

Letting Nature Take its Course

It is not always clear that nature knows best. It may be unclear, for instance, whether a certain heath should be allowed to revert to scrubland, whether a starving elk should be left to die, or whether a species population that has exhausted its food supplies in one area should be moved to another. In such cases, there is room for reasonable people to disagree about what's for the best. So there is a need to discuss issues such as rewilding, our moral relations with wild animals and the ethical pros and cons of assisted migration.

This issue of *Environmental Values* brings together some of the best recent work on each of those issues. Jozef Keulartz sets the ball rolling by asking what historical states of affairs ecological restorationists should seek to restore. There are, he points out, many different options. European restorationists typically aim to restore pre-industrial but post-settlement states of affairs, while many of their New World counterparts seek to restore how things were before the arrival of the Europeans. By contrast, 'new environmentalist pragmatists' (Spash, 2009), such as Peter Kareiva, tend to dismiss such backward-looking approaches (see further, Librova and Pelikán 2015). In their view, we should turn our eyes to the horizon and the potential of 'novel' or 'no-analogue' ecosystems.

These differences often provoke disputes; yet Keulartz champions pluralism. Drawing on several fascinating case studies, he argues that one simply does not need to determine which approach to conservation and restoration is *the* right one, since different approaches will suit different situations. So, for example, conservationists need not feel compelled to choose between Old World and New World approaches. Nor should the interests of rewilders always be pitched against those of the new environmentalist pragmatists, since novel ecosystems can themselves be wild. Our aim, Keulartz suggests, should be to achieve 'a peaceful coexistence' between the aims and approaches of all involved: Old World restorationists, rewilders and new environmentalist pragmatists alike (compare Steinwall 2015).

Though his paper also addresses the themes of restoration and rewilding, Glenn Delière focuses his attention on a specific debate: that between rewilders and those who seek to preserve traditional agricultural landscapes (see further, Verduijn et al. 2015). He takes a conciliatory approach, arguing that the members of both parties are typically motivated by a desire to establish 'contact' with something beyond themselves – an 'external reality' in the context of which their own pursuits have meaning. To explain that proposal, and to consider its bearing upon attempts to preserve nature, Delière appeals to the works of Thoreau and Muir as well as to a very interesting case study of De Bruuk, a Dutch nature reserve. He concludes that if rewilders and their pastorally-minded critics would refocus their attention on how efforts to preserve nature 'can become a meaningful part of our lives', they might find common ground.

With Trevor Hedberg's paper, the spotlight swings away from the concept of *meaning* and onto that of *duty*. However, we remain with the general question of when – and, in such cases, how and to what extent – we should let nature take its course.

Hedberg considers the central argument of Clare Palmer's book *Animal Ethics in Context*: her defence of the 'laissez-faire' intuition that we have duties to assist domesticated animals but none to assist wild ones. He contends that although Palmer's arguments do not support that intuition, they do suggest that we have 'weak presumptive duties to assist wild animals that become stronger as our relations with the animals grow stronger' (p. 427). Hedberg argues that this position – 'the Gradient View' – makes sense of some cases that seem to pose problems for Palmer. For instance, while Palmer (2010: 148-150) suggests that there is no moral duty to help a squirrel that has been injured by a wild predator, the Gradient View can accommodate the notion that we have some duty to help the poor creature – and that, Hedberg suggests, is a point in its favour.

David Switzer and Nicole Frances Angeli's paper is the first of two on the practice of translocating species populations. In it, they consider the translocation of the members of endangered species, with a view to moving beyond the stark opposition between a 'come one, come all' 'cosmopolitanism' and a 'nativist' mistrust of 'alien' species. In an effort to transcend that dichotomy, they recommend that inflammatory references to 'alien' or 'invasive' species be abandoned (see further, O'Brien 2006: 65–67). Following Mark Woods and Paul Veatch Moriarty (2001), they concede that one must take special care in translocating species populations, but not because there is anything intrinsically 'bad' about the relevant species. One must be careful, they argue, because translocations can 'harm native species, have a homogenising effect on biodiversity and, in the case of disease, potentially harm human welfare' (p.456; for a different view, see Sagoff 2005 and Katz 2014: 381–383).

In the main part of their paper, Switzer and Angeli seek to move beyond the cosmopolitanism-nativism debate by exploring analogies between the translocation of species populations and the migration of (human) refugees. Refugees are, they point out, a special sort of migrant, to whom we have special obligations. The same would seem to hold true of the members of endangered species. Notably, both human refugees and the members of endangered species have typically been *forced* to move – by, say, war, political oppression and religious persecution on the one hand and factors such as hunting and habitat destruction on the other. Indeed, Switzer and Angeli argue that the 'refugee' status of an endangered species can justify the use of 'aggressive management techniques' to preserve them.

In their paper, Helena Siipi and Marko Ahteensuu address the question of whether 'naturalness' – and hence, they suggest, value – is preserved when a species population is moved into an area which doesn't lie within the

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‘indigenous’ range of its species, but might have done, had anthropogenic obstacles been absent (they call this area the ‘predicted’ range of the species). The answer, they point out, depends on what one means by ‘naturalness’. On history-based accounts, according to which the naturalness of a thing reflects the thing’s origins, the quality is not preserved, for the species population has, so to speak, been moved by our hand rather than nature’s (compare Palmer and Larson 2014: 654–655). Yet if one discounts historical considerations, such translocations can qualify as natural, for – the authors argue – the ecosystem into which the species population is introduced might serve similar functions or have a similar species composition to one that could have developed without anthropogenic influences. As they themselves write, assisted migration to ‘the predicted range retains property-based naturalness to a greater extent than “assisted migration” elsewhere’ (p. 466).

Siipi and Ahteensuu’s paper invites us, once again, to ask what it means to be natural. Why do we keep returning to this question? Deliège’s explanation is, I think, plausible. Our fascination with nature and what is natural really does seem to be bound up with our quest to find meaning in something greater than ourselves (compare Holland 2011, 2009). How, though, are we to conceive of this *something*? In these scientific times, some conception of the physical universe is likely to spring first to mind, yet other options are available. One would be to follow the path taken by thinkers such as Schelling and Schopenhauer: to think of nature not just as ‘out there’, but as ‘in here’ too; and to suppose, accordingly, that when we look to the forests, rivers and mountains, that very act of looking is itself an expression of *natura naturans*, a nature which is naturing not just in you and me but in the forests, rivers and mountains as well. By the lights of such (admittedly wild) speculations, allowing nature to take its course would involve more than just leaving woods, wetlands and other such places to their own devices. It would be to align oneself with nature’s expression in one’s own life: to live in harmony with nature in something like the way that a Daoist sage lives in harmony with the *dao*.

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