

Defending Aesthetic Protectionism

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Introduction: What is Aesthetic Protectionism?

Environmental beauty is widespread and spectacular. Think of the Colorado Rockies, Australia's Great Barrier Reef, or the Norwegian fjords. Consider the starry heavens above, the quiet of the desert, or the magnificent parade of life on the Serengeti. Environmental aesthetic merit (or environmental beauty for short)¹ is not just in far off places but is all around us and can be found in humanized environments as well those that are relatively wild. Consider shrimp boats gracing the harbor, cozy pocket parks, cardinals at the feeder, or the wind rustling through the trees.

When we degrade the environment, we typically make it less aesthetically valuable. Imagine a poached elephant without tusks, fish floating belly-up in a polluted creek, trash strewn along the highway, a clear-cut forest, or a deformed mountain lacking its summit. Oil-soaked birds, seals with plastic wrapped around their snouts, belching smokestacks, and abandoned strip malls all combine environmental degradation with aesthetic disvalue. Protecting environmental beauty will typically protect the environment.

Environmental beauty is a major motivator for environmental protection. As one commentator notes in a paper called "From Beauty to Duty" (Rolston, 2002, 127), "Aesthetic experience is among the most common starting points for an environmental ethic. Ask people, 'Why save the Grand Canyon or the Grand Tetons', and the ready answer will be, 'Because they are beautiful. So grand!'" Environmental beauty has played a role in laws protecting the environment in several countries: England has designated dozens of *Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty* and the *U.S. Endangered Species Act* (1973, 2) includes "esthetic . . . value to the nation" as one of its rationales. (For more on the Endangered Species Act, see Ben Hale's essay "Extinction," this volume.) When the highway department plans to cut down trees for a new intersection or road widening, the outcry to protect the trees is often immediate and powerful. A proposed building that blocks ocean views will meet stiff resistance. Dollars role in to environmental groups dedicated to saving elephants from extinction but not to those worried about insect conservation.

¹ I use 'beauty' to refer to the entire range of aesthetically valuable characteristics arising from physical, behavioral, psychological, dispositional, and contextual features of objects or events. Beauty is sometimes used more narrowly to refer to a particular type of aesthetic merit in contrast with others, as when the beautiful (that is, the orderly, harmonious, and pleasing) is distinguished from the sublime (that is, the vast, mighty, and overwhelming). Aesthetic merit comes in many forms, as when we appreciate the somber, moving, fragile, dainty, tragic, cheerful, mysterious, humorous, symbolic, or ancient character of objects and events. Aesthetic appreciation engages our sensual, affective, imaginative, and cognitive abilities and can be directed at art, nature, or everyday experience.

People care about and want to protect what they perceive to be beautiful environmental objects.

One study of the origin of environmental concern claims that “The ultimate historical foundations of nature preservation are aesthetic” (Hargrove, 1989, 168). The damming of Hetch Hetchy valley in Yosemite National Park at the beginning of the 20th century was a defining moment in the creation of the environmental movement. It pitted the beauty of Hetch Hetchy against San Francisco’s search for more water. John Muir (1912, 255–257, 260–262), founder of the Sierra Club and the leader of the losing effort to preserve Hetch Hetchy remarked:

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread . . . This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest in the little window-sill gardens of the poor, though perhaps only a geranium slip in a broken cup, as well as in the carefully tended rose and lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks—the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc.—Nature’s sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world. . . . Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.

Recent proposals have suggested removing the dam and restoring the beauty of the valley. (See Harrison Ford on the effort to remove the dam and restore Hetch Hetchy <https://vimeo.com/26047094>.)

The importance of aesthetics to environmental protection is underscored by the fact that aesthetics is often a more powerful motivator than moral obligation. Moral duty can feel stiff, distant, and seeming imposed from without. Beauty, on the other hand, promotes personal attachment, concern, and an almost automatic desire to protect. While it might be true, as Emily Brady argues (2013, 200–01) that “there is no necessary connection between aesthetically valuing some place and also respecting and caring for it,” finding something beautiful and thereby desiring to eliminate or ignore it is psychologically bizarre. As Allen Carlson suggests (in “Rolston’s Aesthetics of Nature,” 2006, 117), “According to this aesthetic imperative, once recognized, ugliness is to be prevented and beauty is to be appreciated and preserved.”

However, that aesthetic considerations often provide an importance impetus for environmental protection does not show that they provide rational justification for that protection. Beauty might make us want to protect nature, but that does not show that beauty is a good reason for so doing. Being repulsed by a leper might motivate us not to help her, but it does not provide a good reason for ignoring her needs.

Aesthetics protectionism is the idea that aesthetic considerations do provide significant justification for environmental protection. The phrase “aesthetic protectionism” was first used by Stan Godlovitch (1989, 171) to connote the view that “nature [is] worth preserving and

protecting from harm on aesthetic rather than moral grounds.”² The exclusion of other sorts of reasons for protecting nature is not part of the position defended here. Although certainly not the only rationale for environmental protection, aesthetic protectionism asserts that aesthetic reasons are legitimate and important for such protection.

In an important paper on the role of environmental aesthetics in public decision-making about the environment Kathy Robinson and Kevin Elliot (2011, 186-188) conceive of environmental aesthetics as mainly a motivational umbrella for marshaling more decisive factors such as economics or human health.

Our point is that a public environmental philosophy that highlights threats to aesthetic integrity is likely to generate the energy and enthusiasm necessary for developing subsequent scientific, legal, and economic arguments. . . . We are not claiming that aesthetic integrity generally has to be the deciding factor in settling policy disputes; we are suggesting only that it provides an effective starting point or frame. . . . the real power of aesthetics judgments often lies in their ability to motivate further investigation of technical, legal, or scientific issues that can ultimately prove decisive.

Robinson and Elliot have identified an important role for aesthetics in decision about the environment. Their conception of aesthetic protectionism contrasts with the broader role of aesthetics in environmental protection defended here. Environmental beauty is not only good motivator. Nor is it just an effective tool for pushing people’s buttons to protect nature. Nor mainly a useful public policy heuristic (that is, a tool to stimulate further investigation). Rather it is a substantial justification for environmental protection in its own right and in several respects it is even necessary for proper protection of and relation to the environment.

