

Spring 2009

ESS 102 – Humans and the Environment - "Reflecting on the Value of Nature"

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Recommended Citation

Lutz, T. (2009). ESS 102 – Humans and the Environment - "Reflecting on the Value of Nature". Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/gna_curr_series/2

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Reflecting on the value of nature

Most of this course has been about reconnecting to nature. The rapid increase in fossil-fuel powered technology after the Industrial Revolution separated most people from regular experience of the natural world. As a result, people no longer realize how dependent they are on natural resources and how ignorant they are of their place in nature. We found that we need to be taught the energy- and chemical-intensive means by which our food originates; we need to be told what and how much to eat. We don't realize when the scale of our energy and chemical consumption cause earth's systems to go out of balance, causing climate change, mass extinctions, and pollution; we need scientists to tell us.

The preceding paragraph refers to two values of nature: utilitarian value, which relates to the material benefits that natural systems provide; and scientific-ecologicistic value, which relates to the benefits that come from knowledge of how natural systems work.

Stephen Kellert, in the Forestry School at Yale University, developed a typology of natural values to investigate how people with different nationalities, experiences, jobs, educational levels, and ages respond to nature. His results suggest that there are differences related to these factors and that, at least in part, the value we put on nature can change through time.

Values are important because valuation of the natural environment motivates us to take scientific knowledge seriously and to act. It's been said, "We manage what we measure," but we could add, "We measure what we value."

If values are informed by experience, then values of nature are built by experience of nature. But for most of us, the human-built world dominates experience. Most of us rarely get the chance to see, hear, smell, touch, taste – and therefore think about— what is natural and what natural processes give us. It's not surprising that few of us care how little we understand nature, even though it's the basis for our life.

The Gordon Natural Area (GNA) is a place where each of us can begin to construct a more complete idea of nature and what it provides. We'll do this by reflecting on what we experience and by making connections to the items in Kellert's typology. Psychological research suggests that people need to spend at least 15 minutes in nature before their senses recover from the human-built environment. Begin by reading the poem as we stand in the woods; what values do you find there?

Unfortunate Location

by Louis Jenkins

In the front yard there are three big white pines, older than anything in the neighborhood except the stones. Magnificent trees that toss their heads in the wind like the spirited black horses of a troika. It's hard to know what to do, tall dark trees on the south side of the house, an unfortunate location, blocking the winter sun. Dark and damp. Moss grows on the roof, the porch timbers rot and surely the roots have

reached the old bluestone foundation. At night, in the wind, a tree could stumble and fall killing us in our beds. The needles fall year after year making an acid soil where no grass grows. We rake the fallen debris, nothing to be done, we stand around with sticks in our hands. Wonderful trees.

"Unfortunate Location" by Louis Jenkins, from *All Tangled Up with the Living*. © Nineties Press, 1991.

Kellert's typology

(Excluding utilitarian and scientific-ecologicistic)

Write about the values that you are thinking about as we walk:

Aesthetic— the value of emotions, such as pleasure or awe, evoked by the splendor or beauty of the natural world.

Dominionistic— the value of mastering, suppressing or controlling nature, sometimes carried to excess.

Humanistic— the value of the emotional attachment, intimacy, bonding, and companionship with animals or landscapes.

Moralistic— the value of an ethic that seeks to minimize harm to natural things and to creatures viewed as fundamentally like ourselves because of an underlying kinship.

Naturalistic— the value of the satisfaction people obtain from the direct experience of nature and wildlife.

Negativistic— the value of fear, aversion, and dislike evoked by nature, extending in the extreme case to excessive, irrational, or cruel behavior.

Symbolic— the value of nature for communicating ideas and emotions through stories, myths, and metaphors.

Write reflections on values of nature: