impressed with the self-referential character of human experience. Consequently, it is blind to what philosopher Albert Borgmann calls nature’s non-human, “commanding presence” (1995:38).

Many thoughtful scientists, activists, and writers of all kinds take this position, and it remains an important response to eco-criticism. A major problem with it, however, is that it fails to engage eco-criticism in a direct manner. The criticisms of “nature” expressed by cultural critics represent powerful lines of thought that are compatible with broader postmodern sensibilities that currently animate much popular life. They thus enjoy a discursive power that eventually must be addressed. By ignoring, dismissing, or sidestepping eco-criticism, modernist thinkers marginalize themselves with regard to debates arising out of eco-criticism. For example, every time environmentalists call for respecting nature and justify a given policy decision based on what is “natural,”⁹ antienvironmentalists can rightly respond that since there is no authentic entity called “nature,” we need not treat the natural world with any special kind of respect or follow the dictates of any given line of policy. Trees, animals, canyons, and rivers are just like anything else: we should feel free to exploit them as we see fit. At the extreme, this view can justifiably maintain that since there is no single, unproblematic understanding of “nature” and nothing outside of human values to tell us to do otherwise, we can freely choose to pave the rainforest, wipe out the last panda bear, or pump high levels of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The only things preventing us from doing so are our own interests, desires, or beliefs, and these differ depending on who is expressing them.¹⁰ Staunch environmental modernists have little to say to this argument. They can disagree about first principles, which would entail complaining about ontological and epistemological premises, but, besides this, there is little dialogue to be had. Squarely rejecting eco-criticism and reasserting a modernist narrative fails to appreciate the intellectual weight of contemporary attacks on “nature.”

A second, and more engaging, response goes in the other direction. Those in this camp actually agree with the critique of nature and, by way of response, advocate a type of “post-nature” environmentalism. Those expressing this view argue that since everything we call “nature” is relative to our ideas, we should accept (indeed embrace) our role as creators of “nature” and assume full responsibility for governing the so-called natural world. Environmentalists of this ilk call for fully utilizing technology to confront environmental problems, and ask that we be content with human-made landscapes and artificial substitutes for natural resources. “Nature” is not some other-than-human world that we find, but rather is part of the world we make. We should, so the argument goes, make our world into a place that maintains ecological services, but our vision and control over the environment need not be hindered by any preconceived vision of what is natural (see, for example, Vogel, 1996). Walter Anderson represents this view when he recommends that we see ourselves for what we really are, viz., eco-artists—designers and builders of the nonhuman world (1996:175; see generally Anderson, 1987). This second response calls for dispensing with the category of “nature” altogether and fashioning an environmentalism that uses other guidelines for vision and mobilization.

This second response is clearly sensitive to eco-criticism and represents a position that is compatible with contemporary postmodern sensibilities. It appreciates the constructed quality of nature and advocates a type of environmental-

⁹ The Sierra Club has used such arguments in their call to remove the Glen Canyon Dam and allow the Colorado River to freely run its pre-dam course (thus retaining its “original” beauty).

¹⁰ Arguments like this are made by, for example, Rubin, 1998.

ism that *can* be attuned to environmental protection. However, by dispensing with the category of “nature,” it throws the baby out with the bath water. It expresses a relativist orientation in which anything goes or, as Camus worries, “All is permitted” (1956:57). There are no reigning guidelines for valuing one set of arrangements over another. Yes, “post-nature” environmentalists advocate certain environmentally friendly actions and pursue lines of scholarship aimed at environmental protection—but they have no ontology or guiding principle to support their preferences. They have no ground on which to argue for a certain set of ecological conditions. At their best, they suggest that everything depends on context (see, e.g., Dryzek, 1995).¹¹ But, again, they offer no guidelines for negotiating the many, often conflicting, considerations that are contextually present. Moreover, without any room for nature in their position, they proffer an environmentalism that would make most traditional environmentalists uncomfortable. How could a Muir, Leopold, Carson, Ehrlich, or Brower sign on to such a viewpoint? What would it mean to be a “post-nature” environmentalist? Does not such an orientation make light of the long tradition of environmental concern?

Existence Precedes Essence

I would like to present a third response to contemporary eco-criticism that can, perhaps, enable us to appreciate the intellectual insight of postmodernism and, at the same time, provide some leverage or guideposts for protecting the non-human world at the global as well as domestic and local levels. The kind of response I present differs from the other two because it is less about the fundamental character of reality—an endless debate between modernists and postmodernists—and more about ethics. While the above replies are concerned about whether a postmodern sensibility has the right epistemological or ontological take on reality—with the first dismissing it and the second embracing it—my position has to do with how we wish to live in the world. It has to do with the kind of people we want to be. My response is a directly ethical one—one concerned about the character of our moral lives and how our moral commitments express themselves in our thought and practices. It is, however, a moral argument that rests on the ontological debris created by postmodern criticism.

Eco-critics are not intellectual hacks. At least most of them offer useful insights about human experience. Neither are most cultural critics completely nihilistic or amoral. In fact, much postmodern thought acknowledges purposeful elements in human life, and many critics see themselves involved in an extremely moral enterprise. This is particularly the case in postmodern IR (Campbell and Shapiro, 1999a; Walker, 2000; Wapner, 2000). The position I lay out melds the intellectual and moral dimensions of much postmodern criticism. It does so through what is often called an “ethic of otherness.”

One of the hallmarks of postmodernism, as mentioned, is that our understanding of reality is not something the mind discovers but rather something it constructs. Whenever we reflect on, talk about, or act in the world, we represent it—to ourselves and to others. And when we do so, we are not rendering an objective view of reality so much as constructing a certain understanding of the world. We are subscribing to a particular discourse or set of discourses about the “way things are,” and these shape our experience. This is not to say, of course, that physical objects are imaginary or that there is no substratum to reality, but simply that we endow the objects of our experience with particular meanings, and these meanings literally determine how we think about and act in relation to them and the world in general.

¹¹ Dryzek characterizes himself as a “late modernist,” but this appellation emerges from his appreciation for eco-criticism.

The ethical dimension of this insight comes into view when one recognizes the danger of forgetting the constructed quality of human experience. One of the things all of us tend to do is reify our own interpretations of the world. We construct our experience, forget that we've done so, and then assume that our constructions are somehow genuinely "real" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). This becomes an ethical failing insofar as it inevitably silences the views of others. Reification is a form of hegemony in that it asserts authority in a way that delegitimizes others' perspectives on human experience and the world in general—a type of "violence" many postmodernists find unacceptable.

At a higher level of abstraction, an ethic of otherness is consonant with a so-called "ethics of relation" (Campbell and Shapiro, 1999b). This is the notion that one's identity is always defined or formed in contradistinction to the "other." That is, one's identity, as a member of a group or as an individual, is not self-referential, and is not given or formed in a vacuum, but is defined in relation to what it is not. Recognizing this, an ethics of relation calls on us to make our responsibility to the other the basis of human reflection and moral consideration (Ibid.:x). In the IR literature, this ethical sensibility finds expression in the work of, for example, Campbell and Shapiro (1999a), Der Derian (1997), Shapiro (1997), and Manzo (1995). These authors point out how states, nations, races, ethnicities, and political units of all sorts define themselves in contradistinction to others who possess different characteristics. The ethical relation involved in such thought finds application in what Campbell and Shapiro call "an ethics of encounter." This entails searching not for universal moral principles to apply in all settings but striving to bring intelligibility to the moral contingencies involved in particular historically situated engagements (Campbell and Shapiro, 1999b:ix). The idea here is also a fundamental concern for the other. This literature has to do with reification in the sense that it points out how we reify our identities by ignoring or forgetting their relational quality.

An ethical response to reification, then, is an extreme respect for the "other." This involves, foremost, humbling and turning down the volume of one's own pronouncements about the world, and listening to others, or simply advancing the opportunity for others to express themselves. This response is what is behind the many efforts by postmodernists to "give voice to the other"—everything from academic campaigns to expanding canons by including alternative voices to popular efforts to embrace and celebrate multiculturalism. The aim is to promote the expression of, and a dialogue with, the marginalized or otherwise disadvantaged.

While postmodern critics are quite comfortable giving voice to other people,¹² when it comes to the nonhuman world—the paradigmatic "other"—they stop

¹² It must be mentioned that an ethic of "otherness" has already found expression in environmentalist circles through the environmental justice movement. Over the past two decades, it has become increasingly clear that environmental degradation is shared unequally within and across countries. The rich, politically advantaged tend to enjoy high-quality resources and live in relatively unpolluted areas, while the poor, politically disadvantaged tend to have less access to natural resources and live in areas with high levels of pollution (Bullard, 1990; Rosen, 1994; Edwards, 1995). There seems to be something unjust, in other words, about the way people experience environmental harm. This injustice takes on additional moral weight insofar as environmentalists, especially within the industrialized world, have tended to ignore the problems of, and exclude from their ranks, the poor and disadvantaged. For instance, the quality of life of the urban poor traditionally has ranked low as a priority among environmental activist groups, and minority groups—those who most severely experience environmental harm—have tended to be underrepresented in the leading positions of most environmental organizations. The environmental justice movement is an attempt to expand the focus of environmentalism to concerns about social well-being. At its root is a sensitivity to those who have traditionally been essentially silenced with regard to their views about, and participation in, environmental well-being. While still a relatively small (but growing) part of environmentalism as a whole, the environmental justice movement is an expression of the ethic of "otherness" championed by postmodern critics. It demonstrates that environmentalism is not deaf to a concern for the "other." In fact, given the steady growth of the movement, it shows that environmentalism and social justice are quite compatible. For a more extensive discussion of the environmental justice movement, especially its international component, see Wapner, 1997.

short. Instead of toning down one's voice to listen to the other-than-human world, when it comes to nature, postmodernists are happy doing all the talking.¹³ There is seemingly no need to heed the voice of the nonhuman, no reason even to assume that, from the vast world of rivers, chimpanzees, rainstorms, and orchids, anything is being said. Postmodern critics look at the nonhuman world and say to themselves that they are essentially looking in the mirror. There is nothing "out there" with its own authentic voice, because as soon as we imagine it expressing itself, we recognize that *we* are verbalizing, and therefore constructing, its "words." As Christopher Manes puts it, "It is as if we had compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology, to the point that someone like Georg Lukac could say, 'Nature is a societal category,' and actually be understood" (Manes, 1995:43).

The response to eco-criticism I am suggesting calls on postmodern critics to see the manner in which they themselves silence nature and to take their own advice and respect the radical "otherness" of the nonhuman world. Postmodernism prides itself on criticizing the urge toward mastery running through the core of modernity—an urge animated by a desire to gain greater degrees of control over ourselves and the world, including (and especially) the natural world (Spretinak, 1999; Thiele, 1997). But isn't mastery exactly what postmodernism is exerting as it captures the nonhuman world within its own conceptual domain? Doesn't postmodern criticism do its own violence as it silences the world of forests, oceans, mountain ranges, and savannas? Might not postmodernism be simply deepening the modernist urge toward mastery by eliminating the ontological weight of the nonhuman world through the assertion that there is no "nature" because everything is a social construction?

The postmodernist may respond that, well, yes, recognizing the social construction of "nature" does ignore the self-expression of the nonhuman, but how would we know what such *self* expression means? Indeed, nature doesn't seem to speak; rather, some person always speaks on nature's behalf and, as we all know, whatever that person says is a social construction. Indeed, isn't any attempt to listen to the nonhuman world a form of social construction?

All attempts to listen to nature are, indeed, social constructions, *except one*. Even the most radical postmodernist acknowledges the distinction between physical existence and nonexistence. As mentioned, postmodernists assume that there is a physical substratum to the phenomenal world, even if they argue about its different meanings. This substratum is essential for allowing entities to speak or express themselves. That which doesn't exist, doesn't speak. That which doesn't exist, manifests no character. Put differently, yes, the postmodernist should rightly worry about interpreting nature's expressions. And everyone should be wary about those who claim to speak on nature's behalf (including when environmentalists and students of global environmental politics do so). But we should not doubt the simple-minded notion that a prerequisite of expression is existence. That which doesn't exist can never express itself. And this in turn suggests that preserving the nonhuman world—in all its diverse embodiments—must be seen by eco-critics as a fundamental good. Eco-critics must be supporters, in some fashion, of environmental preservation.

Biological Abundance and Diversity

Posing the problem of nature in this way is initially helpful in responding to eco-criticism, but it also raises as many questions as it answers. Even if radical "otherness" is at stake and one can accept the commonsense view that things

¹³ Here it is interesting to note that Campbell and Shapiro (1999b), as well as their contributors, for all their ethical sensitivity, never mention the nonhuman world.

must exist to express themselves, what *exactly* should one work to preserve? What or whose existence should be protected? Should we save everything? What would that impossible task look like?

