Philobiblon – Vol. XIX (2014) No. 1

"Nature" and "Wilderness"
The Role of Conceptions of Nature in Environmental Protection

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Keywords: nature, wilderness, environmental protection, contingent ideas, cultural constructs, experiential rootedness, evaluation criteria

Abstract: The overwhelming historical and cultural differences in conceiving nature would suggest that such conceptions are contingent cultural products superimposed on an "objective" reality in a human attempt to make sense of it. As such, there could be no criteria in deciding between rival conceptions of nature, and this would imply their utter uselessness in environmental protection. Contrary to this, I will aim to show that conceptions of reality are never as random and as ideal cultural products as a constructivist would suggest. First of all, because conceptions of nature are rooted in complex environmental experiences, shaped and influenced by them. Second, because those experiences, in turn, are shaped and influenced by the actual surroundings in which they occur. I will illustrate both these points through a critical analysis of the popular environmental conception of wilderness. The more practical stake and question will regard the role of conceptions of nature in environmental protection. Thus in the final part of this paper I will address the importance of conceptual pluralism in ensuring a more efficient, democratic, and just approach to environmental problems.

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Conceptions of nature are of crucial importance to environmental philosophy, as there is widespread – implicit or explicit – tendency to consider the environment worthy of protection nature, i.e. to confuse the two terms. But which of the myriads of conceptions of nature should we consider our environment? Are conceptions of nature mere cultural products superimposed on an objective reality? Are there criteria to decide between rival conceptions of nature? What (if any) is the role of conceptions of nature in environmental protection?

Whenever we experience something, we do so within a prior conceptual framework that always already "knows" what and how the world, humans and animals, actions and values are, even before we can explicitly formulate such knowledge. That our experience is shaped by prior conceptions means that we always already approach the world with certain assumptions – the world and things around us have already been conceived somehow, and these meanings are handed down from generation to generation constituting powerful (because unquestioned) prejudices about how the world and things in the world are. The basic conceptions about our immediate surroundings are just as part of that surrounding as objects or other people. They make up the conceptual

background and context within which all of our actual contacts with our environments happen.

The overwhelming diversity of conceptions of nature. What does it entail?

The sheer abundance of often contradictory meanings and conceptions attributed to the term 'nature' reveals its deep ambiguity. Even if we only consider Greek-European-Western tradition of thought, nature has at least three important clusters of meaning: nature as opposed to the supernatural, nature as opposed to the artificial or cultural, and nature as the inner constitution, structure, essence of a living being or organism. Then, turning our attention to other historical times and different cultural traditions, the conception of nature turns out to be even more complex, ranging from animism through personification to Eastern philosophical depths.

Most of these meanings are not compatible with each other (for example that of 'nature as a machine' and 'nature as a person') but even if they were, the tendency is to posit them as universal. Furthermore, the underlying experiences of nature expressed by different conceptions are very diverse, as well as the experiences induced or influenced by them. The underlying ontological and metaphysical presuppositions also differ (if it was created by God, it is not the result of millions of year of evolution) not to mention the ethical and practical consequences (if it is endowed with spirit, it should be treated as a person). If this is the case, what should be the consequences of such baffling diversity of conceptions and meaning? What would be the criteria for deciding which conception of nature is better than the other?

The objective validity of conceptions of nature, i.e. to what extent they truly and really refer to reality as such, cannot be verified, as it would imply that we have a pure access to reality free of all ideas and presuppositions. Such a 'perspective from nowhere' is not available to human experience. But if we have no criteria to decide how much or little conceptions of nature capture reality in itself, does this mean that anything goes? If we have no way of verifying them by referring to some objective reality, do ideas of nature become interchangeable and equal? Or can we come up with other criteria to decide (in certain specific contexts) which one is better than the other?

The extreme constructivist view of nature holds that since there is no access to "real" nature, all of nature is but a cultural construct.[1] Notice the subtle shift form an epistemological to an ontological claim. While I subscribe to and share some of the premises of this thesis (namely that ideas of nature are in some sense culturally constructed), it is not as clear what the consequences of an extreme constructivist view should be. Does cultural constructivism mean that it no longer makes sense to talk about human intervention or destruction of nature?

