

The Dying Planet Index: Life, Death and Man's Domination of Nature

During my time working in Australia for the Commonwealth Scientific Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) I visited a nondescript building on the rural work site outside Canberra. This restricted access building held the Australian National Wildlife Collection. What the building in fact held was the preserved dead bodies of species, some of which were extinct. The curator was especially pleased at having collected rare specimens. He told of finding one such for sale in a rural market and how he proceeded to order more from the vendor so other collections around the world could have a specimen as well. That this egalitarian act on behalf of collectors would have wiped out the last remnant of a species did not seem to have crossed his mind. Looking at the bottles of rare pickled amphibians and drawers of compressed and preserved bodies of birds was for me a bizarre experience. In this mortician's chamber the careful cataloguing of decline was ongoing but with some kind of abstraction from the reality of it all. There was nothing wild here and certainly no life. The Australian National Dead Animal Collection would certainly have been a more accurate and truthful description.

I was reminded of this incident by publication of the Living Planet Index (LPI) measuring the abundance of more than 10,000 representative populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish. In the most recent report this had decline by 52 per cent since 1970; that is, 'in less than two human generations, population sizes of vertebrate species have dropped by half' (WWF 2014: 4). The statistical decline of species on Earth is another reminder of how humanity watches, observes and statistically enumerates the ongoing destruction. Like the CSIRO collection, the LPI is not a measure of life but rather the death toll relating to human appropriation of resources for human ends. Presenting death as life seems to fit well with the optimistic messages in the rest of the WWF report, which finds an organisation that was once concerned with wildlife now stating 'we love cities' because urbanisation is becoming the dominant form of human lifestyle. Meanwhile they treat Nature as capital that is valued for supporting production to provide new greener consumption possibilities and financial rewards. This is the economic discourse now common amongst the environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS). The contradictions of supporting extractivist capital accumulation and consumerism while wanting to conserve Nature are reconciled as easily as calling death life.

The ongoing decimation of the natural world is now reaching such heights that the term Anthropocene is being put forward as encapsulating the overwhelming influence of man on natural processes. You might expect this to raise concern over stopping abusive and unthinking advance of economic growth and technology and promoting the need for precaution. However, Baskin

opens this issue by describing how the urgency of problems is being used by an elitist expert grouping to promote the rapid implementation of global management and high-tech ‘solutions’ bypassing democratic institutions. This same approach is reflected in the *Better Growth, Better Climate* report (GCEC 2014), which recommends strong economic growth stimulated by public investment in new technologies and deregulation to aid corporate innovation (Spash 2014).

In a strange twisted logic the dominance of man and his destruction of the environment via technology and industrialisation changes from a negative to a positive. Rather than ignorant and unthinking innovation risking life on Earth this becomes man controlling everything. Here man may be taken as meaning male because this discourse strikes me as highly patriarchal, with the overt goal of dominating and controlling all that Nature represents. As Baskin explains, the Anthropocene is for many a modernist triumph signalling the final dissolution of Nature because everything is now man-made.

Baskin reveals the discourse on the Anthropocene as promoting an account of Nature and its relationship to culture that is a crude ‘modernist dream of mastery’ (p. 18) with a normative prescription of planetary management. The supposed transcendence of a Nature based politics merely suppresses it and pretends humans are all that counts. The core ideas of the ‘End to Nature’ are used to advance management by experts (primarily scientists/engineers) using the most advanced technologies possible. Nature is old-fashioned and needs to be replaced by new fashionable plastic, genetic, artificial objects, or modified in ways that fundamentally change what was formerly autonomous.

Behind what Baskin is pointing out is a small elite but vocal group of American, liberal, pro-growth, techno-optimists wishing to take over environmentalism. These people gather under the title of the Breakthrough Institute, a self proclaimed eco-modernist think tank. They see government as providing the financial backing for market players to accelerate technologically and provide a new era of economic growth. They aim to build a community of leaders in their push for policies that support such things as nuclear power, genetically modified crops, megadams, urbanisation and geoengineering the climate. The Breakthrough Institute’s non-American fellows include Steve Rayner, Ulrich Beck and Bruno Latour.

As discussed in *Environmental Values* by Pollini (2013) the previous attempts by Latour to reduce Nature to culture foundered and led to retractions and qualifications. In criticising Latour’s earlier position, Pollini (2013: 25) argues that ‘nature as an objective non-social reality must be conceptualised and studied if the relationships between humans and their environment are to be properly understood and managed’. Baskin describes Latour’s more recent lectures on the Anthropocene as persisting with the idea that humanity is merged with Nature, and so unable to act as independent observer, but also as placing Gaia in a central role, not humanity. Baskin suggests this position counters the

EDITORIAL

science led eco-modernists by placing humans within, rather than in control of, Nature. Why Latour is signed up with the American eco-modernists is then something of a mystery. Perhaps he finds confirmation for his ideas in the way they conflate their use of scientific credentials with their political aspirations.