This essay examines the virtues of—and potential problems for—aesthetic protectionism and provides the following responses to common objections:

- (1) Aesthetic reasons are not weak or trivial in comparison to moral or prudential justifications for environmental protection, and, in some respects, they are even necessary;
- (2) Aesthetic protectionism is not narrowly anthropocentric (that is, human centered). Aesthetic reasons for environmental protection are not reducible to providing benefits to humans (such as enjoyable aesthetic experiences);

² Both Godlovitch (1989) and Keekock Lee (1995) worry that protecting environmental beauty would involve freeze framing nature in its current state thus undermining its naturalness, that is, its relative independence from humans. An example is piping in water to preserve an attractive lake that is naturally draining. I do not think this is a serious problem for aesthetic protectionism, because (1) it is not clear how widespread such cases are, (2) the changing dynamic of nature is itself an object of aesthetic appreciation, and (3) it might be plausible to understand nature’s relative independence from humanity as not only a moral value but also an aesthetic value.

(3) Aesthetic protectionism is not tied to implausible versions of the idea that all of nature is beautiful (i.e., positive aesthetics), though it is lent support by plausible arguments used to defend positive aesthetics;

(4) Objectivity in environmental aesthetics is important for aesthetic protectionism, and if understood properly and pluralistically, environmental aesthetic objectivity is plausible;

(5) Finally, the alleged beauty of some degraded environments (e.g., colorful toxic runoff, pollution sunsets, spectacular stands of non-native species) becomes problematic when ethics and aesthetics are integrated, as they often should be.

How Important Is Aesthetics to Environmental Protection?

While one might agree that aesthetics can play a justificatory role in deciding what sort of environmental entities to protect and when, that role might be a relatively minor one, especially when compared to the role played by moral considerations such as the obligation to consider human well-being or the interests of nonhumans. A number of important voices in the environmental thought from a variety of perspectives believe aesthetics plays a much more prominent role, both in helping and hindering environmental protection.

Aldo Leopold (1953, 149), perhaps the most influential conservation thinker of the twentieth century, believed that cultivating “a refined taste in natural objects” was crucial for properly addressing environmental issues. His landmark book, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), makes as strong an aesthetic defense of nature as it does an ethical defense. Holmes Rolston, who pioneered the academic study of environmental philosophy, claims that if aesthetics is understood broadly as it should be, then “Environmental ethics need[s] such aesthetics to be adequately founded” (“From Beauty to Duty,” 2002, 140). Elliot Sober (1986, 194), a philosopher of biology, has argued that environmentalists will find aesthetics a “hospital home for their values.” And David Orr, a leading environmental educator, argues in his book *Ecological Literacy* (1992, 87-88) that:

“Our greatest disservice to our children” is giving them “the belief that ugliness is somehow normal . . . Ugliness is the surest sign of disease . . . or 'unsustainability'" and signifies a "fundamental disharmony between people and between people and the land."

When people put up with unsightly power poles and trees butchered to protect them, when throwing cigarette butts in the street draws no condemnation, and when billboards that befoul the streetscape are just a normal part of city life, we normalize both ugliness and environmental insults.

Aesthetic considerations are also an important dimensions of environmental protection because they can lead us astray. Aesthetician Marcia Eaton believes that “in absence of a change in aesthetic preferences, sound environmental practices have little chance of being widely adopted” (2002, para. 2). She cites people’s aesthetic preference for green lawns despite the chemical

brew, fossil fuels and increasing scarce water needed to maintain them. Aesthetic objections to wind towers—an important source of green energy—is another aesthetic preference hindering environmental protection, as can be seen in the Cape Cod Wind project controversy. The desire to see the ocean has led many to favor clear cutting growing maritime forests that block the view.

Despite these voices stressing the importance of aesthetics for environmental concern, aesthetics is often considered superficial and not a serious factor in decision-making about the environment (or anything else). Many environmentalists shy away from appeals to beauty. In a paper that points out how spraying sulfur particles into the stratosphere to prevent climate change could bring an end to blue skies and starry nights, Kathy Robinson (2012, 2) remarks: “Not many people think they should be worried about the aesthetic values of the environment in the face of looming global disaster. Why would anyone care about aesthetic qualities when their way of life and perhaps their very lives could be on the brink of destruction?” One prominent environmental philosopher assess the role that aesthetics can play in environmental decision-making as at best a tie breaker (Varner, 1998, 22):

An attempt to justify a ban on logging in the Pacific Northwest's remaining old-growth forests solely in terms of these forests' special beauty would be on very shaky ground if the ban would cause economic dislocation of thousands of loggers and mill workers. . . . It is only in this context (i.e., other things being equal) that aesthetic considerations seem compelling.

In a broad scale philosophical attack on the importance of aesthetics in environmental protection, J. Robert Loftis (2003, 43) claims that:

“Aesthetic considerations involving nature are weak and cannot motivate the kind of substantial measures environmentalists routinely recommend.” He asks, “How can environmentalists ask thousands of loggers to give up their jobs and way of life on the basis of aesthetics?”

Loftis argues that just as public policy toward humans should not be based on human beauty, so aesthetics should not be used in environmental decision-making. For example, it would be perverse to allocate heart transplants on the basis of aesthetic criteria, saving the more beautiful people and letting those less attractive die. Though good-looking people do get better treatment than unattractive people in many areas of human life (e.g., in employment, trials, election to public office, and so on), this is clearly problematic. It would be especially so, if such aesthetic discrimination was public policy. Much of the resistance to using aesthetics in the protection of the environment may be a spill-over from the idea that beauty is an inappropriate basis for making public policy concerning humans.

But aesthetics is not a trivial value in any domain. Even in human life, it is an importance value and it is especially important in environmental decision-making. One way to see the significance of aesthetic values is to note that they sometimes trump moral values, and not just trivial moral

values. As noted in Dale Jamieson's "Animal Liberation is an Environmental Ethic" (1998), during World War II, Winston Churchill moved the National Gallery's paintings out of London to prevent their destruction by the Nazi Blitz. Presumably this effort could have been aimed at protecting human lives rather than art objects. Or consider Marcia Eaton example (in "Integrating the Aesthetic and the Moral," 1992) of Paul Gauguin abandoning his family to travel to Tahiti for the sake of his painting. Gauguin falls short of perfect moral virtue but we could hardly want him to sacrifice his art in order to live a boring life of a "Goody Two-shoes." So even in human affairs aesthetic concerns sometimes justifiably trump serious moral ones.

