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**Dichotemies of the Human Perception
of the Environment
Honors Thesis**

Honors 490

**by Janet K. Robson
May 31, 1991**

I would like to dedicate this work to the memory of Lois Kelley, a wonderful teacher and friend. I also dedicate this work to my husband, Kyle Robson, who helped me make it through the "grind". Thanks to the Honors Program which taught me an important fact of life: "Don't take yourself too seriously."

We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return, --prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms.

Henry David Thoreau

Environmentalism was not introduced in the year 1991, nor was it introduced with the era of the sixties. Perhaps, it is best to say that environmentalism has existed since the dawn of time--an environmentalism consisting of a "hands-off" policy. However, movements based on the environment have experienced an evolution in the past 30 years pertaining to the nature of preservation of wilderness areas and natural resources.

Progress and humankind are somewhat defined by economic terms. In the past, if the result from a transaction concerning land-derived resources was monetary gain, then typically the producer would strive for this output. This enabled the producer to continue in his harvest of the product and the buyer/retailer would then in turn allow the consumer the purchase of the refined goods. However, this process was usually based on short-sighted projections from the consumer, buyer, and producer. An example being that even when the producer realized that his resources were being depleted by sinking fertility of the land and even he had the opportunity to alleviate the effects, he chose not to act because the adverse consequences would not be in his immediate future. Aldo Leopold illustrates this tendency with the plight of Wisconsin farmers in 1930. In 1933, aware of the growing problem of topsoil depletion, the farmers were informed that they would receive labor and machinery if they would "adopt certain remedial practices" to contain the depletion for the next 5 years. However, the farmers continued to produce crops that would bring them an immediate and tangible economic gain. By 1937 concerned with the failure of the farmers to change their habits, the Wisconsin Legislature passed a Soil Conservation District Law which would enable the farmers to construct their own land-use laws and utilize the monetary and physical aid of the Wisconsin public. Even after this extension of freedom to the farmers to write a land-usage law, not a single county had written any law a decade later. When people of this region were asked why no laws had

been formulated, they answered with the statement that education must precede the rules. Leopold states that education practices never mentioned obligations to the land to preserve the topsoil. In fact, the practices maintained were those which brought the farmers the most rapid return for their labors.¹ The introduction of the term "land-use ethics" is then made by Leopold. This terminology introduces a moral obligation of mankind not just to himself, but to the earth and the other creatures thereon. To an average person, most natural resources of the land do not seem to be disappearing and the extinction of animal species does not directly affect him or her--a subtle explanation for the lack of action taken.

A current issue of today's society is whether or not the designation of wilderness areas is removing certain freedoms from a free-market society. Defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964, "A wilderness,...,is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain...[wilderness] 1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; 2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; 3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and 4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other feature of scientific, educational scenic, or historical value."² Not only do preservationists and solitude seekers favor this, but also scientists favor this type of preservation because it enables them to compare the impact of man on the surrounding areas. Wilderness areas also provide a variety of untouched genetic material for scientific research.

Opponents of wilderness designation have argued that it locks away land containing valuable minerals and oil from the public--materials which may help us curb our growing independence on the Middle East for oil. They also maintain that it

discriminates against industrial growth and leads to a slowing economy. The Bureau of Land Management has been charged with "locking up" these resources by submitting outdated geologic studies which give the appearance to the gas and mining industry that there are no valuable resources to be found in that area. However, these studies which may only show trace amounts of a certain resource to be in that area, do not necessarily disallow for richer deposits which may be in the adjacent site desired for wilderness designation. Richard T. Hughes, a Chevron U.S.A. Inc. legislative and regulatory analyst, defined the problems with this system of BLM geologic surveys by stating that the December 31, 1983 deadline for mineral leasing has disallowed for further exploration (i.e. once the land has received this designation mineral and gas companies may no longer access the land for mining or development of any kind). This eliminated the opportunity for mining companies to explore designated wilderness areas, but did not prohibit environmental groups from nominating land regions for wilderness designation.

Arguments from a more conservative group describe the conservationist movement as a movement to a communistic worldwide government. An article from one of their publications states "The February 1990 issue of World Marxist Review, policy journal for the Communist Parties throughout the world, featured an interview with David McTaggart, chairman of Greenpeace International. He described his efforts as 'helping to erase the borders between East and West, North and South.'³ In the same article, the author also utilized the term "indoctrinate" in describing Greenpeace's efforts to teach students about what they can do to aid the environment. The fuel for their antagonistic behavior consists of the depiction of conservationists as communists.

Other opponents of wilderness designation are often people whose lifework consists of efforts to control nature.⁴ This viewpoint is based on the idea that the environment is cruel, inhospitable and desolate. Longshoreman and philosopher,

Eric Hoffer shares his vision of paradise as a place where man would "wipe out the jungles, turn deserts and swamps into arable land, terrace barren mountains, regulate rivers, eradicate all pests, control the weather and make the whole land mass a fit habitation for man."⁵

In the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, the wilderness is perceived as a treacherous place wherein evil dwelt. Psalms 95:8 reads "...as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness:". In visiting with relatives two weeks ago, the opinion was strongly expressed that the land was given to man by God to till and produce as much as he could and in so doing, man was living God's laws. Good land is depicted as a habitable place for man--an environment tamed for his purposes. Typically, Christians have been cited as being anti-wilderness.

Roderick Nash cites some foundations for the conservationist movement in his book Wilderness and the American Mind consisting of the following: 1) A recent and more common thread of wilderness preservation lies in the scarcity of wild land in comparison to the amount of people and urbanized areas, 2) Advocates refer to the wilderness experience in past centuries as a strength for the American people--a means for developing human perseverance and fortitude to overcome obstacles in his future, 3) Wilderness is equated with freedom and self-expression--a strong view from the sixties' counterculture, and 4) the most recent identification of the man-environment relationship as an intricate system of checks and balances.⁶

As our planet becomes more populated and we search for new cures of current ailments such as the AIDS virus and numerous affliction of cancer, researchers argue that some of our antidotes may be found in plants which yet lie in the unaltered primeval wilderness. If we deplete our last resources, we may jeopardize our chances of survival in the future. The most compelling arguments are those which illustrate the direct consequences if we do not choose to maintain a

harmonious balance between man and nature. Man will not always exist, but the environment will always survive. This sense of humility and vulnerability to the earth and her natural processes are perceived as undesirable by most people. David Brower reminds us that the environment is a place "where he [man] can be reminded that civilization is only a thin veneer over the deep evolutionary flow of things that built him."⁷

Self-interest dictates a majority of human actions in society. Motivating people to look past the immediate rewards of their actions has been a struggle for leaders of many countries. Today there are many third world countries which desire to become as wealthy as the United States, yet as ecologists and scientists perceive the damaging effects of our lifestyle upon our own homeland, we caution the people of nations in such areas as South America to conserve their resources (i.e. not to burn their rainforests because they may contain a way to stall global warming--a theory which may have worldwide debilitating consequences). This attitude of the North American scientist or citizen seems discriminatory towards native South Americans who are merely trying to find a passage from their lifestyle into ours. Lester Brown, president of the Worldwatch Institute cautions us to, "Think globally, act locally."

In summary, the division between the opponents and advocates of wilderness seems to span too great a distance, but the emerging problem of environmental pollution affecting many of us in our own backyard is providing reason for a compromise for both groups. Toxic waste negligently dumped in urban areas, an increase in the amount of radon gas found in citizens homes, increased lead pollutants in the air (above the EPA safety levels), surplus of refuse and nowhere to place it, pollution of city water reserves, depletion of the ozone layer and acid rain are just a few of the concerns bringing a diverse group together. The hypothesis of Global Warming is a prediction set forth by climatologists and ecologists suggests

that great climatic change with desert expansion and movement of coastlines inland would be the result. As the public becomes increasingly aware of the choices it can make to alter the inescapable consequences of current problems, a new breed of environmentalists is appearing. These are people who are not just concerned with the current problems of pollution and excess waste, but they are also concerned with the people and their habits in surrounding countries as well as the generations to come. Returning to the Ripple Effect, one person's actions are no longer confined to a small puddle, but they are affecting people elsewhere in the world. The carbon-dioxide from the slashing and burning of tropical rainforest in South America is probable candidate for contributing to ozone depletion over the Arctic Circle. For third-world countries, progress is still at a slow and tedious pace. Inflation of products and deflation of currency provides continual setbacks.

Perhaps this new breed of environmentalists with continued efforts to lobby the American Congress and other nation's governments can create changes which will prolong the future of humanity. James Goldsmith reminds us, "Environmentalists come from every walk of life. They are brought together by an understanding of man's abuses."⁸ Goldsmith did not advocate that the end result of social change for the environment be a global monoculture, but rather cultural diversity may lead us to better solutions for the problems faced in many countries today. By testing certain theories of recycling and reducing contaminants in more than one country, we may find better alternatives to what we know today. Also, what may work for one country in solving its pollution problem may not necessarily work for another. Aldo Leopold mentions that in an area of India-- nonproductive in vegetation, cows are still needed by the local population for nourishment. In order to feed the cows, the residents walk several miles to a region with more fertile vegetation to feed the cows. This seems out of place with the western countries' mindset, yet it is a common way of life for the Indians--they do not question it.

Advocates and antagonists may find themselves at odd when the topic of conversation is the environment and how to deal with natural resource depletion, yet the divisions which separate them are becoming smaller owing to our interdependency upon each other in this world and the land which nourishes all of us.

¹Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," Part IV: The Upshot of A Sand County Almanac, (New York: Ballentine Books, 1970) pp. 244-245.

²Wilderness Act of 1964.

³Bryan J. Ellison, "Greenpeace Wages Redwar," The New American, November 19, 1990, p. 12.

⁴Roderick Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 240.

⁵Ibid., p. 241.

⁶Ibid., p.255.

⁷Ibid., p. 255.

⁸James Goldsmith. "The Environment: Three Options," Vital Speeches of the Day, January 15, 1990

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