Extreme constructivist views are not the only postmodern responses to the diversity and relativity of nature-ideas. There is a moderate constructivist view that holds that ideas of nature are indeed culturally constructed, but they are imposed or applied to

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[1] For an extreme constructivist view see Lawrence E. Hazelrigg, *Cultures of Nature. Essay on the Production of Nature* (University Press of Florida, 1995). For an attempt to reconcile constructivism with realism, see Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies. Natures, Cultures, Spaces*. (London: Sage Publications, 2002).

(physical) reality. On this view, we have no way of knowing how reality is without the filter of our cultural ways of making sense of them: nature is always already "appropriated" by culture in one way or another, so there is no access to "pure" nature. A version of this view was formulated by Martin Drenthen who argues that contemporary fascination with nature and especially "wildness" should be considered as expressing both an experience and a longing of post-modern humans. The post-modern experience of nature is in large a negative experience: of nature not conforming to any of the contingent and relative ways in which humans attempt to make sense of it, but alluding and constantly overflowing such efforts of "appropriation".[1] This is an experience that is not only aware of its own historicity and contingency, but also of its partaking in a historical process and the responsibility that comes from such participation. Such a specifically post-modern experience of nature induces a specific longing as well, one that is very different from the Romantic longing for nature. It is actually a wish for something radically other than any of our interpretations, "something that is already there, that is bigger than us", a wish for nature as utter otherness, untouched by our (mis)interpretations. But such nature cannot be experienced but in a negative way.[2] For Drenthen the baffling diversity of ideas of nature is thus symptomatic of our "postmodern condition" as it entails the possibility to experience our finitude and the finitude of our points of views in contact with the otherness of nature.

The main problem with all constructivist positions is, I believe, the suggestion lurking in the background that cultural constructs, such as ideas of nature, are random and contingent inventions, which have no relation whatsoever with nature which is utter and complete otherness. Or alternatively, ideas of nature could be thought of as symbolic representations, again somehow random. Contrary to this, I think that a closer attention to their roots and histories reveals that ideas of nature are not representations at all, and certainly not random interchangeable inventions. Our ideas of nature are not simply invented and superimposed on some unknowable otherness, but are connected to the ways in which we experience our surroundings, and thus to the affordances of these surroundings. We do not impose random meaning on a meaningless reality, but meanings are results of the inseparable unity in experience of an autonomous reality and our (perspectival, situated, incomplete) interpretation of it. To illustrate my claims here, I will offer a brief history and critique of one of the most popular conceptions of today's environmental protection: wilderness.

The history of the idea of wilderness and the environments it reflected

Usually and most commonly the meaning of wilderness is identical with nature as opposed to the cultural or humanly affected realm. As such, "wilderness" has come to replace "nature" in some environmental debates, especially in the U.S., the most important "intellectual environment" of the concept of wilderness.

The ambiguities and changes manifest in the history of the idea of wilderness parallel the ambiguities of western civilization towards nature as opposed to culture.

[1] Martin Drenthen, "Wildness as a Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration" *Environmental Values* 14 (2005): 317–37, 327.

[2] Ibid., 333.

Accordingly, the problems involved in conceptualizing wilderness can serve as an example of the complex implications and actual consequences involved in conceiving nature as strictly delimited from culture or free of human intervention.

There are several works documenting the fate of the idea of wilderness, two of the most important being Max Oelschlaeger's *The Idea of Wilderness*[1] and Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*.[2] While Nash's history is admittedly restricted to the United States (hence "American" mind), more precisely the European colonization of North America, Oelschlaeger attempts to draw a broader picture about notions of wilderness and their possible implications. Nevertheless, Oelschlanger's work is also – for the main part – focused on US authors and activists of wilderness. This is far from an accidental overlook. Although the idea of wilderness did not emerge on the American continent and has a long and deeply rooted history in European culture, its fate and current centrality in many environmental debates is inseparable from the colonization and gradual transformation of North America.

So-called "natural" peoples, i.e. those groups of people living ways of live and creating civilizations more integrated into their natural landscapes (such as, for example, Native Americans) did not have a concept of wilderness as they did not need to name the opposition between humanly controlled and untamed sections of reality. It was the settled, agricultural way of life that first gave rise to this concept, around 10000-8000 B.C.[3] When and where the humanly affected and controlled places represented merely islands within large untamed and unknown nature, people began to differentiate between domestic and wild places, animals, or plants. Wilderness was the nature that was on the outside of more or less controlled human environments, the hostile and dangerous "other", indifferent, useless or even opposed to human interests. Compared to the ordered and humanly adapted domestic environments, wild "outside" territories came to be invested with all the negative connotations and categories of hostile otherness. In both Greek and Roman thought wilderness areas were thought of and portrayed with fear and content, as signs of barbarism and failure to control and put to use. Fuelled by dreadful and/or apocalyptic Christian views of the wilderness,[4] some version of such negative assessment of wilderness was dominant in Europe and North America well into the 20th century.