While saving everything *is* infeasible, the ideal is nonetheless relevant and provides a direction for thought and practice. Preserving “otherness” is fundamentally about difference; it is about enhancing and appreciating phenomenological variance in the world. The ethic of “otherness,” then, involves protecting as many forms of difference as possible and enabling those forms to tell their own stories. Environmentally, the variance of these forms is *imperfectly* captured through the concept of biological diversity. Biological diversity refers to the variability among living organisms and the physical environments of which they are part. It includes diversity within species, between species, and of ecosystems. To the degree that we wish to preserve “otherness,” we should, at some level, commit ourselves to biological diversity, for this provides the greatest amount and degree of difference. As Gary Nabhan writes, “each plant or animal has a story of some unique way of living in this world . . . [and] [i]n every biotic community, there are story lines that fiction writers would give their eyeteeth for . . .” (1997:12–13; see also Abram, 1996, 2001). A concern for difference should aim to preserve the authors of these stories and thus occupy itself with maintaining biological diversity.

A commitment to biological diversity calls on us to do our utmost not to diminish the multiplicity of life forms which, as best we understand, have generated from the evolutionary processes of the earth. Evolutionary processes have been so powerful and prolific for millennia because speciation has, for the most part, always outdistanced extinction, and thus the gene pool out of which natural selection draws has been robust.¹⁴ Today, the balance clearly tips in the other direction. More species are leaving the system than are joining it—an event that many see as the “sixth great extinction” (Hertsgaard, 1998:202). Due to various and extensive activities, humans are now wiping out such large numbers of species that, according to conservation biologist Michael Soule, “For the first time in hundreds of millions of years, significant evolutionary change in most higher organisms is coming to a screeching halt . . . This century will see the end of significant evolution of terrestrial vertebrates” (quoted in Thiele, 1999:48–49). His remark mirrors a more general sense that species are disappearing to such an extent that extinction in many areas and for many flora and fauna now exceeds the rate of evolutionary diversification. That is, we are impoverishing the evolutionary processes that create an abundance and diversity of living organisms.

Those committed to giving voice to the “other” should find evolutionary diminishment and loss of biological diversity disturbing. Nothing more clearly silences the other-than-human world than wiping out huge swaths of different life forms. In ethical terms, then, to allow extinction is a moral failing; to work to protect biological diversity is a moral imperative. How to avoid supporting extinction and how to enhance evolutionary dynamics and biological diversity is, of course, a complicated business. Many ecologists tell us that the best way to enhance these is to protect areas that are large and healthy enough to maintain critical ecosystem services and breeding grounds that support evolutionary diversity (Soule and Terborgh, 1999; Terborgh, 1999; Quammen, 1996). Whatever the concrete route, the general goal to be pursued follows from an ethic of “otherness.”¹⁵

While protecting biological diversity is key to preserving “otherness,” the ethic behind it demands that we pay attention not simply to the number of species but also to their quality. If the quantity of species is all that matters, there is arguably little to worry about regarding biological diversity, because even though humans

¹⁴ I say “for the most part” to account for previous mass extinctions that have happened in the distant past.

¹⁵ There are reasons for protecting biological diversity that go beyond an “ethic of otherness.” See, for example, Tilman, 1997.

are wiping out species at inordinate rates, human beings can now also bioengineer new species. By recombining genes of various organisms, we can manufacture new life forms and thus may be able, if we choose, to populate the world with innumerable species possessing diverse characteristics. Thus, to the degree that we desire simple diversity, there may be no need to protect ecosystems or even ensure the continuation of the evolutionary process, because bioengineering has taken speciation out of the evolutionary process itself. We no longer need to bother with natural selection to ensure the emergence of new species. We can now, in the words of Walter Anderson, “govern evolution” (1987) or, more accurately, bypass it entirely. While this may sound attractive—if not a bit daunting—human designed and controlled speciation should not sit well with those concerned with silencing others. It replaces genuine “others” with human creations. And in such a situation, “otherness” is not valued but disparaged.

We value the ethic of “otherness” because we realize that our own conceptions of the world are partial, and thus we are unentitled to impose our views on others. Put differently, we tone down our own conceptualizations and pronouncements of the world to open space within which others can express their experience of living. The moral message in all of this is that we should listen to the stories of others and attune ourselves to the difference being expressed. We should not forget, then, that what we value in “others” stories is that they are simply that: “*others*” stories. We don’t script them; we appreciate their “other scriptedness.” Our moral work involves, then, enabling an entity’s internal purposes and functions to express themselves without undue intervention. When it comes to the other-than-human world, it entails allowing the unfolding of an entity’s existence free from significant human intervention. Allowing such expression is, by the way, the original meaning of the Greek word *physis*. It comes from *phyein*, which means “to grow,” and refers to the process by which things come into being and pass through their existence (Torrance, 1999:xiv). According to this understanding, all things have a nature that is expressed in the unfolding of their lives. What distinguishes the nonhuman world from the human one, and thus what categorizes the more specific meaning of *physis*, is that for the former, this unfolding takes place independent of any conscious effort. It happens as a matter of course. The quality of *physis* is crucial to identifying and giving voice to the “other.” Thus, when we think about the challenge of preserving the existence of others, we need to be mindful of both the quantity and quality of biological diversity.¹⁶

¹⁶ It may strike the reader that, whether discussing quantity or quality, the entire category of biological diversity is itself a human construct and thus fails to penetrate the linguistic prison recognized by postmodernists. [This is why I said above that the concept of biological diversity only *imperfectly* captures phenomenal variance in the nonhuman world. Indeed, the notion of species, on which biological diversity is conceptually built, has always been a matter of controversy insofar as biologists have long recognized *its* social constructivist quality (see, for example, Templeton, 1989), to say nothing of the diversity of species.] For many, species diversity represents an arbitrary way to categorize the world, rather than an accurate correspondence between concept and phenomenon. Thus, it can never serve as a reliable object of concern and protection. At best, it can provide only a first-cut engagement with variance in the nonhuman world. It is important to recognize, however, that, as a first-cut, it provides much conceptual mileage. The idea of biological diversity is a human expression that hints at an agreed upon meaning of what nonhuman otherness is all about. It captures, as best can be articulated, ecological variation resulting from the process by which nonhuman others come into existence, and thus can express a unique way of being in the world. The term biological diversity rests on the notion of evolution as a mechanism that historically has been outside of human control, and it is this *other-than-human* quality that undergirds its general meaning. To be sure, evolution itself is a human construct insofar as it is a convenient locution that attempts to explain the coming into being of different life forms. But, like the word “species” and the phrase “biological diversity,” it represents a best linguistic norm; it expresses an inter-subjective agreement about what to call the process by which biological differentiation comes to be. The most important point is that, although we may misunderstand the details of evolutionary dynamics and possibly even the entire process, we know that evolution is not a human affair. Rather, it is very much an other-than-human one. The term biological diversity aims to capture this quality both as a diachronic and a contemporary phenomenon. It is the “coming from otherness” that enables the nonhuman world to assume its subaltern character.

Many environmental scholars try to capture the quality of “otherness” through the concept of “wildness.” Thoreau wrote famously that “In wildness is the preservation of the earth” (1937:672). This is often misquoted as “wilderness,” but it is clear that Thoreau had in mind not a specific type of landscape but a certain quality of existence. Something is wild for Thoreau and many other environmental thinkers to the extent that it is not humanized—influenced, altered, or controlled by humans (Hettinger and Throop, 1999:12). Thoreau valued wildness partly because it expresses stories that we ourselves have not written. Indeed, most of Thoreau’s detailed observations of plants and animals are really “readings” in which he tries to trace the trajectory of other lives as they proceed, independent of human intervention or influence (see, for example, 1993, 2000).

