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Nature Connoisseurship

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ABSTRACT

Environmentalists who seek to protect wild nature, biodiversity and so on for its own sake manifest a disposition to value the interesting at least on par with the useful. This disposition toward the interesting, which provides the affective and cognitive context for the discovery of intrinsic values in nature and the elaboration of ecocentric ethics, does not arise simply from learning about nature but is part of a more general socially inculcated cultural system. Nature connoisseurship exhibits formal parallels with art connoisseurship. The abstraction-oriented cultural system which prizes 'disinterested interest' is characteristic of culturally rich fractions (or subdivisions) of the middle class in modern Western societies. Valuing nature for its own sake (like valuing, for its own sake, the domination of nature) is not a 'natural' response to nature but a disciplined cultural accomplishment.

KEYWORDS

Nature preservation, taste, connoisseurship, Hargrove, Bourdieu

1. INTRODUCTION

How do people come to value nature 'for its own sake'? Specifically, how do ecologists, conservation biologists, naturalists and others who seek to defend species, ecosystems, 'ecologically significant' natural areas, or (more abstractly) wildness, biodiversity or ecological integrity, come to hold these entities or conditions to be intrinsically valuable? To borrow a distinction from the philosophy of science, we are concerned here with the 'context of discovery', not with the 'context of justification'. When it comes to justifying favoured policies, nature preservationists and biological conservationists often lean heavily on instrumental arguments even if these do not express the advocates' own motivations (see e.g.

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Craig et al. 1993; Grumbine and Soulé 1994). The question of whether, and in what sense, talk of 'intrinsic values in nature' is *philosophically* (and scientifically) justified has been central to the field of environmental ethics since its inception. I do not intend to address the substance of these natural-scientific, normative and meta-ethical issues here. My thesis is a sociological and cultural one: that modern Western societies generate (some) people who are predisposed to experience their personal and scientifically mediated acquaintance with nature in terms of particular kinds of intrinsic values.

My argument, then, can be situated (not altogether happily) in the context of the 'social construction' debate in environmental thought (Bennett and Chaloupka 1993; Cronon 1995; Soulé and Lease 1995; Braun and Castree 1998; Crist 2004). According to one side of this debate, personal experience and scientific ecological knowledge represent a direct confrontation with the objective realities of nature, providing access to a point of view that transcends and corrects cultural prejudices. Naturalists discover intrinsic values in nature despite, rather than because of, their social and cultural situation. In this view, the contexts of discovery and justification are fused; the naturalist's valuations are caused by acquaintance with the knowledge that justifies them. According to the other side, what we think we find in nature is itself a projection of cultural preconceptions. This view is often assumed (by partisans of both sides) to imply a context of discovery of value (i.e., 'social construction') which undermines its justification (e.g., if 'wilderness' is a social construct or cultural artefact, wilderness can't 'really' have intrinsic value). Some (e.g. Evernden 1992) manage to hold both these positions more or less simultaneously, the former in respect of ecology they like and the latter in respect of ecology they don't.

I adopt neither of these positions. However justifiable the ecocentric views and values which inform conservation biology (and which I share), these views do not impose themselves indifferently on minds exposed to nature and scientific facts about nature. Elective affinities toward ecocentrism cannot be explained by appealing to the arguments that might justify it. Neither, conversely, is nature a blank screen upon which pre-existing culturally given values and categories (to do with 'nature' and so on) are projected. Ecocentric value-judgements, I suggest, are produced when properties of nature are experienced, studied and described by people with certain culturally produced dispositions. Those dispositions do involve values, but values of a very general sort and not necessarily to do with nature in any substantive sense. I'm going to suggest that one effect of ecological learning, at least within a particular cultural context, is what I will call 'nature connoisseurship', a refinement of taste connected with judgements of intrinsic worth. Further, I will suggest that the notion of nature for its own sake grows out of the same social and cultural matrix as that of 'art for art's sake.'

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2. ECOLOGICAL AS AESTHETIC VALUES

Eugene Hargrove (1989: 78–90) argues that ecological values are akin to aesthetic values, and that much of the conservation agenda of ecologists and naturalists is motivated by an appreciation of what he calls the quasi-aesthetic category of the ‘interesting’. We want to save that which is interesting, unique, rare, pristine, sensitive, or significant, rather than have it replaced by what is dull, ordinary, commonplace or disturbed. According to Hargrove (1989: 78), ‘the perception of the world of modern ecologists and environmentalists is little different from, and is directly traceable to, the *aesthetic* perceptions of early botanists, biologists and geologists’. These perceptions were refracted through the eighteenth century Romantic aesthetic categories of the ‘picturesque’ and the ‘sublime’; the aesthetic criteria of ‘complexity, diversity, variety, individuality and geologic time’ that informed those categories survived into the nineteenth century and beyond under the rubric of the ‘interesting’ as employed by naturalists and geographers (Hargrove 1989: 88–90).