One can acknowledge that aesthetic values sometimes trump moral values pertaining to humans and still insist that human beauty itself is a trivial basis on which to base decisions about how to treat people. But this idea can be seen to be mistaken once we fill out what is meant by "beauty" (that is, aesthetic merit) in humans. The belief in the insignificance of aesthetic value often stems from a superficial account of that value. Those who think of human beauty as a trivial basis for decision-making seem to assume that beauty is only skin deep. The exemplar of human beauty for them is the beauty queen. But this notion is flawed in much the same way that formalists in aesthetics are mistaken when they insist that the aesthetic value of art consists solely in its forms, lines and colors and that the sensuous surface of things exhausts their aesthetic content. Aesthetic merit is much richer than the formalist claims. Beginning with Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), an upside down urinal, signed, titled and submitted to an art exhibition (and often considered to be the most influential artwork of the 20th century), many artists have focused on creative conceptual, performance, and even anti-aesthetic art. Consider Tehching Hsieh's performance *Rope Piece* (1983-1984). An exploration of endurance and the meaning of freedom, Hsieh's tied himself with an 8 foot rope to fellow artist Linda Montano for one year. Such art eschews formal beauty for artistic merit in other dimensions. Similarly, human beauty is not just skin deep, but includes what is sometimes called "inner beauty," including character traits such as curiosity, sense of humor, and wit. Those with these aesthetic merits may not have stunning physical beauty but may shine aesthetically in comparison to the beauty queen who may be boring, humorless and no fun at all.

Leopold (1949, 168) points out that a similar idea applies to the environment: "In country, as in people, a plain exterior often conceals hidden riches." Besides the physical and formal beauty of environments and environmental entities such as animals and mountains, nonhuman entities have behavioral, historical, representational and expressive dimensions that figure in their aesthetic merit. For example, a salmon's beauty is not just a function of how it looks, but also how it behaves. Some salmon species are born in tiny creeks, in some cases 500 miles from the ocean, they spend their lives roaming the open seas before returning to these creeks to spawn and die. Sublime landscapes get much of their aesthetic merit from their ability to highlight human insignificance and engender humility. When the multi-faceted nature of the environment's aesthetic merits are understood, dismissing aesthetics as insignificant to environmental protection becomes quite implausible.

The assumption that the importance (or lack of importance) of aesthetics in human affairs will be

mirrored by its importance (or lack of importance) in environmental affairs should also be questioned. Even if aesthetic merit were an insignificant factor in decision-making about humans, it might not be an insignificant factor in decision-making about the environment. With humans, it is plausible that a person's moral and intellectual virtues are more important than their aesthetic merits. Such virtues do not apply to environmental objects. Perhaps there are competing values in the assessment of environmental objects (such as diversity or naturalness values) that clearly outweigh their aesthetic merits, but this is not clear. It is plausible to think that aesthetics should play a more prominent role in policy decision about the environment than in policy decision about how to treat people.

A Thick Conception of Aesthetics

It should be clear by now that aesthetic protectionism, as conceived here, relies a broad understanding of the kinds of reasons and response that count as aesthetic. Narrow accounts of aesthetic value, whether formalist or pleasure-focused, will not do. (For a defense of formalism in the appreciation of nature, see Zangwill, 2001.) In his paper "Trivial and Serious in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature" (1993, 1) Ronald Hepburn remarks:

When we seek to defend areas of 'outstanding natural beauty' against depredations, it matters greatly what account we can give of the appreciation of that beauty. . . . If we wish to attach very high value to the appreciation of natural beauty, we must be able to show that more is involved in such appreciation than the pleasant, unfocused enjoyment of a picnic place, or a fleeting and distanced impression of countryside through a tour coach window or obligatory visits to standard viewpoints or (should I say) snap shot points.

Environmental aesthetic responses are not reducible to sensuous pleasure or to the appreciation of formal qualities. Pleasure does not capture the character of many positive environmental aesthetic responses (consider being stunned by flashes of lightening or intrigued by bulbous dragonfly eyes that allow sight in all directions). Further, such responses often involve cognitive engagement and affective absorption and not mere sensation. Their objects include the aesthetic character of environments as a whole, as well as sense of place values and the expressive qualities of both natural and humanized environments.

Expressive qualities of environments are especially important. Consider the bleak, awesome character and relentless power of many natural environments: The vast panorama as one stands on the mountain top, the endless sea, or the raging storm that sends one scurrying inside. These natural environments and entities can energize us; they can also astonish and overwhelm us. Often they humble us and bring home the insignificance of much of what we do. They manifest our vulnerability and comparative weakness and thus provide a check on human arrogance and undermine a masterful attitude toward nature, vices that are becoming increasingly prevalent in what some are now calling the "Age of Man." (For more on the "Age of Man," see Phil Cafaro's essay on "The Anthropocene," this volume.) Emily Brady's *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy*:

Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature (2013) develops these ideas in depth. These environments present, as Richard Norman writes in “Nature, Science, and the Sacred” (2004, 23):

Features of nature which . . . contribute to the meaning the world has for us . . . they enrich our lives (as they are) emotionally evocative . . . such experiences are part of the human condition . . . our experience would be diminished if they were to be destroyed.

The expressive character of humanized environments is also an important feature of their aesthetic value. If we assume that functionality is a key to aesthetically appreciating humanized environments, then the expressive character of human environments depends in large part on their functions. Dysfunctional and thus unsustainable human environments will have negative expressive qualities. Consider unplanned suburban sprawl: It uses land inefficiently, enforces automobile use, undermines public transit, disregards pedestrians and cyclists, causes traffic jams, and generally cripples the community. Though it can be visually appealing, sprawl has numerous unsavory expressive qualities. While vast expanses of green lawns are formally attractive they expose our commitment to poisons and to the domination of landscapes. They also display competitiveness between neighbors. Shopping malls are emblematic of overconsumption and excess waste, shallowness, and greed. Gas stations express a myopic devotion to the automobile and a commitment to a short term, nonrenewable, and climate-wrecking energy source.

Identifying such negative expressive characteristics of suburbia is not to deny it also possess positive symbolic meanings, such as neatness and prosperity. It is also important to note that those who reject the notion that much human activity as it is currently carried out is unsustainable and environmentally pernicious are unlikely to perceive these sorts of negative expressive qualities. For them, for example, mega-malls might symbolize a booming economy and express rising material comfort, rather than overindulgence. But as we will see below in more detail, expressive responses to environments are subject to rational constraints. One cannot assign symbolic meanings to objects in any way one chooses. For example, the Nazi Swastika does not express human solidarity, even if some people think it does. How we should read the expressive character of environments depends on facts and moral judgments about those environments.

One might worry that we are illicitly sneaking moral considerations into the assessment of the aesthetic character of environments. But aesthetic responses need to pay attention to the meaning, content, and identity of their objects. The dysfunctionality and morally problematic character of such environments are central to what they are and thus aesthetic judgments about them appropriately factor in these considerations. The issue of the relation between aesthetics and ethics is further developed below in the discussion of beautiful, but degraded, environments.