But gradually, as people came to control and modify nearly all of nature around them, a different concept and assessment of wilderness emerged. As untamed and uncontrolled nature was fast disappearing, wilderness became a valuable asset. It is not at all accidental that such a positively idealized notion of wilderness only emerged

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[1] Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). See also Max Oelschlaeger, "Wilderness," in *Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability: The Spirit of Sustainability* (Berkshire Publishing, 2009), 428–431.

[2] Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

[3] Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness,* 28.

[4] See Keith Innes: *The Old Testament Wilderness in Ecological Perspective*. http://www.ringmerchurch.org.uk/Keith/ (accessed on 18.03.2012). Paul Shepard argues that the Desert Fathers' notions of nature was a response to the desert landscape, and it was among the first ones to set nature strictly aside from culture, in an opposition – see Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1982).

starting from the 17th century, in an almost fully "domesticated" and heavily urbanized Western European setting.

Aleksandra Chaushova, *Still Life with a Man*, 2013,
pencil on paper, 46,4 x 52,6 cm

The first full-blown positive conception of wild nature owes its birth to the Romantic Movement in the 18th century. Its first proponents were mostly wealthy, educated city-dwellers who became nostalgic for the artistic and recreational values of "original" nature. The Romantic conception of wilderness was highly aesthetic, relying heavily on the notions of sublime and picturesque. Also, related to such aesthetic primacy, this idea of wilderness was first and foremost a visual concept and a visual appreciation of nature. It favoured and praised sceneries from high points that provided bird's eye views to picture-perfect landscapes. And last but not least, it was a mystical-religious concept (in later forms, even today, this aspect is called "spiritual"). As if responding to the need to justify the appreciation of nature by recurring to and relying on its sacred origin, promoters of wilderness argued for the presence of God within "wild" portions of reality previously thought to be inhabited by evil forces.

Both the dominant negative conception and the positive Romantic vision of wilderness were taken over from Europe to North America and, as they say, developed a life of their own, often and obviously closely connected to the changes European settlers performed on North American natural environments.

According to both Oelschlaeger's and Nash's history of the idea, the first European settlers in North America still conformed to the long European tradition of assessing wilderness in negative terms and as a challenge to civilization. But as

European history of nature-taming repeated itself in an incredibly fast pace in the "New World", the positive Romantic concept of wilderness was gradually established as not only a pivotal concept of "American" national identity, but also as worthy of praise and preservation. Two figures have become known as the founding fathers of both theoretical and activist wilderness preservation: Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)[1] and John Muir (1838–1914)[2]. Both were transcendentalists and both promoted an idea of wilderness which was a mixture of aesthetic and pantheist arguments for valuing and preserving "wild nature." With the gradual disappearance of such "wild nature" from the American continent and together with enthusiastic celebration of such "progress", the idea of wilderness also grew into cult status by the time there was no more "pristine" nature left outside of reservations called national parks or nature reserves. Today, especially in the United States, wilderness is in danger to be "loved to death" by tourists, as Nash famously asserted. Also, even if the boundary between wilderness and humanly affected world has long been blurred, there is a persistent and insistent tendency to idealize wilderness as "nature without us", even if many of the areas considered symbols of the "American wilderness" were actually designed and shaped into appearing wild to visitors.[3]

The relation of ideas of wilderness to environmental experiences

It is my contention that the idea of wilderness, both in its negative and positive form, is an "outsider" concept of nature, in the sense that it is based on a limit and opposition between us and nature. I base this assessment on considering the type of experiences that the idea of wilderness was symptomatic of. The initial fearsome and loathsome aversion against wilderness expressed the attitude of outsiders afraid of the unknown and uncontrollable forces that were supposed to lie hidden in "wild nature", i.e. outside of the humanly constructed and controlled confines of life. The less experience of and within "wild nature" people had, the more negative connotations such areas received.