Many ecologists and conservation biologists readily acknowledge this (quasi-) aesthetic dimension of the values that inform their work. Conservation biologist Michael Soulé (Grumbine and Soulé 1994: 103–4) sums up the normative basis of his discipline as follows:

[B]iological diversity is good...It’s an intuition of mine and probably of many ecologists and natural historians....I love diversity. I love seeing a wide range of species and habitats. It’s an aesthetic experience...and it’s hard to define what the difference is between aesthetic and spiritual.

Others, though, might hasten to reject the assimilation of ecological to aesthetic values. They would insist, on the contrary, that ecological values are often opposed to aesthetic values. Aesthetic values, they would charge, are superficial, subjective, culture-bound and anthropocentric. The ‘aesthetic’, as they understand it, is precisely the category of the facile, uninformed judgement that is easily fooled by cosmetic measures like the fringe of trees left to hide the clear-cut from the highway or canoe route; it prefers the forest tidied of underbrush and deadwood, and the prairie, meadow or fen replaced by neat, comfortable lawn. Ecologists, by contrast, judge a habitat ‘not by how it looks but by what it does’ (Rappaport 1993: 877).

This repudiation of the ‘merely aesthetic’ has, however, an aesthetic dimension of its own. The connoisseur of art, no less than the scientifically informed nature connoisseur, judges on the basis of formal attributes rather than superficial prettiness or conventional (popular) attractiveness. Connoisseurs of nature – not only professional ecologists and conservation biologists, but also individuals with an avocational interest in natural history – are by no means blind to the sensual properties of nature, but their valuations distinctively attach to formal properties of natural features constructed by scientific knowledge: representa-

tiveness (of landscape type, landform, ecosystem, taxonomic group, and so on), rarity, diversity, integrity, ecological function, and so on. Expert taste, as we shall see, always distinguishes itself from popular taste on just such grounds. In environmentalist discourse the language of 'scientific' or natural values operates a bid to sanctify the taste for the interesting as 'legitimate', as bearing the imprimatur of scientific authority (Johnson 1995: 759; Yearley 1992). Of course, the legitimacy of legitimate taste is always a contested matter. The legitimacy of educated ecological taste is never guaranteed to carry the day, moreover, as a minority taste and one that stands in the way of economic gain.

In the discussion to follow, I will develop this parallel between art and nature connoisseurship as systems of dispositions, starting at the level of the individual, and then turning to the cultural traditions and social locations within which such systems of dispositions are generated. Finally, I will draw a few implications for environmental thought. Throughout, I draw heavily on the ideas of the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

3. CONNOISSEURSHIP OF ART AND NATURE

According to Bourdieu (1993: 230), 'legitimate' taste in art presupposes 'art competence', which is a 'cultivated disposition' or a 'durable and generalised attitude which implies recognition of the value of works of art and the ability to appropriate them by means of generic categories'. Art competence, Bourdieu (1993: 221) suggests,

can be provisionally defined as the preliminary knowledge of the possible divisions into complementary classes of a universe of representations. A mastery of this kind of system of classification enables each element of the universe to be placed in a class necessarily determined in relation to another class, itself constituted by all the art representations consciously or unconsciously taken into consideration which do not belong to the class in question.

The system of classification as it applies to works of art or literature may employ such variables as author/painter, period, school, genre, style and so on. Ecological competence involves the acquisition of an analogous vocabulary of classifications: taxon, trophic level, guild, seral stage, landscape or habitat site type, etc. (a point vividly illustrated by Waterton 2004; see also Lynch and Law 1988). Perception of environmental value presupposes the tacit possession of a 'code'. One lacking biological and geological literacy in the presence of nature--like one lacking cultural literacy in the presence of art--experiences 'disorientation and cultural blindness' (Bourdieu 1993: 216). Landscapes that are ecologically significant are not always those that are the most appealing to the uncultivated eye¹; a species particularly exciting for the naturalist to find may be a matter of

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indifference to the eco-philistine (Yearley 1992, 1993). Nature, like art, is an acquired taste, and the acquisition of taste is a social process.