Aesthetics is Necessary for Proper Environmental Protection and Regard

It is important to have rationales for environmental protection that do not value nature as a mere resource for human benefit. Although nature is absolutely essential for human well-being, treating nature's value as reducible to the benefit it provides us manifests a kind of species self-centeredness. It is a kind of species-level egoism, no more plausible in environmental ethics than ethical egoism is in human ethics. We need an ethic of the environment that is not human-centered and instrumental. One way to get such an ethic is to acknowledge the rights and interests of nonhuman sentient animals and perhaps also insentient living creatures. But a sentient-life-centered ethic or even an all-life-centered ethic leaves the protection of non-living nature as a contingent matter. Perhaps we can protect glaciers because we have a moral obligation to consider the interests of the ice worms that live in them. Perhaps we can protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge because of the caribou who make it their home. But what if it turns out that the caribou will fare well with the proposed oil development? We can imagine them cuddling up to the heated pipelines in the winter to stay warm. Because of such cases—and there could be many—we need a reason to protect non-living nature in its own right. Attempting to articulate and defend the interests or rights of natural entities other than organisms is clearly problematic. While it is arguable that all living creatures have a good of their own specified by either their desires or genetically-determined tendencies, what is the good of a glacier, a cloud, or a wetland? In contrast, it is clear that nonliving nature is often quite beautiful and thus aesthetics provides us with an important rationale for its direct protection.

Direct appeal to aesthetics is also needed if humans are to have adequate respect for nature and a virtuous human-nature relationship. Ignoring environmental beauty is a tragic human failing and not just because the appreciation of natural beauty is an important part of human flourishing. Failing to appreciate and protect natural beauty is a kind of disrespect for nature, like failing to appreciate and protect a person's beauty shows disrespect for that person. If we do not admire the streak of the Milky Way across the night sky or the amazingly intricate spider's web, we fail in our relation to the nonhuman world, just as much as we fail in our relation to other humans when we do not appreciate their good humor, their grace, or their steadfastness under pressure. In discussing the beauty of his wife, Rolston (2002, 129) puts the point this way:

I would wrong her to value her only in so far as she is 'beautiful,' at least in the usual aesthetic sense. . . . I would also fail her if I failed to enjoy her beauty. That might give me an entrance to her further merits. *Mutatis mutandis*, our relations with Sandhill Cranes and sequoia trees might be similar.

While certainly not the only type of reason to protect nature, aesthetic considerations are significant ones and in these respects they are necessary for proper environmental protection and regard.

Objections to Aesthetic Protectionism

I now consider four worries about aesthetic environmental protection and explore responses to each. These concerns are:

1. Aesthetic protectionism is problematically anthropocentric; that is, it values nature solely for its instrumental benefits to humans.
2. Aesthetic protectionism relies on positive aesthetics; that is, it is dependent on the romantic fantasy that all of nature is beautiful.
3. Aesthetic protectionism presupposes the problematic assumption of aesthetic objectivity.
4. Aesthetic protectionism ignores that degraded environments can be beautiful.

1. Is Aesthetic Protectionism Anthropocentric?

On initial consideration, it is natural to believe that if we protect nature for its beauty, we are protecting it for human benefit. It is arguable (though perhaps problematically so) that only humans can enjoy nature's beauty; other animals don't appreciate nature for its aesthetic merits. Thus one might think that aesthetic protectionism amounts to preserving beautiful nature because humans enjoy looking at it, or more broadly, because of the pleasurable experiences we get from appreciating its aesthetic merits. This treats the rationale of protecting the environment for its beauty as type of enjoyable human use of nature, on a par with other uses of nature that are based on enjoyment, such as off-road vehicle use, snowmobiling, water skiing, hiking, hunting, and so on. While it is true that aesthetics appreciation of nature typically leaves it undamaged (unlike some of these other uses), and in that way is a benign way to enjoy nature, this still amounts to an instrumental use of nature for human enjoyment.

Let us distinguish between shallow and deep types of anthropocentric aesthetic protectionism. Saving nature because it is pretty and enjoyable to look at is a shallow anthropocentric aesthetic approach. Identifying it as shallow is not to deny its beneficial effects for our lives. However, a deeper anthropocentric approach takes environmental beauty as constitutive of human well-being and not just instrumental to it. Robinson and Elliott have provided such a constitutive account when they argue that aesthetic integrity, sense of place, human identity and well-being are tied together. Based on a review of the psychological literature, they suggest that "place attachment is 'a state of psychological well-being'" (2011, 182). Sense of place involves a meaning and affective attachment to place that is partly constitutive of people's identity and is important to their well-being. Destroying a place's aesthetic integrity—by putting an asphalt parking lot in a tree-shaded neighborhood or polluting waterways in a town known for its lakes and rivers—compromises people's sense of place, as would the opening of a McDonalds or a strip club in many communities. Protecting the aesthetic integrity of an environment because it is tied up with people's identity and well-being in this way is a human-centered rationale for protection, but one that makes environmental beauty constitutive of and not merely instrumental to human flourishing. It is a deeper and more powerful anthropocentric aesthetic argument for protecting nature than are aesthetic arguments based on protecting mere pleasurable aesthetic experiences of environments.

Nevertheless, interpreting aesthetic protectionism solely in anthropocentric terms fails to take advantage of its full importance. The environment is incredibly instrumentally valuable to us. We need it in all kinds of ways many of which are not readily apparent. This is part of the truth

behind the insistence that humans are part of nature and not separate from it. (See Doug Maclean's "The Human Place in Nature," this volume, for a discussion about humans being part of nature.) Our well-being and nature's well-being are interlinked in deep and important ways. Digging ourselves out of our environmental predicament will require taking our instrumental dependence on nature much more seriously. Nevertheless, valuing the environment solely as a means to human benefits fails to take a moral attitude toward nature and evidences a species self-centeredness. If aesthetic protectionism is just another way of using the environment for human benefit, it loses the special status afforded to rationales for protection that are not anthropocentric. Such defenses might include the injunction to share the planet with other living creatures or the insistence that human presence on the planet is excessive. There is something ethically amiss in the argument against, for example, driving elephants extinct when it is cashed out solely in terms of the benefits elephants provide to present or future people, even if those benefits are understood as constitutive of human well-being.