And the positive (Romantic and up to the contemporary) praise of wilderness was/is even more of an outsider's concept. The Romantic concept at first glance does not seem to be based on experience at all. If it is still based on any experience, it is usually not the experience of wilderness itself, but on the experience of a growing dissatisfaction with Western civilization and way of life. Indeed, the positive idea of wilderness seems to be more of an intellectual construct than any previous ideas of nature, more theoretical than practical. Consider, for example, Nash's several examples to the point that the first prophets of wilderness manifested mixed feelings in their writings: while praising wild nature when looking at it from high mountain tops (like sceneries, like picture landscapes), both William Byrd and William Bartram experienced

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[1] For details see Nash, *Wilderness*, 84–95, and Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 134-139.
[2] See Nash, *Wilderness,* 122–140, and Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness,* 172–204.
[3] The most important works of nature-design performed by Frederick Law Olmsted, namely Niagara Falls and Yosemite are commonly considered symbols of wilderness in spite of the considerable human effort that went into their re-shaping to afford different human experiences. For details on the works and thoughts of Olmsted see Anne Whiston Spirn, "Constructing Nature. The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmsted," in *Uncommon Ground. Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 91–113.

fear, anxiety, threat and complained for lack of safety and comfort during their travels, i.e. during actual life in the wilderness.[1] Plus, even if or when these authors were describing their experiences in and of nature, this experience was highly informed by learned concepts (such as the sublime or the picturesque), literary examples (of how one "should" experience wild nature), and religious beliefs (which turned nature-experience into a mystical encounter). Nevertheless, visits to the wild were in fact mere visits: most promoters of wilderness remained tourists appreciating the visual scenery, aesthetic values and "spiritual" experiences afforded by natural surroundings. Those who most appreciated wilderness were the ones merely vacationing in it.[2]

But different conceptions of wilderness not only relied on different experiences, but also shaped and induced different experiences. The shifting history of the conception of wilderness is another example to the point that just as inherited conceptions shape and to some extent pre-determine experiences, actual experiences also change and nuance conceptions. The pioneers did experience hostile wilderness partly because their conception of nature was of a hostile "outside". On the other hand, Thoreau's merely aesthetic-theoretical concept of wilderness became challenged when experiencing actual wilderness, when he came face to face with the otherness and indifference of nature. He reported it as "even more grim and wild than you had anticipated, a deep and intricate wilderness," or as "savage and dreary," and he noted that "vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got man at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains."[3] He came out of this experience convinced that man's place in nature has to be thought of as a balance between wilderness and civilization.

The questionable consequences of ideas of wilderness in environmental protection

Many have criticized the idea of wilderness and argued against its basic assumptions or extensive use in environmental philosophy.[4] The most popular conception of wilderness required that areas invested with such elevated values be free of people, put a fence around, and revered only through occasional visits, much like museums or churches. This myth of pristine nature had and still has many unfortunate consequences and often casts a suspicious light on wilderness-conservation projects. The most serious and tragic consequences of such a presupposition were suffered by indigenous peoples, whose lives and the environments they inhabited were left in a state of limbo.[5] The concept of

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[1] Nash, *Wilderness*, 51-55.
[2] Ibid., 61
[3] Quoted in ibid., 91.
[4] See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground,* 69–90.; William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *A Journal of American History* March (1992): 1347–1376; For a feminist critique of wilderness see Anne Warner, "The Construction of Wilderness. An Historical Perspective" http://hdl.handle.net/1880/46951 (accessed on 13.03.2012); Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003). Mark Woods groups these critiques into five categories and tries to respond to them in Mark Woods, "Wilderness," in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, ed. Dale Jamieson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 349–361.
[5] See Anne Warner, "The Construction of Wilderness"; Nash, *Wilderness*, 7.

wilderness promoted an ideal according to which 'real' nature is only uninhabited nature, and hence "protected" wilderness areas were often cleared from their original inhabitants.

One of the most prominent critics of the elitism and injustice of the wilderness cult, William Cronon, offers several examples where indigenous peoples were forced to move so that "tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God's own creation."[1] The US National Park Service forbade all Papago Indian farming in what is now Organ Pipe National Monument in Arizona, and then in 1962 destroyed all non-historic Papago structures in the making of Organ Pipe Wilderness Area.[2] Also in the US, the Blackfeet tribe continues to be accused of "poaching" on the lands of Glacier National Park that originally belonged to them.[3] But such practices of "wilderness-creation" are not limited to the US. In India people were removed and forbidden to utilize certain areas to create wilderness parks or tiger reserves within the Project Tiger,[4] and there is widespread discrimination in Brazil against peoples who have lived in or at the margins of rainforests for centuries.[5]

