

Values, Ethics, and Public Lands

Introduction

Last year I presented a paper at the biennial George Wright Society meeting. The paper addressed environmental values and ethics and their implications for public land management. I was aware of George Wright's legacy: he was a powerful advocate for science in the management of parks and other public lands. Consequently, I was a little unsure about how my paper—exploring so seemingly soft a subject as values and ethics—would be received.

In the end, I was relieved. In fact, the meeting room was nearly full, and I enjoyed spirited conversation with several Society members until well after the session. Follow-up correspondence led to the idea of a special issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM devoted to the subject of environmental values and ethics. We solicited papers from leading writers in the field. The only incentive offered was that their papers would be read by researchers, managers, and policy-makers in the best position to guide and influence public land management. Nearly all responded with both substance and timeliness.

The seven papers in this collection are broadly representative of the growing literature in this area. The papers might be grouped into three broad categories. The first includes two papers which explore a range of potential values found in nature as well as a diversity of environmental ethics. Both papers are empirically based. Bengston and Xu explore shifting and expanding values resident in the national forests. Their premise is that management of national forests must evolve in concert with evolving social values. Using content analysis, they found that the public is placing increasing importance on life support and moral-spiritual values of forests. However, economic-utilitarian values retain their traditional importance in society. The authors conclude, among other things, that new, integrated paradigms, such as ecosystem management, may be especially timely as a means to resolve inevitable conflicts among forest values. Manning, Valliere, and Minter report on several surveys of park and wilderness visitors. Initial conceptual development identifies and classifies a range of environmental values and ethics. Empirical measures are developed and respondents are asked the extent to which they subscribe to these values and ethics. Findings suggest that parks hold multiple values in society and are clearly more than recreation places. Environmental ethics are also multi-

faceted, ranging across the anthropocentric–biocentric continuum. As with the previous paper, increasing conflict over public lands is a likely implication arising out of those findings. However, protection of ecological integrity may be a common denominator in realizing this diverse set of environmental values and ethics.

The second set of papers is more philosophical. All three argue for changing conceptions of public lands. Callicott is critical of the traditional rationale for wilderness preservation which he finds too anthropocentric and ecologically uninformed. He suggests zoos as an appropriate analogy. In recent years, zoos have evolved into “biological parks” in recognition of their enlightened ecological role. In a similar manner, wilderness areas should evolve into “biodiversity reserves.” These areas would be expanded in size, new areas created where habitat requirements demand, and economic and other human uses allowed where compatible with conserving biodiversity. Oelschlaeger also criticizes the conceptual foundations of parks and wilderness as too limited and rooted in the assumptions of modernism. As isolated reserves, parks and wilderness can be viewed as mere playgrounds, farms, or even prisons, detached from humanity. If parks and wilderness were more integrated into society—if we could move beyond preservationism—then they might serve as models of a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Gottlieb and Blumberg take a different tack, encouraging us to expand the public interest in public lands. Reflecting on the broad social agenda associated with environmentalism—ideas that can be traced back to Robert Marshall, Catherine Bauer, and Benton MacKaye—the authors outline ten ideas designed to achieve social and environmental justice. They conclude that a broader base of environmentalism will be good for both society and our public lands.

The final set of papers focuses directly on human behavior. Both papers address the behaviors of visitors to parks and wilderness. Stefanovic notes that there are not yet well-developed norms of behavior among recreationists. One solution to this problem may be codes of ethics for park visitors. The author describes development of such a code for Short Hills Provincial Park, Ontario. Nash is concerned more specifically with new communications technology and its implications for the quality of the wilderness experience. Instant, two-way communication between wilderness visitors and the “outside” world may diminish the very idea of wilderness. Following a tradition of human restraint to protect wilderness, Nash suggests we need a new wilderness ethic in the age of cyberspace.

I would like to thank the authors of these papers for their thoughtful and provocative ideas. I also appreciate the encouragement and assistance of Dave Harmon in developing this special issue of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM. I hope readers find it useful.