Connoisseurship, as Bourdieu (1993: 221) describes it, ‘is an “art” which...cannot be imparted entirely in the form of precepts and instruction, and apprenticeship to it presupposes...repeated contact with the work or works of the same class’; connoisseurship, in contrast to explicit theoretical knowledge, is an ‘unconscious mastery’ resulting from long contact and ‘slow familiarisation, a long succession of “little perceptions”’. In the case of nature connoisseurship, this ‘apprenticeship’ typically takes the form of recreational or avocational natural history pursuits, in addition to the ‘field’ component of formal scientific training. The process that gives rise to any kind of connoisseurship – including nature connoisseurship – creates a need by creating the means to satisfy it, since ‘each new appropriation tends to strengthen the mastery of the instruments of appropriation’ (Bourdieu 1993: 227). As nature is ‘appropriated’ through the classification-based practices of birding, botanising and eco-tourism, the mastery of these practices increases, and so accordingly does the need for ever more refined and challenging opportunities to exercise mastery.

Connoisseurship, then, cannot be imparted entirely through instruction or ‘book learning’ but requires long and intimate first-hand familiarity with its objects. Extensive direct personal experience of nature in the outdoors will, however, normally give rise to nature connoisseurship only in one who also acquires both a scientifically derived system of classifications and a generalised aestheticising disposition.

Researchers have identified direct contact with nature in childhood – through which both cognitive familiarity and emotional affinity is forged – as a key formative influence on adult environmental values and activism (Horwitz 1996; Kals et al. 1999). Childhood exposure to nature, especially in the course of the active pursuit of ‘foraging’ for such wild collectibles as tadpoles, bugs, flowers, berries and wildflowers, also helps to generate the intuitive grasp of habitat and niche upon which nature connoisseurship rests (Chipeniuk 1995). Direct contact with nature, although a *necessary* condition for the formation of ecocentric dispositions, is not, however, a *sufficient* condition. Enough childhood ‘foraging’ experience may always give rise to a kind of nature expertise, but not necessarily the kind of nature connoisseurship characteristic of conservation biologists and their allies. Indeed, the latter groups often find themselves at odds with rural people who have also (or to an even greater degree) grown up outdoors in intimate contact with the natural environment, and these conflicts reflect divergent environmental and cultural values, not just divergent proximate material interests (Satterfield 2002). Childhood experience of nature will result in qualitatively different kinds of knowledge and values depending, say, on whether it is acquired along with a cultural orientation toward practical mastery or toward theoretical mastery and disinterested appreciation.²

Nature connoisseurship is acquired only if long and varied exposure to nature occurs in a special social context where certain scientifically and artistically influenced ways of knowing are imparted and cultivated. These ways of knowing involve learning to appreciate and understand nature through a system of formal, disinterested classifications. By 'disinterested', I mean that such attributes as usefulness, agreeableness, or prettiness are either incidental or irrelevant to them. There is, I would suggest, nothing 'natural' about relating to nature in this way. Rather, these are cultivated practices, and the desire to cultivate these practices is inculcated as part of a broader complex of durable, transferable dispositions, or 'habitus' as Bourdieu calls it.

Before exploring this notion in greater detail, let me offer a homely illustration. For one Ontario schoolteacher and schoolyard naturalisation advocate (Scallen 1994: 35), ecological restoration is part of a deliberate effort to combat the 'dangerously anti-nature' squeamishness many children bring to their encounters with non-human life:

Every fall, I introduce a variety of creatures that students invariably recoil from (snakes, spiders and millipedes for example). My students are asked to replace terms of disgust like gross! ooh! yuk! etc., with wow! neat! amazing!

Note the dispositions that Scallen is trying deliberately to inculcate in his pupils. The children are encouraged to respond to what are initially difficult and viscerally repellent stimuli with excitement and intellectual curiosity. Whether the biophobic responses the pupils initially exhibit are innate or conditioned (see Ulrich 1993), they are in any case reflex-like. Scallen is engaged in a process of socialisation, which involves the suppression of habitual biophobic responses and their gradual replacement with new, culturally appropriate biophilic dispositions. In so doing, he is contributing to the formation of a habitus favourably disposed to liberality, an adventurous openness to the strange, and a disciplined, disinterested curiosity in the face of emotional aversion. To give in to such aversion would display a 'dangerous' and 'disappointing' prejudice.

The generalised, transferable disposition to set aside a naive, parochial or prejudiced reaction is a form of 'cultural capital' common to the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities alike. Significantly, pre-adult acquisition of 'cultural capital' – as measured in terms of the number of books in the family home, parents' employment in social or cultural occupations, or adolescent consumption of literature and art – has been found to be among the strongest predictors of pro-environmentalist attitudes (Skogen 1996; Tranter 1996). Seen in this light, the distinctive cultivated biophilia associated with what I am calling nature connoisseurship is an instance of a more general type of value system that operates in relation to culture as well. While they may differ in their substantive objects, both nature and cultural connoisseurship manifest a similar type of aesthetic disposition which stands in characteristic opposition to other

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types. This opposition (as regards nature) is clearly evident in the discourse surrounding certain environmental controversies.

4. THE DISINTERESTED AESTHETIC OF THE INTERESTING

The disposition to take a passionate yet disinterested interest in nature presupposes a predisposition for disinterested interest. This aesthetic of disinterested appreciation finds its classic philosophical articulation in Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgement*. The 'Kantian' aesthetic is one based on the capacity and inclination to take pleasure in the pure formal attributes of the object of contemplation: 'pleasure purified of all sensuous or sensible interest...as remote from concupiscence as it is from conspicuous consumption' (Bourdieu 1984: 493). The disinterested interest in the 'interesting' is, according to Bourdieu (1984: 40, 486–94), captured in Kant's contrast between the 'beautiful' and the 'agreeable' and Schopenhauer's contrast between the 'sublime' and the 'charming'. The elevation of the former terms over the latter expresses a 'disgust at the facile'. That which is 'agreeable' or 'charming' 'excites the will by presenting to it directly its fulfilment, its satisfaction'.

The 'Kantian' aesthetic is, as I will explain shortly, thought by Bourdieu to be characteristic of well-educated fractions of the middle class, and it is opposed by a principally working class 'anti-Kantian "aesthetic"'. The 'anti-Kantian "aesthetic"' 'bases appreciation on informative, tangible or moral interest' in the subject matter of art works rather than on formal properties and disdains works of purely formal interest. This orientation is, for example, 'brought into play when manual workers almost invariably reject photography for photography's sake (e.g. the photograph of pebbles) as useless, perverse or bourgeois: "A waste of film....Haven't they got anything better to do with their time than photograph things like that?"' (Bourdieu 1984: 40–41).

As with culture, so, I suggest, with nature. The 'Kantian' aesthetic applied to nature would be manifest in an orientation that refuses the 'natural' relation to nature which is interested, invested, 'anthropocentric', 'utilitarian', prejudiced in favour of the useful, the comfortable and the gratifying, conducive to active engagement, consumption, use and so on. Such is the orientation of the biophilic nature connoisseur, who appreciates nature in itself, the very diversity of 'life and lifelike processes (ecological functions and structures, for example)' (Kellert 1993: 42); valuing not only cuddly and charismatic creatures, but even (especially!) the obscure, the recondite, the invisible, the rare, the hard to find, the hard to experience, the little-known. Conversely, the 'anti-Kantian aesthetic' of nature appreciates that which is tangible, enjoyable and accessible; efforts to preserve visually unappealing species or habitats and inaccessible landscapes for the sake of abstract goods such as 'representation', 'biodiversity' or 'ecological integrity' manifest the formalist ethos in purest degree and are thus the

most likely to be regarded as frivolous or whimsical by those who do not share that ethos.³

The opposition between 'Kantian' and 'anti-Kantian' aesthetic modes is revealed, for example, in the contrasting approaches to science exhibited by environmentalists and loggers, as described in Terre Satterfield's recent ethnographic study of conflicts over Oregon's old-growth forests. Environmentalists favoured 'abstract' science, which resonated with a Romantic version of a Kantian-formalist aesthetic of nature. They were especially drawn to scientific accounts that revealed mysterious and wonderful complexities of old-growth forest ecosystems involving obscure species and invisible relationships beyond the horizon of mundane awareness, such as the intricate and far-reaching ecological ramifications of mycorrhizal symbioses (Satterfield 2002: 83–90). Though these accounts may be seen simply as research results which happen to support preservationist policy prescriptions, I suspect that the appeal of such descriptions for environmentalists derives in part from the same source as the appeal of the old growth forests themselves: a habitus predisposed to delight in complexity, diversity, non-obvious order, rarity, antiquity and so on. These tastes are also manifest on a still more abstract plane in the characteristics of environmentalist cosmologies such as deep ecology (Greenbaum 1999). Loggers, for their part, tended to reject 'abstract science' in favour of 'applied science' which has tangible objectives, confirms or supplements knowledge derived from practical experience, and jibes with 'common sense' (Satterfield 2002: 90–95). This cognitive preference went along with an aesthetic preference for second growth forests, which are simpler, more orderly to the eye, more convenient and of greater practical utility.