Conceiving unaffected nature to be the only real nature also exonerates and justifies using and abusing areas that are not within the confines of wilderness reservations. As if they have given up on the environments we actually inhabit, many wilderness advocates manifest contempt and lack of care for "less natural" environments.[6] As if the trees in our backyard and the animals living in cities were somehow less natural than the trees and animals in Yosemite national park.
Such a conception of nature as "wild" also makes people prone to protect faraway wildernesses. The popular slogan of saving the rainforest is the most telling example in this sense,[7] for, as Cronon observes, protecting the rainforest in the eyes of First World environmentalists all too often means protecting it from the people who live there."[8]

Appreciation of wilderness, both sentimental and scientific, emerged at a time when Western civilization hardly left any forests untouched. But so-called third world and developing countries supposedly do have such "wild nature". So how are we, from the perspective of the West, to approach these areas and how can we argue for their preservation? The most commonplace arguments say they should be protected in the benefit of mankind or, even more hypocritically, the planet. Both of these arguments

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[1] Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, 77.
[2] Nabham, G.P., *The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in Papago Indian Country* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 89–93.
[3] Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, 78.
[4] Mark Woods, "Wilderness," 357.
[5] For several other examples and an analysis of conflicts between nature preservation and indigenous ways of life, see Elisabeth Andrew-Essien, Francis Bisong, "Conflicts, Conservation and Natural Resource Use in Protected Area Systems: An Analysis of Recurrent Issues" *European Journal of Scientific Research* 1 (2009): 118–129.
[6] Cf. Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, 84, 87: "In the wilderness, we need no reminder that a tree has its own reasons for being, quite apart from us. The same is less true in the gardens we plant and tend ourselves: there it is far easier to forget the otherness of the tree."
[7] Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness*, 428; Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, 80–81.
[8] Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, 80.

seem suspicious and questionable, not to mention quite arrogant.[1] The main problem with such arguments, as I see it, is that we are using our own conceptions of nature and wilderness as universal principles which we then try to impose on others. We suppose we know what nature, ecosystem, sustainability, and so on are. We suppose to know what has to be done, for example, to save the rainforest: keep people out of it. But do we really know, or are we just repeating the mistake of taking our own cultural background as ground? Are we ready to understand and take into consideration different points of view and conceptions about reality? These are questions that wilderness conservation has to face and answer in each and every particular case, since in all cases more than one conception of nature and more than one interest will be involved in the decision making process.

Conceptual pluralism in environmental protection. Why should environmental protection consider different ideas of nature?

One possible answer to this question was, I believe, fully illustrated in the negative by considering what happens when we do not consider alternative conceptions of nature, as in the case of wilderness preservation at the expense of indigenous peoples. Leaving our own presuppositions unquestioned and arrogantly imposing them on other people is an act of aggression. Banning people from their environments to realize some ideal of "wild nature" rather than paying attention to their insider views, practices and conceptions of reality that enabled them to live in relative harmony with their surroundings for centuries is one of the absurd and painful consequences of disregarding diversity in ways of thinking and inhabiting environments. The conception of wild nature was totalized into universal validity and real environments were assimilated when they failed to conform to the concept.

This example, as well as others, constitutes a warning that when constructing environmental theories and especially actions, one must pay serious attention to the differences in underlying conceptual schemes, and especially close attention to what nature means to different people involved in the debates.[2] A carefully negotiated, dialogical and pluralistic approach to environments tries tailor and fit understanding and action to specific environments rather than fitting environments into one conception or another.

So the first and most important argument for considering alternative conceptions of nature is to surmount our own prejudices and avoid the arrogance of forcing them

[1] Oelschlager argues that there are mainly two sets of objections against popular campaigns to save the rainforest: Oelschlaeger: "First, the charge has been made that globalization has exploited the resources of undeveloped nations and created localized ecological havoc and poverty, while economic benefits flow largely to wealthy nations. (…) Second, critics argue that there can be no justification for calls to protect wilderness in undeveloped nations without consequential changes in the lifestyles of the developed nations that combine with efforts to ameliorate global poverty." *The Idea of Wilderness*, 430.