While aesthetic protectionism has anthropocentric dimensions in that humans both enjoy environmental beauty and that beauty is often central to our well-being, there are also non-anthropocentric aspects of aesthetic protectionism. The ideas that a proper human relation to nature requires aesthetic appreciation of it and that it is disrespectful to fail to appreciate and protect environmental beauty involve a kind of non-anthropocentric direct concern for nature. Such considerations take the protection of environmental beauty as an end and not a mere means. Protecting certain aesthetic features of nature because they "contribute to meaning world has for us" (as Norman puts it) may also be a kind of direct concern for environmental beauty.

Allowing that the valuing of environmental beauty can be nonanthropocentric need not commit one to the notion that such environmental aesthetic value is out there in the world separate from valuing attitudes, as are trees and rabbits. One might argue that valuing attitudes of humans are an essential part of aesthetic value, that is, that aesthetic value is (in part) generated by humans (it is *anthropogenic*), and still reject the notion that such value's worth consists in its usefulness to humans (that such value is *anthropocentric*). One might value a landscape (or person) because of beauty and not be valuing for the sake of benefits one derives from that beauty. Consider an analogy with friendship. One values another person because he is a friend, but this is not to value him solely for the benefits he provides for you.

To put the point another way, we must distinguish the source of value from its object. That human valuing is the source of some type of value does not indicate that what is being valued is a human state of affairs. Additionally, that aesthetic valuing is a type of valuing—and so generated by a valuer—is compatible with it being valuing as an end and not as a means. Aesthetics valuing can be anthropogenic, non-anthropocentric, and non-instrumental all at once.

2. Aesthetic protectionism and positive aesthetics

One might worry that protecting the environment because of its beauty will provide limited environmental protection given that many environments and natural objects are not aesthetically

positive. Mosquito-infested swamps, the endless prairie, and vampire bats do not seem likely candidates for protection based on their beauty. In “Evaluating Nature Aesthetically” (1998, 121), Stan Godlovitch offers (though he does not endorse) this thought: “Just as there are rotten violinists, so there must be pathetic creeks; just as there is pulp fiction, so there must be junk species; just as there are forgettable meals, so there must be inconsequential forests.” Allan Holland (2004, 35) has suggested that nature is as filled with the aesthetically deficient as with the aesthetically meritorious, claiming that “the mundane, the miserable and the monotonous . . . are to be found in nature in equal measure” as the dramatic, spectacular and beautiful. According to this criticism, aesthetic merit has limited use in environmental protection because, as T.J. Diffey (1993, 48) put it: “There is much in nature that, in spite of a sentimental temptation to deny it, is not beautiful.”

The problem for aesthetic protectionism is that many environments and environmental entities that seem to lack aesthetic value are nevertheless important to protect. Implementation of the U.S. Endangered Species Act has often been criticized for protecting charismatic megafauna while letting the creepy crawlies go extinct. And yet it is often the uncharismatic in nature that are most important to protect. For most people, bees lack the aesthetic merits of bunny rabbits, but as important pollinators, their role in ecosystems are of much greater value.

One response defenders of aesthetic protectionism might embrace is the position that all of nature is beautiful. This idea is called “positive aesthetics.” One early formulation of this view comes from Muir (1901, 4) who claimed that “None of nature’s landscapes are ugly so long as they are wild.” Carlson (1984, 5) embraced a version of positive aesthetics for years,³ claiming that

The natural environment, in so far as it is untouched by humans, has mainly positive aesthetic qualities; it is graceful, delicate, intense, unified, orderly, not dull, bland, insipid, incoherent, chaotic. All virgin nature in short is essentially aesthetically good.

Note the qualifications in these formulations of positive aesthetics: Muir’s remark is limited to landscapes and only wild ones at that. Carlson qualifies his claim with the phrases “mainly” and “essentially.” Some extreme versions of positive aesthetics deny the existence of negative aesthetic qualities in nature altogether and suggest that nothing in nature, no matter from what perspective it is perceived, is ever ugly. Eugene Hargrove (1989, 177) characterizes positive aesthetics this way. He writes, “According to positive aesthetics, nature, to the degree that it is natural (that is, unaffected by human beings), is beautiful and has no negative aesthetic qualities.” Such extreme versions of positive aesthetics are not plausible. Putative examples of ugly nature are too numerous and too diverse to plausibly hold that all of nature is invariably

³ In *Functional Beauty* (Parsons and Carlson, 2008, Ch. 5), Carlson has now rejected positive aesthetics as a blanket approach to the environment, claiming that dysfunctional organisms are aesthetically negative. Nevertheless, he continues to embrace positive aesthetics for abiotic nature.

aesthetically positive in every detail. Some natural items (or dimensions of natural items) looked at from some perspectives are brutal, clumsy, chaotic, dangerous, disgusting, destructive, grotesque, painful, putrid, spoiled, or terrifying. The charge of nature romanticism sticks if these dimensions of nature are ignored.

One might think that aesthetic protectionism should avoid the doctrine of positive aesthetics entirely. While it is true that insisting on the importance of beauty in rationales for protecting the environment in no way commits one to positive aesthetics, it is also true that if nature were as filled with the ugly, monotonous, and trivial as it is with the beautiful, spectacular and momentous, aesthetic protectionism would indeed have a constrained utility. While not embracing the doctrine of positive aesthetics, aesthetic protectionism can benefit from some of the considerations used to support positive aesthetics. They help us see that environmental beauty is much more widespread than one might initially think.

Many environments and natural objects that are superficially unattractive turn out to have significant positive aesthetics qualities once we learn something about them. In the case of nature, knowledge tends to undermine negative aesthetics, often transforming the boring and the ugly into something aesthetically valuable. (This is often not the case with humanized environments, where human failures are so frequently discovered.) For example, when we learn that a drab tundra plant is hundreds of years old and withstands eighty mile per hour winds and sub-zero temperatures, we begin to appreciate it as a stalwart centurion. Similarly, with the right knowledge, the hideous vampire bat becomes a marvelous sonar flying machine. Knowledge of natural history—supported by imagination and emotion based on such knowledge and integrated into the aesthetic experience—allows for the aesthetic appreciation of natural items that otherwise seem aesthetically negative or neutral. In “The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature,” Yuriko Saito (1998, 105) claims that: “No matter how seemingly insignificant, uninteresting or repulsive at first sight, natural history and ecological sciences reveal the marvelous works of every part of nature. . . . Every part of nature is aesthetically positive for its storytelling power.” The idea that some scientific understanding of the nature is important to an improved aesthetic response to it has been called “scientific cognitivism.” Embracing the insights of the scientific cognitivist approach in the aesthetics of nature justifies a positive aesthetic response to a much larger array of natural environments and entities than was previously possible.

It remains true, however, that there is ugliness in nature. The most compelling type of example put forward by the critics of positive aesthetics are diseased, dying or malformed organisms. Consider the sluggish possum infested with hundreds of worms, wilted and decaying flowers, or toads with extra limbs. Note, however, these are not things we want to preserve or protect, and thus aesthetic protectionism gives us the right answer here. Furthermore, because aesthetic protectionism does not claim that aesthetics is the only important type of reason to protect nature, to the extent that there is aesthetically meritless nature in need of protection, other reasons can be used for its preservation.

Finally, consider the many, aesthetically-negative humanized environments. Toxic waste dumps, landfills, suburban sprawl, urban blight, trash-littered highways, butchered mountains, electric power lines and substations, and strip malls are all a major part of the human environment. Aesthetic protectionism gives us the right answer here as well: These should not be protected. Rather, they should be prevented. Aesthetic protectionism counts in favor of getting rid of these ugly humanized environments and preventing their production in the first place.

3. Aesthetic Protectionism and Aesthetic Objectivity

It is widely assumed that aesthetic judgments and responses lack objectivity. As the saying goes, beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. Perceptions of beauty are a function of subjective, idiosyncratic preferences. Some enjoy a night at the opera, while others prefer hip-hop. Some find tidal-basin mudflats dull, while they inspire others (Stecker, 2012). Each fails to appreciate what the other enjoys. On this view, there is no better or worse judgments about which type of music is superior or about whether the mudflat is inspiring or not: It all depends on the taste of the individual (or perhaps group). Such an anything-goes subjective relativism might be thought to apply especially to environmental aesthetics judgments and responses. At least with art objects we have an artist whose intentions can help settle disagreements about the artworks's nature and value. In nature, there are no artistic intentions to help fix the aesthetic object or to help resolve diverging judgments of value.

Now if aesthetic judgments are subjective, personal tastes—which vary between individuals—judgments about environmental beauty (or lack thereof) will be little use in protecting the environment. Any claim that an environment deserves protection because of its beauty can be countered by an equally valid claim that it is not beautiful. For more than fifty years, environmentalists have been working to protect Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from oil development and while there are many dimensions to this conflict, the aesthetic value of the refuge has played an important role. At one point the U.S. Interior Secretary during an administration hell-bent on exploiting the refuge described it as a "Godforsaken, mosquito-infested swamp shrouded in frozen darkness half the year." In contrast, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter claimed the refuge was a place of "solitude, unmatched beauty, and grandeur." If these aesthetic judgments are mere matters of personal taste, no better or worse than the other, then the aesthetic character of the refuge would seem to have no legitimate role in determining its fate.

In a paper titled "Reaffirming Beauty: A Step Toward Sustainability," Sandra Lubarsky (2011, 1) articulates the worry thus:

If we cannot speak of beauty except as a matter of opinion, how are we to evaluate some of the most tragic experiences of the contemporary world? What does it mean to look at a strip-mined slice of the Appalachians and refrain from an aesthetic judgment? . . . Could it be that our inability to say publicly and confidently, "Mountain-top removal is ugly," makes us unintentionally complicit

with this particular ongoing obliteration and the destruction of so much else?

Aesthetic protectionism would seem to rely on a notion of aesthetic objectivity that many believe to be problematic.

One intriguing response to this concern is that worrying about environmental aesthetic objectivity in the aesthetic protectionism debate is a red herring. On this account, all that matters is that some people believe an environment is beautiful and not that there is some sort of objectivity in this assessment. Robinson and Elliott (2011, 187-89) make the case this way:

The importance of environmental aesthetics judgments would not be significantly increased even if it could be shown that they were objective. . . . Nobody cared whether the public's aesthetic judgments about the pond were objective or not. . . . Even if they were subjective, they constituted a serious consideration. . . . Even if a group of citizens had regarded the land along the river as an aesthetically unappealing swamp, this by itself would not have invalidated the perspective of those who did value the undeveloped land.

Whether or not objectivity is important for aesthetic protectionism depends on how we conceive of that rationale. If the appeal to environmental beauty is merely a strategic umbrella under which the non-aesthetic deciding factors can be advanced, then aesthetic objectivity is not needed. Whether or not the judgement that an environment is beautiful is reasonable or otherwise justifiable, if some people thought it was, and this led to discovery of economic and health reasons to protect it, then the subjectivity of those judgments is not a problem. There is no need for environmental aesthetic objectivity here.

Objectivity may also be superfluous if we treat protecting environmental beauty as constitutive of human well-being in the way articulated by Robinson and Elliot. If what matters to people's sense of place (and thus well-being) is *perceived* aesthetics integrity (not *actual* aesthetic integrity), then again aesthetic objectivity is not required. Their well-being will be threatened by the environment's destruction even if their belief in its beauty is no more warranted than those who deny its beauty.

On the other hand, environmental aesthetic objectivity is needed if aesthetic protectionism is to function not solely as a heuristic or a means to a subjective sense of human well-being. If a good reason to protect an environment is because of its aesthetic merits—end of story, then the claim that it is beautiful must not be understood as a subjective preference no better than the opposing idea that it is aesthetically worthless.

Many consider aesthetic objectivity, and especially environmental aesthetic objectivity, to be a dubious notion. They think such objectivity involves not only a belief in value facts existing “out there” in the world (in the same way that blue birds and boats exist in the world) but also a commitment to the dubious idea that there is only one appropriate aesthetic response to an

environmental object. But objectivity in environmental aesthetics can be understood in a way that avoids these problematic interpretations (Hettinger, 2008). Let us treat environmental aesthetic objectivity as an epistemic concept (that is, as having to do with our ability to know certain things and justify our claims), rather than a metaphysical one (i.e., about what sorts of things exist and how they exist). As such, it is not committed to the idea that beauty is a property of objects independent of appreciative capacities or responses (as would be properties such as an object's size and weight). What it is committed to is the idea there are better and worse environmental aesthetic responses, judgments, and reasons. It thus amounts to a rejection of "anything-goes subjective relativism" and an insistence that claims about an environment's aesthetic character or aesthetic value can be more or less warranted, as can be aesthetic responses to that environment. On this view, one can be mistaken about one's aesthetic judgments, one can improve upon them, and there are reliable ways to avoid mistakes and improve one's judgments. Disagreements about judgments of environmental aesthetic merit are real but not invariably intractable or irresolvable.

Environmental aesthetic objectivity also need not be committed to the problematic idea that there is only one correct aesthetic response to an environmental object. It can embrace a constrained pluralism allowing for a multiplicity of better and worse aesthetic responses to—and judgments about—the environment. For example, perhaps Wyoming's Grand Tetons, appropriately appreciated as majestic by most of us, will justifiably appear puny to someone who grew up in the Himalayas. But finding the Tetons comical because of the meaning of their French name can be justifiably criticized as juvenile. In evaluating environmental aesthetic responses, we need not restrict ourselves to narrow criteria such as true or false, correct or incorrect, or even appropriate or inappropriate. While at times such evaluations are apt, so are assessments of better or worse based on a variety of criteria. Aesthetic responses and judgments can be serious or trivial, informed or unformed, careful or hasty, perceptive or distorted, and deep or shallow.

Often environmental aesthetic responses are deficient due to cognitive defects. For example, if one mistakenly believes that the cute woodchuck is a massive, awe inspiring rat, one's mistaken belief results in a mistaken aesthetic response. In general, knowledgeable responses are better than ones that distort, ignore, or suppress important truths about the objects of appreciation. Swamps are often despised because they are perceived as mosquito-infested wastelands. But in fact many swamps have moving water, not the stagnant water mosquitos prefer, and far from being wastelands, swamps provide multiple and important ecosystem services, including pollution filtration, flood control, and wildlife habitat. Aesthetic responses to swamps based on uninformed views should carry little weight in debates over whether or not swamps should be protected. Robert Stecker (2012, 253) highlights this point when discussing the judgment that a mudflat viewed at low tide is uninspiring, while failing to realize it is a tidal basin that will be flush with water in a few hours:

It's plausible to claim that there is something wrong, something criticizable about a judgment of ugliness in these circumstances because it is based on a misconception of the object of judgment. One is essentially assigning properties to

the object it does not actually have and ignoring others it does have, and one is basing one's judgment on this misconception.

More generalized knowledge about the environment can also be important for improving one's aesthetic response to it. Understanding the magnitude of human damage to the earth and its life communities will help make one's aesthetic response to environmental changes more perceptive and deep. The small patch of woods left standing in one's neighborhood becomes symbolic of the diminishing extent of nonhuman nature on the planet and not simply a bunch of trees not worth fighting for. The tiny red-cockaded woodpecker looms large when we perceive it as a wounded survivor of a looming mass extinction caused by us. (For a helpful discussion of human-caused mass extinction, see Ben Hale's essay "Extinction" in this volume.)

Environmental aesthetic responses can also be deficient due to defects in aesthetic perception. For example, discriminating aesthetics responses are better than stereotypical ones: "How nimble and delicate she is" is better than "Oh, isn't Bambi cute!" Judging mudflats as dull and uninspiring is questionable if one fails to notice the differing shades of brown and gray, the subtle shifts in topography, or how the sheen of water reflects the sky. If the proposed road across the mudflats is supported by such an indiscriminating aesthetic response, those who oppose the road because it will destroy the beauty of the marsh have the stronger aesthetic argument.

One might think that the environment's expressive properties and appreciators' affective responses to environments lack objectivity entirely and so are of no use for aesthetic protectionism. However, affective responses to environmental objects can also be more or less warranted and aesthetic judgments about expressive properties are subject to rational constraints. Consider Rosalind Hursthouse's (2006, 162) discussion about the appropriate objects of wonder:

Some objects, for instance nature and its works, are proper objects of it; some, such as the merely novel or unfamiliar, are not. And getting this natural human emotion in harmony with reason really matters morally . . . If we think and feel, not that nature is wondrous but that Disneyland or the Royal Family of Windsors are, that other animals are not, but we are, that the seas are not but swimming pools on the twentieth floor of luxury hotels are, and act accordingly, then we will act wrongly, just as we do when we fear pain to ourselves but not to others, or are angered by justified criticism and not getting our own way but not angered by cruelty to animals or injustice to our fellow humans.

A full defense of Hursthouse's claims about the proper objects of wonder would be a difficult task. Such a defense would likely depend on views about human nature and our relationship with the rest of nature.

Nonetheless, it seems clear that there are more or less appropriate emotional arousals. In his paper "On Being Moved by Nature," Noel Carroll (1993) gives one account of the difference. He

notes that some emotions are cognitive. When they are, they are aimed at objects and involve beliefs about them. Now emotional responses are appropriate for some objects and not others. For example, being moved by the ten foot wingspan of a condor or a crashing waterfall are appropriate responses, while being bored is (typically) not. Fear of an imminent hurricane is an appropriate emotional response, whereas generalized fear of wolves and sharks are not. Environmental policies based on people's fear about and thus dislike of wolves and sharks are irrational environmental policies based on irrational emotional responses.

It should be noted that there is often significant agreement about environmental aesthetic judgments and their rational basis: No one seriously believes putting McDonalds in National Parks is compatible with the parks' aesthetic integrity or that the African savannah is more beautiful without its lions and elephants. No one would trade blue skies for gray on grounds of aesthetic merit or claim that roadside litter enhances the beauty of rural landscape. Even developers acknowledge that trees enhance the beauty of a subdivision or shopping area.

Furthermore, what might be called an anti-environmental aesthetic is often based on self-interest and thus not really an aesthetic response. Owners of snow-mobile rental companies may claim that the sounds of those vehicles as they cross the wilderness are not aesthetically displeasing, contradicting the views of cross-country skiers. Loggers may not see clear cuts as eyesores. Developers may reject the aesthetic judgment that an expanse of concrete adorned with pawn shops, power poles, and bill boards is unsightly and generally unpleasant, insisting instead that it is aesthetically stimulating and expressive of individual freedom and entrepreneurial ingenuity. To the extent that such judgments are based on self-interest, they lack the disinterested character typically seen as essential to aesthetic judgment. If I think a musical performance is excellent because my brother is one of the musicians or perhaps because I stand to make a lot of money from it, my assessment is not sufficiently disinterested and thus not an aesthetic one. In a similar way, the snow-mobile operator's, the logger's, and the developer's putative aesthetic judgments may turn out not to be genuine aesthetic judgments after all.

While this constrained pluralist account of environmental aesthetic objectivity allows for multiple (and perhaps diverging) equally meritorious aesthetic responses to environmental entities, we have seen that it also provides rich resources for discriminating between better and worse aesthetic responses. This provides sufficient objectivity to allow aesthetic considerations to play an significant role in environmental decision-making.