For example, another senior fellow of the Breakthrough group is Peter Kareiva, Chief Scientist of The Nature Conservancy, an American ENGO. He argues that supporting corporations is scientific because they are a keystone species, and that conservation is about designing Nature for economic growth. He has worked with biologist Gretchen Daily in pushing natural capital valuation in association with WWF. As Nature is merely a human construct, and can be equated to other forms of capital, humans are free to destroy and create it at will. Thus, under Kareiva the Nature Conservancy now promotes economic expansion of oil and mining on the assumption that humans are able to undertake ecological restoration/re-creation and developers can purchase ‘biodiversity offsets’. His advocacy of what I would call new environmental pragmatism (Spash 2009) has created some counter-reactions from conservationists (Doak et al. 2014; Cafaro and Primack 2014). Indeed, as revealed in this issue, conservation seems to be a repeated battlefield in the struggle over human–Nature relationships.

This is evident in Steinwall’s coverage of Swedish protected area management, where the debate has raged over the meaning of Nature, wilderness, naturalness and the role of intervention. He focuses on how the ends and means of conservation are articulated in the policy process. There is a contrast between naturalness as a set of properties and as the autonomy of an ecosystem allowed to change and go in its own direction. The Swedish debate centred on core ideological issues defining the purpose of protected areas.

Steinwall states that ‘environmental managers in government bureaucracies are amongst the least studied groups of stakeholders in environmental issues’ (p. 35), and the empirical work presented aims to start rectifying this. On one side were those wanting areas left untouched, who were sceptical of intervention and restoration including its ability to deliver. Hands-off management, or pure preservation, contrasted with adaptive management. ‘The interventionist discourse involves a “disarticulation” to remove “untouchedness” from its privileged position, either by denying the existence and thereby relevance of “untouched” nature, or rearticulating it (and sometimes also “naturalness”) as *subjective/recreational*’ (p. 42). The promotion of biodiversity is seen as providing a key signifier for adaptive management so that protected areas become a means to an end.

An interesting aspect of the ‘old fashioned’ approach to Nature preservation is the power it provides as a defence against reducing conservation to efficient management for meeting well defined goals and targets. The managerialism of trade-offs and compromises that erode what is meant to be inviolable can and has been opposed strongly in the past. As Steinwall states,

the conceptualisation of achieving the ‘untouched’ or ‘undisturbed’ in Nature policy has ‘proven much more effective in terms of resisting court challenges attempting to weaken protection in reserves than in cases where the stated purpose only concerns certain species and habitats’ (p. 48). In contrast, using resources for hands-on management militates against protecting new areas and leaves existing areas open to tinkering to meet the latest fashions in restoration. Strategically then the move in conservation to the purely instrumental and the claimed non-existence of Nature are both disempowering. Steinwall concludes that ‘[w]ith “naturalness” out of the way, active interventions to “maximise” biodiversity or “create nature” are harder to argue against’ (p. 49).

The discursive struggle amongst public conservation professional in defining the ends and means of conservation is also investigated empirically (using semi-structured interviews) by Verduijn, Ploegmakers and Meijernisk. Their case study is ecological restoration in Dutch policy on Nature. They are less concerned with justifications for different viewpoints on Nature–human relationships than the process whereby the restoration agenda became prominent. They note that ecological restoration deliberately opposed traditional preservation discourses and provoked fierce debate. Policy entrepreneurs are described as people using a problem-solution framing. In the Dutch context the ecological solutions employed traditional scientific modernist and technical language that would appeal to the administrative rationalist bureaucracy. Ecological restoration appears to have been a solution looking for a problem. The successes that occurred in pushing the solution also led to conflict, because the aim of re-creating a hypothesised, pre-disturbance, historic state meant criticising the powerful farming lobby who fought back with their own agricultural aesthetic.

Last year in *Environmental Values*, Katz (2014) raised concerns over how ecological restoration frames what constitutes the state of Nature to be restored. This appears especially problematic when it involves species eradication programmes and pre-human ideals. How can such states be determined and what is involved in the arguments? Is this search for purity and the removal of outsiders equivalent to fascist designs for society and the environment? Preaching control, unbounded imperialism and mastery of the human over the non-human is an evident cause for concern. The eradication of what some humans chose to select as invasive in order to preserve something else they deem natural also requires acts of condemning to death and execution.