[2] For a good case-study on how different conceptions of nature figure and play out in actual environmental decisions see Martin Drenthen, "Developing Nature Along Dutch Rivers: Place or Non-Place," in *New Visions of Nature. Complexity and Authenticity,* eds. Martin Drenthen, Jozef Keulartz, James Proctor (London: Springer, 2009), 205–228.

onto others as final truths. Certainly, if my own arguments in this chapter make any sense, the way we conceive the world or nature or animals is not a matter of choice (at least not in the first instance). [1] However, the conceptual background which shapes our unreflected and un-thematic experiences of nature are not final and they are not even homogenous. Our prior conceptual assumptions do not have to constitute a limitation of our experience or understanding. But they are necessary starting points for any ulterior, more reflective ways of conceiving our surroundings. However, to achieve such a result, hidden presuppositions have to be revealed, then transcended. Our presuppositions and prejudices are surmountable by critique, comparison, dialogue and in general, by broadening one's own conceptual horizon by exposing it to others.

It could also be argued, that conceptions of nature different from our own could offer valuable solutions to our contemporary problems, including environmental crises. As indeed concepts are more abstract features of environmental experience than perceptions and practices, they give the impression that they could be in fact "removed" from their setting (be it imagined as natural, cultural, physical, practical) and applied elsewhere. While more scientifically oriented Westerners would have no problem in arguing that, for example, scientific conceptions of nature can and should be exported and applied everywhere, they would presumably not allow the same to be true of all conceptions of nature. But of course, scientific ideas of nature are just as relative to their own context as others. Moreover, as I have argued, conceptions are also more or less but necessarily rooted in experiences and so specific places. Consider the example of a Native American medicine man who protested the flooding of a certain valley by arguing that this will not only destroy medical plants in that valley but also his knowledge of medicine.[2] His knowledge of the natural world was presentational (the valley had to be there, had to be present), not representational as in Western conceptions, according to which we form propositional knowledge about the surrounding world and we can take that with us anywhere. So the question is, can conceptions be exported at all? If not, why should we even bother considering conceptions different from our own?

Indeed, it is not always clear what we mean when we look for "solutions" in other cultural milieus, although this is widely practiced in environmental philosophy. Michael G. Barnhart in his excellent *Ideas of Nature in an Asian Context* notes the ambivalence in Western literature regarding the merits of Eastern thinking in general, and in special regarding environmental thinking. Some claim that Eastern views are more enlightened and nature-friendly than exploitative Western ideologies, some say if there is such thing as Eastern philosophy, it is distinctively life-denying. Barnhart claims neither is correct, and asks the nuancing question of what it is that Westerners are looking for when they are looking at Eastern views on reality or nature.[3] Especially, Barnhart addresses some strong claims of Holmes Rolston III, who, after a detailed

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[1] Cf. also Martin Drenthen, "Wildness as a Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration," *Environmental Values* 14 (2005): 317–37, 332. Drenthen argues that we do not take on different conceptions of nature as pieces of clothing, nevertheless, we do employ different conceptions in different experiential contexts.

[2] *Indigenous Perpectives*, 3–4.

[3] Michael G. Barnhart, "Ideas of Nature in an Asian Context." *Philosophy East and West* 3 (Jul. 1997), 417–432, 417.

review of Eastern religious and philosophical concepts, comes to conclude that there is nothing in them that could help westerners value nature, they can have no positive application within environmental ethics. It is, however, not clear, why or how they should, or just what would it mean to look to the East for "solutions". It is also not clear what Rolston was looking for, what his question was. Barnhart argues that Rolston was looking for concepts simply opposing the western ones, but following the same logic. He took the background assumptions of Western scientific understandings of nature for granted, plus, he took scientific views of nature to be true but ethically neutral. Both of these assumptions are highly questionable. Rolston was looking for an axiology that not only values nature, but that tells us how and why it has intrinsic value, otherwise, he contended, Eastern conceptions would be "too non-discriminating to be operational".[1]

But there could be another argument against looking into other cultural assumptions. If one takes cultural differences to absolute extremes, it might seem that these differences amount to inaccessible otherness. Such absolute inaccessibility would make other ideas simply irrelevant in another cultural context.[2]

Both of these lines of argument dismiss other cultural conceptions because they pre-suppose that the point of understanding such conceptions is their "implementation" or "application" in another cultural setting. However, there are other reasons to try and understand different cultural contexts. First, even if these different ideas don't turn out to be normatively operational in other cultural contexts, one can see how they are practically operational in their own context, and how they result and inspire different experiences than our own. Second, this understanding leads to a deeper understanding of our own cultural assumptions, by comparison. Third, it shows our cultural assumptions to be relative and far from necessary, so it increases flexibility of thought and freedom from our own taken-for-granted assumptions. Fourth, it shows that there are connections and shared assumptions, so otherness is never radical and absolute difference. And finally, it increases tolerance and reluctance to have arrogant attitudes or to assume cultural hierarchies.

