Environmental Pluralism
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Introduction

Decisions increasingly become dilemmas without obvious solutions as worldviews clash, science conflicts, politics polarize, and institutions entrench. Yet decision must be made: Should we sacrifice a species in order to build a road that increases access to health care for people in need? Should we confine pigs and chickens in feeding operations whose efficiencies preserve habitat that conserves biological diversity? Should we burn trees and bunnies to restore native species and natural fire regimes? Should we salvaged for lumber dead trees or leave them to rot and provide habitat? Should dams release water for spawning salmon and forgo opportunities to generate clean hydropower and irrigate inexpensive food? Should we subsidize biofuel industries that produce jobs, national security, and moderate climate but convert vast habitats to corn and tree monocultures? Should livers be transplanted from genetically modified pigs to extend human lives? Should exotic species of fish be poisoned so that native fish might thrive?

Decision makers facing these wicked choices operate within a segmented and fractured world created by disciplinary, institutional, locale, language, and normative barriers that define communities of practice such as public-health and environmental illness, deep ecology and animal rights, organic agriculture and steady state economics, evangelical Christians and creation care, urban planning and civil engineering, and environmental justice and environmental law. Each of these communities of practice develops internally consistent and self-reinforcing rationale to explain observations of the world and defend decisions. These communities of practice, although largely autonomous, can overlap in the preferred outcomes and rationale they advance.

Environmental pluralism is offered as the framework for decision-making appropriate for this context; for the purposes of this essay, it has two dimensions: moral and procedural.

Moral Environmental Pluralism

Moral environmental pluralism suggests there exist multiple, competing, overlapping, self-consistent frameworks for differentiating right from wrong, good from bad. No one frame is always best; no one frame subsumes all the others in a hierarchy. Moral pluralism contrasts with moral monism, which is the as yet unfulfilled promise of a unifying ethical theory that can serve as the keystone species of morality, organizing all moral criteria into a hierarchical system from which logical and consistent decisions flow. Monism is the understandable search for a golden rule derived from some deep truth that reasonable people accept as a tool to resolve wicked problems and environmental dilemmas. Critics of monism argue that a unifying system does not yet exist, and probably cannot be created, so that a theory and practice of pluralism is both

prudent and necessary. Monism is further problematic because it risks excluding or marginalizing voices, which has the effect of shrinking the political base and creating adversaries instead of allies.

Environmental pluralism, in contrast, contends the world is infinitely complex, fluid, and negotiated; frustrating any attempt to impose a master narrative as an overarching, organizing frame. Reasonable differences of opinion will exist among reasonable decision makers embedded in different communities of practice. Much of professional forestry, for example, has a utilitarian ethic that tries to maximize social welfare, an economic language to express welfare trade-offs as benefits and costs, and a scientific ability to describe and predict economic attributes of forests such as tree volume, soil productivity, and threats to profit such as pest and fire. Conservation biology, in contrast, has more of a Leopoldian ethic that respects the integrity of biotic communities, an ecological language to communicate ideal states of the communty, and a scientific ability to describe and predict the content and processes of ecolgocial systems.

To the forestry community, the decision to clear-cut trees is evaluated in terms of the sustained yield of water, hunting, grazing, recreation, timber and other forest products affecting social welfare, and explained in terms of silvicultural science predicting the sustained yield of marketable resources and ecosystem services. The same decision, evaluated from the perspective of conservation biology, might question the forest system's resilence to such a disruption of process and removal of content as well as the sacrifice of habitat made by flaura and fauna dependent upon the removed trees and disturbed soil.   Two very different rationales emerge, even though both are internally consistent in the moral and scientific reasoning they use to identify and defend their preferred outcomes.

Pluralism proposes that the diversity of values and principles relevant to moral judgment cannot be reduced to a single dimension—utilitarian pleasure and pain, Kantian respect for rationality, economic benefits and costs, or inherent value possessed by all life forms. Longstanding and divisive debates over which monistic dimension trumps all others has distracted attention of ethicists from moral insights needed to guide practical and pressing environmental decisions. Particularly debilitating is the longstanding debate over whether nature has value independently of humans or whether nature's value depends entirely on instrumentality and human logic.

Moral Environmental Pluralism rests on a philosophy grounded in pragmatism, which deduces moral principles not from theoretical principles but from negotiated solutions to real management problems. These deductions provide rules of thumb and a language for articulating solutions used to resolve environmental dilemmas. Environmental pluralism assists environmental decision making by helping identify the values and tradeoffs that are being negotiated; in contrast, monism offers solutions that *should* be followed because they are consistent with philosophical principle.