While forestry disputes typically pit urbanites against rural dwellers who have very different economic stakes, some similar features mark conflicts within urban or suburban jurisdictions (and often between neighbours) over the use of lawns versus meadows or other more naturalistic forms of landscaping in front yards and parks. Environmentalists who oppose bylaws, policies and social conventions prescribing lawns do so in part because lawn maintenance consumes resources and often involves the use of hazardous pesticides. But they also condemn the lawn as poor in biodiversity, not representing regionally distinctive flora, lacking ecological complexity and functionality – in short, as monotonous, boring and lifeless. An urban meadow appears a messy patch of undifferentiated 'weeds' only to the unenlightened eye; to the nature connoisseur equipped with a knowledge of natural history and a grasp of ecological relationships it may be fascinating, vibrant and enthralling. Those on the other side of the issue appreciate the practical convenience and comfort provided by the lawn and the diligence (consistent effort and practical skill) displayed in its care; to them, lawn opponents are apologists for disorder and neglect, swayed by faddish ideas rather than by common sense (Greenbaum 2000: 315–19, 516–24). As with the forestry conflict, the rhetoric is informed on one side by a

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romantic-biophilic version of a 'Kantian' aesthetic of disinterested appreciation and on the other by an 'anti-Kantian' aesthetic of tangible utility.

These cultural divisions show up not only between 'pro-' and 'anti-environmentalist' positions but also in the oft-noted distinction between a middle class (or Northern) environmentalism concerned with nature and wilderness, and a working class (or Southern, or subaltern) environmentalism concerned with human health, justice, subsistence, tradition or community (see, e.g. Di Chiro 1995; Taylor 1995; Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997). Following Inglehart's (1990, 1997) 'culture shift' theory, we can identify many of the latter environmentalisms as 'materialist' (deriving from a value system that gives priority to material security) and the former as 'postmaterialist' (deriving from a value system of those who, having experienced material security growing up, place a greater emphasis on expression and participation). In this scheme, nature connoisseurship would characterise one subvariant of postmaterialist environmentalism.

Empirical studies have identified some of the environmental attitudes distinctive of highly educated members of the middle class. The latter were more likely to evince views reflecting an 'ecological worldview' or 'global green awareness' but are not more likely than others to fear technological hazards (Rootes 1997: 321–23). They are more likely value animals as parts of ecosystems whose wildness or integrity is valued for its own sake, and less likely to value animals as useful objects to be dominated or even as sentient individuals whose welfare is a concern (Kellert 1984a, 1996; Bulbeck 1999). If they are activists, their environmentalism is more likely than that of others to take the form of an all-embracing 'personalist' ('expressive individualist') commitment to an alternative, culturally unconventional, politicised lifestyle, as opposed to organising in defence of the interests of a conventional (non-intentional) community (Lichterman 1996; Horton 2004; Starr 2004). In each of these instances, we find the earmarks of postmaterialism, abstraction-orientation and disinterested interest.

Materialist and postmaterialist environmentalisms may converge on similar positions concerning a wide range of issues; materialists and postmaterialists alike may be inclined to endorse statements of 'pro-environment' attitudes, especially if these are sufficiently general (such as supporting 'stricter pollution regulations', 'more spending on cleaning up and restoring the environment', even 'protecting nature').⁴ This is good news from the point of view of forging a broadly based environmental movement, but it means that it is easy for survey studies to underestimate the relationship between social variables and environmental values, and thus to obscure the generative mechanisms by which environmental values are formed.

5. SOCIAL SOURCES OF CONNOISSEURSHIP

So far, I have suggested that nature connoisseurship is one particular manifestation of a more general 'Kantian' aesthetic disposition. This disposition, Bourdieu (1984: 49–93) suggests, can only emerge as part of a particular form of life constituted by a distinctive set of practices: '[t]he aesthetic disposition, a generalised capacity to neutralise ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends, a durable inclination and aptitude for practice without practical function, can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are ends in themselves, such as scholastic exercises or the contemplation of works of art' (54). Bourdieu claims that this 'generalised capacity' initially arose from and was attuned to the bourgeois experience of 'distance from the world' – that is, distance from material processes of production, from immediate material need, and from the various far-flung people with whom abstract, monetised transactions might be conducted. Bourgeois culture also inculcated norms of autonomy, austerity, seriousness and introspection, as distinguished from the outward-directed, hedonistic norms said to characterise both the aristocratic and working classes. Other students of class cultures (e.g. Gans 1961, 1977; Bernstein 1971) have also described the distinctive 'abstraction orientation' and cosmopolitanism of middle class culture, and compared it with working class culture's grounding in locally shared practical knowledge of concrete particulars. The latter gives rise to the 'anti-Kantian' ethos described above.