Concluding remarks. The possibility to evaluate conceptions of nature not based on their truth-content but on their practical implications

A pluralistic, dialogical and contextual consideration of different points of view and experiences reveals for us the possibility of a non-arrogant and non-totalizing interpretation of our experiences and our relations with the surrounding world. What the plurality of possible views and perspectives teaches us is not only the relativity of our conceptions and positions, but also our responsibility for them.

In my view, all environments "contain" nature one way or another, in the sense that there are always concurring ideas of nature that shape and guide our environmental experiences and behaviours. All conceptions of nature convey some specific perspective,

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[1] Barnhart takes issue here with the arguments of Holmes Rolston III in his "Can the East help the West to value Nature?" *Philosophy East and West* 2 (1987): 172–190.

[2] A similar argument, although in a much more abstract formulation, can be found in Husserl's fragments dealing with the home–alien opposition in Edmund Husserl, Husserliana XIII-XV: *Zur Phenomenology der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlaß* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 431–432.

some specific experience, or some specific practical context from which they emerge, so they all have their own validity with respect to their own context and their own environment. And given their roots in experience (and the fact that experience is embedded in environments) ideas of nature are never pure constructions or mere inventions.

I consider the concept of nature to be indispensable in environmental protection because its history and fate is closely and inseparably related to environmental problems. However we make sense of nature has severe consequences on environmental experiences and attitudes. The various meanings attached to "nature" are far from mere theoretical disagreements about the world. They are reflections and results of different experiences which, in turn, constantly shape and determine current experiences of our surroundings. Disregarding nature for having too many meanings and senses is simply disregarding the complexity of environmental experiences in favour of the illusion of a strict formal definition. Ambiguity in conceptions of nature is not a failure or a crisis of thought, but a symptom and result of the many different experiences and aspects that our environments afford.

Contrary to my position here, many have suggested that "nature" should be discarded from environmental philosophy.[1] It has been argued that the concept of nature is too ambiguous and has too many meanings and contents, and as such it is useless for environmental ethics.[2] But just because a concept has many different meanings and layers of senses, surely this does not make it superfluous. In fact, discarding a concept for its complexity can only be a suggestion of those who regard relativity a flaw and consider that all terms of philosophical discussions must be strictly and universally defined or definable. However, on such grounds we could dispense of all or most of our philosophical terms as they tend to be less than the technical terms employed with strict determination.

Just because there is no criterion to decide which conception of nature is "more valid" than the other, this does not mean that they are incommensurable in other respects as well. Possible criteria have been suggested by feminist philosopher Sandra Harding who proposes that conceptions be evaluated in their negative virtues, i.e. based on what they avoid rather than what they afford. Conceptions that are free of distortions of experience, mystifications, colonizing and totalizing tendencies should be preferred to those that are not.[3] Harding offers these as general criteria for evaluating positions and conceptions in a postmodern world; however, I believe that they are especially suited criteria for evaluations of environmental concepts.

I have suggested above a criterion on which different conceptions can be compared and evaluated: experience and impact. It is my contention that ideas of nature which do not distort or deny experience (and their own experiential roots) are to be

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[1] For an overview of such arguments see Robin Attfield, "Is the Concept of "Nature" Dispensable?" *Ludus Vitalis* 25 (2006), 105–116.

[2] Stephen Vogel: *Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*. *Environmental Ethics* 24, 2002, 23-39.

[3] Position presented in *Postmodern Environmental Ethics: Ethics as Bioregional Narrative,* 24, referring to Sandra Harding: The Science Question in Feminism. Cornesll University Press, Ithaca, 1986.

preferred to those that run against experience. For example, the scientific-mechanical conception of nature is inferior to aesthetic conceptions of nature, not because the scientific idea is completely free of experience (after all, science relies on experience, albeit not the ordinary experience, but controlled, designed, isolated, laboratory experiences), but because it operates a double denial of experience: it denies its own experiential roots and the importance of experience as such. Regarding impact, it is not difficult to conclude from the example of "wilderness protection" that allowing certain ideas of nature to become leading principles or ideals of environmental protection leads to severe injustice. So the most important criterion to decide which conception is better should be their practical consequences, social impact, and justice.