Wildness also denotes the sense in which the nonhuman world is largely indifferent to human life. While Thoreau read nature and tried to glean lessons for living from it, there is a certain sense in which nature operates in ways that are completely unrelated to human life. John Daniel makes this observation in an elegant way when discussing the experience of coming upon a snake-laden boulder field and noticing that the snakes were indifferent to his fears, thoughts, or needs. In *The Trail Home*, he writes, “The rattlesnakes beneath the boulders instructed me, in a way no book could have, that the natural world did not exist entirely for my comfort and pleasure; indeed, that it did not particularly care whether my small human life continued to exist at all” (quoted in Nabhan, 1997:8). Nature’s indifference to human life is what partially makes the nonhuman world an “other,” and what allows us to call it wild. Generally, this means that an ethic of (otherness) calls on us not only to work for a multiplicity of species—biological diversity as conventionally understood—but also to preserve the other-than-human quality that the vast majority of existing species now represents. Protecting the evolutionary process as it has always existed and how it will operate long after humans are gone is central to an ethic of “otherness.” It allows for the emergence and unfolding of life separate from human agency.

An ethic of otherness is not lost to contemporary environmental politics within the U.S. or elsewhere. The U.S. Endangered Species Act, which calls for protecting against the extinction of species, and parts of the evolving Convention on Biological Diversity—which, despite a strong anthropocentric orientation—have provisions for protecting other-than-human species simply because they exist, illustrate impressive efforts to translate a concern for otherness in national and international legislation. To be sure, both of these policies emerged out of modernist understandings, and both remain under intellectual and political attack. Nonetheless, postmodernists should find much to support in them.

Conclusion

Societies and the global community are constantly being asked to address complex questions of environmental quality for which there are no easy answers. As we wrestle with challenges of global climate change, ozone depletion, loss of biological diversity, and so forth, we need to consider the economic, political, cultural, and aesthetic costs and values at stake. These considerations have traditionally marked the politics of environmental protection. In addition to these lines of concern, however, a sensitivity to eco-criticism also demands that we include an ethic of “otherness” in our deliberations. That is, we must retain a place in our discussions for preserving the nonhuman in the name of respecting the “other.” This is not to say that such an argument should solely drive our actions or that respect for the “other” should always carry the day. Rather, it simply means that respect for the “other” must be part of our reflections and calculations. For instance, as we estimate the number of people that a certain area can sustain, or assess the effects of a course of action such as the siting of

a coal burning plant or damming a river, we must think about the lives of other creatures on the earth and the continued existence of the earth's nonliving characteristics. Thus, as we continue to negotiate a climate-change convention or agreements on forest protection or biological diversity, we should keep in mind not only the environment's ability to keep humans alive and well but also its capacity to support nonhuman beings. To be sure, our commitments here need not always trump other considerations. In fact, our commitments may mean simply holding up a sign to remind ourselves of our obligations to respect the other. But the sign is important: it serves as a grounded principle that must find its way into our cogitations and debates.

The world may be made up solely of human beings, but the earth extends well beyond them. We are not alone on the planet. We share it with other species of animals, plants, and nonliving entities. While these inhabitants of the earth may not speak our language, they are still part of the global ecosystem and represent that which is not human. As the most radical "other," then, the nonhuman realm deserves protection. In light of eco-criticism, I hope we can see that the reasons for this respect no longer come solely from modernist justifications to save nature unto itself, but also, and contradictorily, from a postmodern understanding that the constructed quality of human experience demands a respect for the nonhuman.

To summarize, I have been using postmodern cultural criticism against itself. The postmodern critique argues that there is no such thing as "nature" in the sense of a single or even a set of meanings and, as such, there is no ontological imperative to treat the nonhuman world in one way rather than another. It is up to us to make, and fight over, such decisions. The position expressed above doesn't remove the fighting and, in fact, may make it fiercer. What it *does* do, however, is add an additional element and argument to our reflections and politics about "nature." It calls for remembering the intellectual importance of, and moral obligation for, respecting the "other," and then for folding this into our political work. Put differently, yes, the postmodernists are right: we can do what we want with the biophysical nonhuman world. There is nothing essential about the realm of rocks, trees, or whales that calls for a certain type of action. But postmodernists are also right in that the only ethical way to act in a world that is socially constructed is to respect the voices of the "others"—those with whom we share the planet but with whom we may not share a common language or outlook. There is, in other words, a limit or guiding principle to our actions, a principle of respecting "otherness." It could be said, indeed, that one can't argue for the diversity of views of "nature," without taking a stand for the diversity of nature.

This same point was put well, but in a different manner, a half century ago by Aldo Leopold. Speaking of his proposed "land ethic" to serve as a general principle for thinking about and acting in terms of the natural world, Leopold (1987:204) wrote:

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 community as such. In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, (*ex cathedra*), just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves.

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