Meurk provides insight into the implementation of such a process. She reports on the case of an invasive species control programme – namely pigs in far north Queensland. Tensions over land management in the area goes back decades and at one point involved developers being countered by environmental activists in the creation of an ‘undevelopment’ agenda. However this has been countered by a ‘pro-development’ discourse and politics and a local rejection of scientific valuation of the area’s environment. The scepticism over

EDITORIAL

outside science is reminiscent of that reported in *Environmental Values* by van Assche, Bell and Teampau (2012) for Romania.

Through interviews with key actors Meurk reveals conflicting opinions over conducting pig control and the values associated with the animals involved and the overall control policy. Animal rights activists empower animals by regarding them as like humans. In contrast, white male Australian hunters naturalise killing by regarding humans as like animals and involved in a competitive relationship with their quarry. Male hunters depict pigs as intelligent and worthy adversaries. Meurk explores the construction of hunting as inhumane and ineffective for biodiversity management, while conservation managers advocate poison baits as cost-effective although they result in much worse and prolonged deaths. Meurk notes that ‘implementing baiting technologies reinforces ideologies and meanings that support conceptually detached, exogenous, human–animal relationships’. The most humane control method being used traps pigs in a cage, which allows them to be shot with precision using a single bullet. This is regarded as labour intensive, and so expensive, while trapping specific pigs can prove problematic, making it a less effective means of damage control. In the end, the conservation manager’s promotion of poison comes across as the most cold-blooded, calculating and divorced from the animals. The contamination of the pigs themselves means their carcasses become a potentially hazardous waste for other animals further breaking the chain of life (see Plumwood 2008).

The main invasive species causing most destruction on the planet would seem to be modern humans and their mode of living. Modernism is then contrasted with the native, indigenous or pre-modern that is associated with a better human–Nature relationship. Tanasescu takes-up the perspective of indigenous native tribes in Ecuador in light of the Constitutional recognition of Rights of Nature in 2008 being seen as a triumph for their perspective. As in Australia, ‘development’ has been advanced by publicly funded investment in roads that allow colonisation and settlement to the detriment of the native populations. In Ecuador areas regarded as ‘new’ territories were treated by the government as if they were uninhabited. By the early 1990s indigenous communities were getting organised to oppose their oppression and domination. Internal colonisation employed an extractivist model of economic development and ignored the territorial rights of the ancestral communities. Conceptualising their relationship with the natural environment became a key part of their fight.

Nature as well as rights are inexact translations of the indigenous vision, but representing Nature via rights was useful in opposing neoliberal economic policy. The struggle for protecting territory therefore became associated with making Nature a subject and giving it standing in the law; after all the USA led the way in making non-human corporations legal subjects (i.e. equivalent to individuals). Nature was presented as having been subjugated by humanity for

mercantile reasons and representing Nature via rights as providing legal ammo for defence against domination.

The downside of this approach, according to Tanasescu, is that ‘the indigenous as a champion of environmental sensibility is both patronising and suspect’, and this neglects evidence for their culture of ‘tinkering with the natural’ and practising agro-forestry. The immense indigenous support for Rights of Nature emanates from political need rather than their philosophical outlook. Tanasescu concludes that while there is some affinity between the indigenous conceptions of Nature and rights language, claiming a basis for rights in indigenous philosophy is misleading and historically incorrect. Tanasescu sees rights as being hegemonic and their use as an indigenous symbol of human–Nature relationships as forced. However, this seems to conflict with the recognition that neoliberalism and the extractivist economic model of development was the hegemony which the indigenous communities were using rights to fight back against in the first place.

This issue of the journal brings together some of the key problems in environmental values for the twenty-first century. What is the relationship between humans and Nature, is this changing and if so how; can the potential for domination and exploitation of others be counter-balanced and combated; what should be the role of humans in construction and manipulation of the world around them; does ecological restoration have a credible role; how can the values of male authoritarianism and cold blooded violence to others be countered; why is the evidence of on-going destruction and human–Nature conflict so easily brushed aside; what is the future of conservation and the environmental movement? Dressing the problems up as something they are not has become a strategic marketing exercise for ENGOs, undertaken to avoid scarring those living comfortable material lifestyles who have been numbed into a conformist existence of denial in which their donations buy penitence. As time runs out for more species and habitat and more greenhouse gases accumulate in the upper atmosphere, the main political agenda remains dominated by economic growth and advancing technology. Something substantive is now necessary to break this mould.

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EDITORIAL

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