These distinctive class sensibilities have long been reflected in attitudes toward nature. Industrialisation, while accelerating the instrumental exploitation of nature, produced – and was produced by – a bourgeois class which began to distinguish itself from workers and peasants by virtue of the 'aesthetic asceticism' of its love of nature: for the one, the natural landscape became a sacralised object of aesthetic contemplation; for the others it remained a 'sphere of production', a workplace and collection of resources, or else a backdrop for socialising and boisterous recreation (Frykman and Lofgren 1987: 43f., 72–74). 'We regard as coarse and low' wrote Kant (quoted in Bourdieu 1984: 498), 'the habits of thought of those who have no feeling for beautiful nature'. This dichotomy persists in the opposition between recreation and work which Richard White (1995) sees as structuring both environmentalist and anti-environmentalist discourses about nature. In both accounts, the dispositions that direct people's perceptions and evaluations of the natural environment are conditioned by whether their direct involvement with it consists primarily of extractive/productive work or of contemplation.

Relevant cultural divisions do not, however, exist only between the middle and working classes, but within the middle class as well. Bourdieu identifies the middle class as the 'dominant' class in modern societies by virtue of its possession of economic and cultural capital.⁵ The 'dominant class' can itself

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be divided into 'dominant' fractions (including elite professionals rich in both economic and cultural capital, and economically – if not culturally – rich business people) and a 'dominated' fraction consisting of culturally – if not economically – rich artists and intellectuals (including natural scientists in fields remote from commercial application). Each middle class fraction has distinctive material and ideal interests, style and ethos. The tastes and cultural attitudes of economic elites sometimes resemble those of workers more than those of artists and intellectuals.⁶ This holds as well for environmental attitudes, which may vary more among middle class fractions than between classes (see e.g. Milbrath 1984; Brint 1994: 88–95; cf. Skogen 1996).

According to Bourdieu (1984: 487), the 'Kantian' aesthetic of disinterested interest expresses 'in rationalised form, the ethos of the dominated fraction of the dominant class'. Intellectuals' culture is distinguished from 'bourgeois' culture by a selective appropriation and exaggeration of formalist elements that distinguish the latter from workers' taste. Among those upper and middle class fractions most invested in economic capital, these formalist cultural values may take a back seat to the manifestation of wealth as a source of honour and prestige in cultural choices. For those most invested in cultural capital, by contrast, honour derives mainly from cultural, intellectual and moral excellence, with all the more claim on legitimacy by virtue of its distance from and opposition to bourgeois material interests. This gives rise to a distinctive tenor of cultural elitism combined with economic anti-elitism – a taste, for example, for 'high-brow', avant-garde and 'alternative' culture that does not 'sell out' and a disdain for both the 'conspicuous consumption' of the vulgar rich and the 'tacky' enjoyments of the vulgar masses (Bourdieu 1984: 283–95).

We find this tension at work in environmentalist discourses associated with nature connoisseurship. Three examples are furnished by controversies over environmental economics, domestic landscaping and old-growth logging, respectively. Critics of market-based environmental decision making usually object that market approaches have inegalitarian consequences (inasmuch as individuals' preferences are weighted in proportion to their ability to pay), but some (e.g. Sagoff 1981), also complain that by responding indiscriminately to consumer preferences (rather than environmental ethics) these approaches would produce only ugliness and vulgarity under conditions of mass affluence. Proponents of naturalistic landscaping attack the fashion for groomed, monoculture lawn variously as a form of conspicuous consumption, as an emulation of the gentry, and as something foisted on the public by a greedy lawn-care industry: that is, as something that manifests or symbolises the dominance of economic capital. At the same time, however, it is also attacked as a mindless conformism bravely resisted by people whose superior ecological acumen, aesthetic autonomy and ethical integrity distinguish them from their less enlightened neighbours (Greenbaum 2000). Finally, Satterfield (2002: 65–70) reports how, in the Oregon forestry controversy, environmentalists discursively constructed

a solidarity with loggers on the basis of a shared victimisation by 'big money interests', while contrasting their own scientific and socio-political sophistication and agency with the loggers' 'ignorance' and manipulability.

6. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT.

Inasmuch as the argument of this paper has been sociological and cultural, not philosophical or ecological, it has no direct bearing on the *merits* of any particular normative, natural-scientific or cosmological theory about environmental values. Rather, it aims to shed light on *one* source of the intuitions on which various theories rest or which motivate environmental ethics theorising. The need to articulate an environmental ethic starts with the need to articulate the rationale for a system of practices and judgements (e.g. biological conservation, wilderness preservation, ecological restoration) that themselves are embedded in and express aspects of a form of life, even if they set themselves against the prevailing practices and judgements in the society in which that form of life has evolved. Although this paper aspires to contribute to the discussion of the 'social construction' (or sociogenesis) of *ideas* and *attitudes* regarding nature (such as those about intrinsic values) no conclusions regarding the ontological status of the *objects* of those ideas and attitudes follow from my remarks here. In particular, I have not intended to intervene on behalf of the controversially relativistic thesis that nature itself is a 'mere' social construction (Crist 2004; Soulé and Lease 1995; Braun and Castree 1998).