Perhaps the harshest critique of pluralism is that it reduces all ethics to rhetoric and promotes relativism and skepticism. Right, wrong, good and bad become matters of personal taste and class preferences. Pluralism, according to this critique, enables articulate, sophisticated scoundrels to manipulate deliberations so as to justify whatever outcomes they desire using whatever ethical principles prove persuasive. Pluralism is a giant step backwards towards an ethic of might makes right: those with power—people with legal and technical expertise, political position, and lobbying opportunities—

manipulate the system towards their own ends and cannot be held accountable to higher ideals towards which civilization fitfully progresses. Environmental pluralism, critics further argue, is a form of political populism and marketing, reducing moral reasoning and responsibility to nothing more than checking the latest opinion poll.

From the vantage point of the pragmatist and of managers faced with making decisions, this critique of pluralism seems impractical and perhaps idealistic. Decisions that affect the quality and future of our environment are made every day, many times a day: forest road construction, sewage water discharge rates, poultry house locations, fertilizer applications, power plant designs, genetically modified crop releases, critical habitat restorations, mining and drilling operations, and so on. These decisions must be made with imperfect knowledge and with expediency. Full knowledge of values or consequences is not possible.

The decision-space facing environmental decision-makers resembles mountain tops poking above clouds: each mountain representing the collection of facts, values, conceptual models, and methods that create different communities of practice. Competent decision-makers can climb to the top of one or two mountains and confidently propose solutions to the narrow range of problems that occur only on those mountains, but that is not where solutions exist to the big, complex and tragic problems that we increasingly face in a biosphere with over 6 billion humans consuming ecosystem services and finite resources. These solutions exist in between the mountains, out in the thick fog of unknowns.

Environmental pluralism accepts the uncertainty of this terrain, the need to compare and contrast alternative moral frameworks for their relevance to the situation at hand, and the unlikelihood that one value metric or moral framework spans all these issues.

The procedure of environmental pluralism, the next topic of this essay, is the method for negotiating solutions in an uncertain, pluralist world. It proposes open negotiation by earnest and well meaning people dedicated to navigating the unknowns and finding higher ground in our search for sustainability.

Procedural Environmental Pluralism

Pluralism can facilitate collaboration if it moves us beyond the environmental fundamentalist's moral certainty that motivates pursuit of absolute victory, no-holds-barred conflict, stalemate, litigation, expense, delay, and paralysis. Adversarial politics fueled by interest groups defending their all-or-nothing frames leaves little room for cooperation and can hide agendas, conceal information, guard power, and manipulate procedure, resulting in ineffective solutions that waste time, money and talent. However, collaborative pluralism is a search for commonalities, higher ground, and win-win solutions that requires negotiators to accept the legitimacy of alternative frames and look for outcomes that maximizes the preferences of diverse stakeholders that collectively have the ability and will to affect change.

Replacement of command-and-control regulations with market based strategies that trade pollution credits provides a classic example of a pluralist strategy. It required considerable collaboration, sharing of information, and respect for the positions advocated by competing communities of practice. For example, human health advocates had to accept certain risks from pollution as unavoidable, environmental preservation advocates had to accept pollution as a part of normal business, and polluting industries

had to internalize and pay the costs of pollution, share privileged information about industrial processes, and change business practices.

Civic environmentalism and deliberative democracy are promising trends in efforts to reclaim a civil society through decentralization and devolution of decision making authority from state to local, NGO, and market institutions. This transition reflects the advancement of transactive planning and adaptive management as alternative paradigms to rational comprehensive planning. The laudable goals of these efforts are to create room and appreciation for civil discourse, to share the responsibility for problem definition and solution, to harness local knowledge and agency, to produce equitable outcomes that check abuses of power, and to incrementally test solutions in the advance towards sustainability. The success of this movement requires environmental pluralism in order to avoid the paralysis and polarization that prevents meaningful collaboration by vested stakeholders.

Conclusions

The challenges to our survival and sustainability are enormously complex. A diversity of solutions representing a plurality of values and implemented through collaboration with open and regular testing of outcomes for feedback and correction seems essential. Environmental pluralism seeks to build a broad political base, encourage experimentation, and strive for the higher ground where many, but not all, of the preferred outcomes of multiple stakeholders exist. It strives to overcome the polarization and paralysis symptomatic of contemporary environmental decision making.

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