

The Toxicity of Environmentalism

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Recently a popular imported mineral water was removed from the market because tests showed that samples of it contained thirty-five parts per billion of benzene. Although this was an amount so small that only fifteen years ago it would have been impossible even to detect, it was assumed that considerations of public health required withdrawal of the product.

Such a case, of course, is not unusual nowadays. The presence of parts per billion of a toxic substance is routinely extrapolated into being regarded as a cause of human deaths. And whenever the number of projected deaths exceeds one in a million (or less), environmentalists demand that the government remove the offending pesticide, preservative, or other alleged bearer of toxic pollution from the market. They do so, even though a level of risk of one in a million is one-third as great as that of an airplane falling from the sky on one's home.

While it is not necessary to question the good intentions and sincerity of the overwhelming majority of the members of the environmental or ecology movement, it is vital that the public realize that *in this seemingly lofty and noble movement itself can be found more than a little evidence of the most profound toxicity*. Consider, for example, the following quotation from David M. Graber, a research biologist with the National Park Service, in his prominently featured *Los Angeles Times* book review of Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*:

This [man's "remaking the earth by degrees"] makes what is happening no less tragic for those of us who value wildness for its own sake, not for what value it confers upon mankind. I, for one, cannot wish upon either my children or the rest of Earth's biota a tame planet, be it monstrous or—however unlikely—benign. McKibben is a biocentrist, and so am I. We are not interested in the utility of a particular species or free-flowing river, or ecosystem, to mankind. They have intrinsic value, more value—to me—than another human body, or a billion of them.

Human happiness, and certainly human fecundity, are not as important as a wild and healthy planet. I know social scientists who remind me that people are part of nature, but it isn't true. Somewhere along the line—at about a billion years ago, maybe half that—we quit the contract and became a cancer. We have become a plague upon ourselves and upon the Earth.

It is cosmically unlikely that the developed world will choose to end its orgy of fossil-energy consumption, and the Third World its suicidal con-

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sumption of landscape. Until such time as *Homo sapiens* should decide to rejoin nature, some of us can only hope for the right virus to come along.

While Mr. Graber openly wishes for the death of a billion people, Mr. McKibben, the author he reviewed, quotes with approval John Muir's benediction to alligators, describing it as a "good epigram" for his own, "humble approach": "Honorable representatives of the great saurians of older creation, may you long enjoy your lilies and rushes, and be blessed now and then with a mouthful of terror-stricken man by way of a dainty!"

Such statements represent pure, unadulterated poison. They express ideas and wishes which, if acted upon, would mean terror and death for enormous numbers of human beings.

These statements, and others like them, are made by prominent members of the environmental movement. The significance of such statements cannot be diminished by ascribing them only to a small fringe of the environmental movement. Indeed, even if such views were indicative of the thinking only of 5 or 10 percent of the members of the environmental movement—the "deep ecology," Earth First! wing—they would represent toxicity in the environmental movement as a whole not at the level of parts per billion or even parts per million, but at the level of *parts per hundred*, which, of course, is an enormously higher level of toxicity than is deemed to constitute a danger to human life in virtually every other case in which deadly poison is present.

But the toxicity level of the environmental movement as a whole is substantially greater even than parts per hundred. It is certainly at least at the level of *several parts per ten*. This is obvious from the fact that the mainstream of the environmental movement makes no fundamental or significant criticisms of the likes of Messrs. Graber and McKibben. Indeed, John Muir, whose wish for alligators to "be blessed now and then with a mouthful of terror-stricken man by way of a dainty" McKibben approvingly quotes, was *the founder of the Sierra Club*, which is proud to acknowledge that fact. The Sierra Club, of course, is the leading environmental organization and is supposedly the most respectable of them.

There is something much more important than the Sierra Club's genealogy, however—something which provides an explanation in terms of *basic principle* of why the mainstream of the ecology movement does not attack what might be thought to be merely its fringe. This is a fundamental philosophical premise which the mainstream of the movement shares with the alleged fringe and which logically implies hatred for man and his achievements. Namely, the premise that *nature possesses intrinsic value*—i.e., that nature is valuable in and of itself, apart from all contribution to human life and well-being.

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The antihuman premise of nature's intrinsic value goes back, in the Western world, as far as St. Francis of Assisi, who believed in the equality of all living creatures: man, cattle, birds, fish, and reptiles. Indeed, precisely on the basis of this philosophical affinity, and at the wish of the mainstream of the ecology movement, St. Francis of Assisi has been officially declared the patron saint of ecology by the Roman Catholic Church.

The premise of nature's intrinsic value extends to an alleged intrinsic value of forests, rivers, canyons, and hillsides—to everything and anything that is not man. Its influence is present in the Congress of the United States, in such statements as that recently made by Representative Morris Udall of Arizona that a frozen, barren desert in Northern Alaska, where substantial oil deposits appear to exist, is “a sacred place” that should never be given over to oil rigs and pipelines. It is present in the supporting statement of a representative of the Wilderness Society that “There is a need to protect the land not just for wildlife and human recreation, but just to have it there.” It has, of course, also been present in the sacrifice of the interests of human beings for the sake of snail darters and spotted owls.

The idea of nature's intrinsic value inexorably implies a desire to destroy man and his works because it implies a perception of man *as the systematic destroyer of the good, and thus as the systematic doer of evil*. Just as man perceives coyotes, wolves, and rattlesnakes as evil because they regularly destroy the cattle and sheep he values as sources of food and clothing, so on the premise of nature's intrinsic value, the environmentalists view man as evil, because, in the pursuit of his well-being, man systematically destroys the wildlife, jungles, and rock formations that the environmentalists hold to be intrinsically valuable. Indeed, from the perspective of such alleged intrinsic values of nature, the degree of man's alleged destructiveness and evil is directly in proportion to his loyalty to his essential nature. Man is the rational being. It is his application of his reason in the form of science, technology, and an industrial civilization that enables him to act on nature on the enormous scale on which he now does. Thus, it is his possession and use of reason—manifested in his technology and industry—for which he is hated.

The doctrine of intrinsic value is itself only a rationalization for a preexisting hatred of man. It is invoked not because one attaches any actual value to what is alleged to have intrinsic value, but simply to serve as a pretext for denying values to man. For example, caribou feed upon vegetation, wolves eat caribou, and microbes attack wolves. Each of these, the vegetation, the caribou, the wolves, and the microbes, is alleged by the environmentalists to possess intrinsic value. Yet absolutely no course of action is indicated for man. Should man act to protect the intrinsic value of the vegetation from destruction by the caribou? Should he act to protect the intrinsic value of the caribou from destruction by the wolves? Should he act to protect the intrinsic