That said, the analysis developed here does, I think, have some implications for environmental thought. In the space remaining, I draw attention to two such implications at odds with some commonplaces of environmentalist theorising. The first relates to ideas about nature versus culture, the second to ideas about 'modernity' and 'the West'.

The first ironic upshot of this analysis is that nature connoisseurship may be understood as a form of cultural transcendence of nature. My analysis here runs counter to those which would frame ecological struggles (insofar as these have anything to do with nature protection) in terms of a Critical Theory derived diagnosis of a connection between the domination of 'inner' or human nature and that of 'outer nature' (Leiss 1974; Eckersley 1992: 97–116). The valuing of nature 'for its own sake' – like that of 'art for art's sake' – expresses an ascetic aesthetic of renunciation, a supremely cultural accomplishment associated with those social locations most invested in culture and least involved in the material metabolism of society. As Bourdieu (1984: 491) points out, the Kantian opposition between the pure, refined, ascetic pleasures of the connoisseur, and the sensual or mercenary pleasures and practical, mundane, utilitarian preferences of the uncultured, correspond to an opposition between culture and nature,

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between spirit and body, between freedom from and bondage to mere appetite; it implies the ethical superiority – and hence legitimates the social superiority – of the those associated with the former term in each of those pairs. The appreciation of nature no less than the appreciation of art partakes of the humanisation of humanity through the transcendence of nature by culture. In particular, the kind of relationship to nature that is condemned as merely ‘instrumental’, ‘utilitarian’, ‘anthropocentric’, ‘resourceist’ and so on is precisely a ‘natural’ relationship in which nature is consumed by the body, made to produce what can be consumed by the body, or transformed so as to be made safer and more comfortable to the body.

Much has been written about the propagation by the Romantics of a taste for ‘sublime’ inhospitable landscapes over habitable, productive ones, a taste at first widely viewed as perverse (Nicholson 1959; Pace 1979). Fewer have noted that it is ‘only natural’ for an organism to prefer an environment that provides a safe, comfortable, resource-rich habitat for its kind (Heerwagen and Orians 1993), and hence that for a human to visit or admire other kinds of habitats (indeed, almost all wild ones) involves an ‘ascetic’ reversal of that ‘inner nature’. This is not to deny the abundant sensual delights of the wild. Yet acquired ecological taste must distinguish between sensual pleasures that are fitting (hence doubly enjoyable at both purely sensual and aesthetic-intellectual levels), and those (like a groomed picnic area or swimming pool in a wilderness reserve) that are artificial and merely ‘agreeable’, hence out of place, defiling and disgusting.

The love of nature does not appear as a fruit of artificial discipline from within the system of conditionings which gives rise to it. Quite the contrary. The taste for wild nature is an accomplishment, but, as an accomplishment of the habitus it is ‘second nature’ and perceived as natural. Indeed, the freedom of wild nature from human domination is a natural symbol of the freedom from natural and social constraint, from venality and artificiality, that characterises the ethos of the ‘dominated fraction of the dominant class’. Perhaps this ethos expresses a system of dispositions adjusted to a form of life where liberality and curiosity are more estimable than orderliness because it is oriented to an output for which novelty and complexity more than reliability and standardisation are the criteria.⁷ It is thus ‘natural’ for those of us who exist within this form of life to experience a resonance between the liberation of the self and the ‘liberation of nature’.

This brings us to the second irony, concerning the cultural matrix of this peculiar form of life. Kellert (1984a, 1993, 1995) concludes from his cross-national research attitudes to animals and nature that while some affiliation with the non-human is indeed universal, ‘biophilia’ as understood by E. O. Wilson and others – a broad, disinterested valuing of all life-forms and life-processes just because they are alive – is not; it is, rather, a minority view most frequently encountered among well educated Europeans and Euro-Americans (the very sorts of people who defined the concept in the first place). This is not to say that ‘environmental

concern' is highest among well educated, middle class Westerners. There is reason to think that quite the contrary is true. It does suggest, however, that as one particular source of environmental concern, disinterested (nonanthropocentric) biophilia is a distinctive product of modern Western culture.

This is ironic, because in much environmental thought and rhetoric it has long been commonplace to characterise nonanthropocentrism as a radical antithesis to an unsurpassably anthropocentric and instrumentalist modern Western paradigm. We have often been told that the current environmental crisis demands that the West overturn aspects of its attitude toward the nonhuman and to resacralise its relationship with nature – a process in which modern Westerners are said to have much to learn from premodern and non-Western cultures (Murphy 2003).⁸ Yet, as Kay Milton (1999) has argued, 'nature is already sacred' in Western culture, and its distinctive mode of sacredness is related to what I have been calling 'nature connoisseurship'. Indeed, it is precisely because nature is sacred in modern Western culture that bearers of modern Western 'high culture' have been especially appalled at the consequences of modern technological and economic dynamics for wild biodiversity, and have in some cases set themselves (at least rhetorically) against Western modernity.