4. Aesthetic Protectionism and Beautiful Degraded Environments

If the beauty of environments is a strong reason for protecting them, as aesthetic protectionism claims, what are the implications for beautiful but degraded environments? Fields of the invasive exotic [Purple Loosestrife](#) (*Lythrum salicaria* L) are strikingly beautiful. Surface mining can make for a formally intriguing landscape and toxic runoff from mining can produce spectacularly colored waste pools. The photography of Canadian Edward Burtynsky highlights

the haunting beauty of environmentally devastated landscapes. His photographs of mines, tailings ponds, quarries, and fields of oil derricks are spectacular. (Burtynsky's work can be viewed at www.edwardburtynsky.com.) Aesthetic protectionism would seem to problematically imply that the beauty of such degraded landscapes gives us a reason to protect them.

We can address this problem by examining the relation between aesthetics and ethics. A view famously held by Oscar Wilde was that there was no such relationship. Wilde ([1890] 1969, 236) wrote: "I am quite incapable of understanding how any work of art can be criticized from a moral standpoint. The sphere of art and sphere of ethics are absolutely distinct and separate." Leni Riefenstahl's (1935) *Triumph of the Will*, an historically significant and powerful film that glorified Hitler and Nazism, should make one worried about too facile an acceptance of Wilde's position. We should also be skeptical of Wilde's apartheid because our aesthetic sense is not an isolated compartment of our lives but rather is fundamentally tied with who we are, what we believe, and what we value (including ethically value). If we reject as extreme and implausible such an absolute separation between aesthetics and ethics, we open ourselves to the possibility that ethical concerns may sometimes rightly interact with our aesthetic responses. This problematizes the alleged beauty of degraded environments. As Patricia Matthews (2002, 45) points out, a multicolored patch on a young girl's face loses its aesthetic appeal when we realize it is the product of abuse and not face paint. So, too, a field of exotic plants is no longer thoroughly aesthetically positive once we understand the effects it has on native wildlife and perceive it as harmful.

Consider pollution sunsets. Some environmental aestheticians insist that they are beautiful. It is true that their colors and shapes can be quite impressive, and, in a narrow formal sense, they may be even more beautiful than ordinary sunsets. But proper sensitivity to the harms of pollution should negate, diminish, or at least qualify the judgment that the pollution sunsets are straightforwardly beautiful. As we have seen, aesthetic appreciation should go beyond the sensuous surface and involve conception, imagination and emotion. We need to understand that what is being experienced are harmful particles that damage lungs, send people to the hospital and acidify lakes. Our imagination should be engaged and we might picture dead fish and hear the wheezing of vulnerable individuals. We should perhaps feel angry at the industry executives who profit by externalizing costs onto others and at the bureaucracy that fails to adequately protect human and environmental health. If we move beyond a narrow formal appreciation of the sunset to a deeper and multifaceted aesthetic response, the innocent aesthetic delight and peaceful feelings sunsets normally deliver are absent. Perhaps the pollution sunset retains some aesthetic merit, but it will be qualified and compromised.

How to understand the interaction between ethics and aesthetics and determining the extent to which it should take place are subjects of longstanding and ongoing debate in the philosophy of art. Long ago David Hume ([1742]1987, 153) argued that narrative art that depicts immoral material but fails to be "marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation" is thereby aesthetically deficient. Kendall Walton (1994) wonders why given that we object to immorality outside art, we may not also object to immorality in art. If someone tries to get us to

act or feel in ways we find morally reprehensible, whether they do so in a newspaper editorial or a film, we will feel disgust and downgrade their work. On the other hand, some have argued for “immoralism,” the idea that ethical defects in a work of art can sometimes enhance its aesthetic merits. Perhaps Edward Abbey’s novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), in which four ecologically-minded radicals destroy bulldozers, power lines, and other tools of industrial society, is a better novel because of the immorality of what it endorses. Moving from the realm of art to nature, some might think the fear and pain of the prey, a disvalue when considered in itself, increases the aesthetic merit of predation by turning it into a terrible, perhaps tragic, beauty.

If we accept such interaction, we must be careful to not let ethics overwhelm aesthetics: Aesthetics has some autonomy from ethics. For example, a delicious meal does not taste worse because the chef is a convicted killer. Stephen Davies (2006) has argued that for morality to be relevant to art it must affect the artwork’s identity and content. Imagine that a film producer cheats her cast and crew out of wages they deserve. Such immorality would not affect the artistic value of the film, Davies argues, because it is not relevant to its identity and content. In contrast, if the film glorifies and embraces sexism, this should be treated as relevant to the artistic merits of the film, because it is part of the film’s identity and content.

This idea can help us understand when ethical considerations are relevant to the aesthetic merits or demerits of environments. The fact that some environments are toxic waste dumps or consist of pollution particles or exotic plants is part of the identity of these entities and so our aesthetic responses to them should consider these moral dimensions of their nature. One’s ethical views about clean energy can explain why towers belonging to a nuclear power plant look sinister while those associated with a solar-wind energy project look benign. In contrast, the fact that someone committed suicide by jumping off the side of this cliff or that this beach was Osama Bin Ladin’s favorite vacation spot are not relevant to the cliff’s or beach’s identity or nature. Thus these ethically charged facts are not relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of those environments.

While it is true that some degraded environments appear to be attractive at a superficial level, their problematic nature should lead us to downgrade our judgments of their aesthetic value. Hence such environments present less of a problem for aesthetic protectionism than one might at first think. Furthermore, in cases where such environments nonetheless remain aesthetically positive all things considered, or in cases where their dubious nature enhances their aesthetic appeal (as with immoralism), we can always refuse to protect them on other grounds. Environmental beauty, though an important factor in environmental decision-making, is by no means the only factor. Even though they are significant considerations, aesthetic reasons for environmental protection will have to compete with other important factors, including the values of biodiversity and naturalness, the interests of sentient animals, and the implications these environments have for human well-being.

Summary

Aesthetics reasons should be significant factors in justifying decisions about both natural and humanized environments. Far from being trivial or mere tools to find serious considerations, aesthetics rationales are necessary for appropriate environmental protection. Aesthetic responses to environments should be construed broadly to include cognitive, expressive and sense of place dimensions. Aesthetic justifications for environmental protection go beyond shallow and deep anthropocentric rationales and involve direct appeal to environmental aesthetic merit. While nature is not aesthetically positive in all dimensions, natural beauty is sufficiently widespread for aesthetic protectionism to be consequential. Environmental aesthetics responses can be better or worse and such objectivity is required if aesthetic protectionism is to be fully functional. By paying attention to the interaction between aesthetics and ethics, the prima facie beauty of some degraded environments is called into question. Aesthetic merit has an important place among the other compelling reasons for environmental protection.

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