

Book Review

Encountering Nature:

Toward an Environmental Culture

By Heyd, Thomas

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England and Burlington, VT (2007).

Thomas Heyd wants “to reflect on the cultural dimensions of our relationship with nature.” (P. 1). Further, he believes that ethics, aesthetics and culture in general can and should play a positive role in human interactions with nature. He claims that this shift in interaction is desperately needed because of the current degradation and destruction of the environment, the trends that are creating further crises, and the mismatch between the environment/nature and our culture(s), i.e., industrialized societies.

As I read, I was reminded of my boyhood some sixty and more years ago, when I went fishing nearly every day during the summers at a neighbouring pond. Two local industries began dumping their chemical waste products while the local city officials decided to deposit raw sewage directly into the pond. Daily I saw exactly what was taking place, and I cried, and then cried out. My parents, neighbours, schoolteachers, and everyone else I talked with were all powerless to intervene, even though I made sure that they too saw what was happening. The frustration of my situation back then was and is, I am certain, echoed around the world for all of us these days. What to do about environmental damage created by our industrial society is precisely what Heyd discusses in his series of essays, edited for this book.

His thesis is that we need a new environmental ethics, based on adapting existing morality to a more astute environmentally aware morality. However, we have way too many people alienated from nature because they have had virtually no direct personal experiences with the natural environment. Other obstacles in addition to isolation from nature are an adversarial to nature attitude and behavioural pattern, values held by many people for profit at any price, naked self-interest, and rule by corporate capitalism. The quest for Heyd is to try to broaden the existing value set around the globe to become more benign to and in a more positive relationship with, the natural world.

The author advocates direct, emotionally engaging, experience in natural environments as one tactic. He views science as better able than belief to understand and to generate useful predictions. In addition, he would like to see greater recognition of nature as autonomous, as nature is not just there to be used and discarded.

Additional approaches are several. Because half one's waking time is spent in workplaces, and because “many, if not most, of today's environmental problems are attributable to activities in, or directed from, the work place, especially those run by large, corporate business” (p. 51) people ranging from the self employed, managers and CEO's, union members, investors and professionals all could choose to take on responsibility to act or continue to neglect the environment. Opportunities are available.

Latin America serves as another significant case or example, given endemic widespread exploitation, expropriation of land, global market forces tearing apart traditional rural communities, industrialization without any safeguards, and urbanization without planning. The resulting degradation of the environment by the rich and the corporations is similarly reflected in India, the North, among Afro Americans, and for Hispanics. To counter these destructive forces, the importance of local knowledge of plants, animals and ecosystems (ethnoecology) has increased, along with greater attention to social ecology and liberation or restorative ecology, an ethos of care in which humans and environments are equals. Emerging strategies do appear and can serve others in the fight to avoid destruction of the environment.

Art and a broad range of aesthetic endeavours offer still another approach to enhance awareness and valuing of environments. The breaking of rigid cultural categories and beliefs that depict nature as something to be used and discarded through verbal and non-verbal stories, modern and unusual forms of art such as “rock art”, poetry, dance, wandering, reclamation art, earthworks, and others offer viewers and participants emotionally charged links to greater understanding and appreciation of environments and contexts. What Heyd seeks for us is “a culture of nature (that) may help bring about, and help us perceive, natural qualities that might not flourish, or be evident, otherwise.” (P. 132).

In the Afterword, Heyd calls for more research and information from science, an ecological consciousness that leads people to be willing to act, and most importantly, the capacity to act. This latter quality requires both problem specific institutions, such as movements for recycling, bicycle paths, farmers markets, and general enabling institutions that encourage people to act at the community, regional and society wide levels. These general enabling institutions need to be set up and used so as to alter the present situation for all of us.

Given my experiences more than a half century ago, Heyd is on the right track, but at least from my perspective, sadly may well be too late to prevent die-off (www.dieoff.com). Science certainly does beat superstition, however, most of our educational efforts fail to address or result in genuine scientific understanding. Corporate capitalism and implementation of high technology

without regard for consequences are both out of control. The military-industrial complex has relegated the environment and nature to oblivion in their mad pursuit of profits.

In summary, the author states in his final paragraph that his “aim in this book has been to weave together a tapestry of research questions and methods in the hope of encouraging readers to think, feel and live afresh our relationship with the non-human natural environment.” (p. 186). In this goal, I believe Heyd has succeeded. I recommend his book for philosophers, naturalists, environmentalists, artists, and activists, as well as for those who could, like CEO’s of business, industry, and military establishments, choose to make a positive difference.

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