NOTES

¹ Marietta (1982) recounts finding the Florida Everglades disappointingly dull until he learned more about their ecology, whereupon he found this landscape fascinating.

² For example, Kellert (1984a,b) found that rural children had more knowledge of and interest in animals than urban children; he found rural people scored higher on measures of utilitarian and dominionistic values regarding animals and lower on ecologicistic and scientific values than did urbanites.

³ Consider, for example, the reaction of an Ontario logging contractor I interviewed in the mid-1990s to the establishment of a nature reserve where logging would be excluded:

I don't know of anybody who would be crazy enough to walk way back there....I don't know what the Ministry had in mind when they did come up with the Master Plan with these areas, but I would say that if you're going to take some for the public, have it so it's easy access.... And only one person out of ten would really enjoy just going looking at trees.

This subject would not venture an opinion, even a derogatory one, concerning the formalist or inherentist values that motivated the policy of representing the full compliment of the region's ecological site-types in a system of reserves. He 'does not know' what the planners had in mind – the decision is as inscrutable as it is perverse. (Data collected in connection with the project 'Mapping Environmental Values' funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council; Professor Wesley Cragg, York University, Toronto, principal investigator. The quote is taken from interview transcript APFI2: pp. 4–5.)

⁴ Environmental activists (aside from those concerned with local health threats), like those in other 'new social movements', are drawn disproportionately from the 'new middle

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class'; but surveys of public attitudes typically find levels 'environmental concern' only weakly related to occupation and other socio-demographic variables (Greenbaum 1995). One interpretation is that environmental concerns cut across social strata but that some strata are better equipped and disposed for activism (Bagguley 1992); another is that 'environmental protection' is a 'synthetic macrocategory', meaning different things and supported for different reasons by different kinds of people (Ungar 1994).

⁵ Bourdieu's earlier explorations of this topic emphasised the interconvertibility of different kinds of capital and thus the role of cultural capital in the reproduction of social inequalities. Critics have suggested that the association between high culture competence and high socio-economic status described by Bourdieu is distinctive to the mid-twentieth century French society he observed and does not hold for contemporary North America (Lamont 1992; Erickson 1991, 1996), and that it was not even entirely accurate for France (Halle 1993: 9–10). These objections apply less to his subsequent work, which emphasised the field-specific nature of different kinds of capital – e.g. the specific prestige of works within fields of 'high' or avant-guard culture which are inversely related to commercial success (Bourdieu 1993: 37–61) – and decomposition of upper and middle classes into fractions possessed of varying proportions of different kinds of capital. Besides, as Holt (1998) demonstrates, class differences show up not so much in *what* kinds of cultural objects people know, like or consume, as in *how* they think and talk about these objects; consistent with Bourdieu's analysis, middle class subjects were more likely to discuss objects in terms of formal attributes or abstract categories than workers were.

⁶ French research from the 1960s reported by Bourdieu (1984: 35–47), found that individuals with higher levels of formal education were more likely to hold that subject matter (such as a snake or tree bark) not conventionally pretty might make for an interesting or beautiful photograph. In the case of the snake, the education effect was particularly marked among those of high socio-economic status, illustrating the bifurcation of upper/middle class culture along fractional lines. Here, the responses of less educated elites were even further from those of highly educated elites than workers' were. This pattern was replicated in more recent North American research, which found that 'in the realm of artistic choices, the most apparent differences are not between what can be called a dominant class and a dominated class, but between one section of the dominant class and everyone else' (Halle 1993: 196; see also 1992). Although business owners and manual workers are poles apart on attitudes to do with economic distribution and power (Wright 1985, 1989), 'social and cultural specialists' (i.e. the most culturally-invested middle class fraction) stand apart from both workers and other middle class groupings in terms of environmental, cultural and moral attitudes (Brint 1994: 85–103).

⁷ This is consistent with the empirical findings of Melvin Kohn and his colleagues on occupational self-direction and middle class liberalism (Kohn and Schooler 1983; Kohn et al. 1986; Spenner 1998).

⁸ Ironically, this creates pitfalls for Western nature intellectuals in actually learning from and about non-Western cultures. There is a danger of projecting onto non-Western peoples what are distinctively modern Western (albeit counterparadigmatic) notions, while misrepresenting and marginalising their actual views and environmental concerns (Taylor 1995; Lohmann 1995: 125–6; Paper 2000: 116).

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