

Aesthetics in Practice: Valuing the Natural World

Emily Brady, Philosophy Department, Brooklyn College,
City University of New York, 2900 Bedford Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11215,
ebrady@brooklyn.cuny.edu; April 2005

1. Introduction

I have titled this presentation ‘Aesthetics in Practice’ to convey how deeply aesthetic value permeates human practice, from engagement with everyday environments, to enjoying wild places, to making moral choices, to scientific study of nature. The aesthetic is not reserved for the art museum, concert hall or scenic viewpoint. While a distinctive kind of valuing, it is not separate or cut off but rather integrated into the relationships we develop with the natural world through a variety of human activities.

Although I won’t spend time here discussing it, I should mention that a theoretical basis for this aesthetic approach may be found in John Dewey’s aesthetics. True to pragmatic ideals, the aesthetic is continuous with practical and intellectual experience. Dewey was critical of the elitism of aesthetic theories which raised the aesthetic out of the vital stream of human experience.¹ Put simply, he replaced an aesthetics of the rarified with an aesthetics of the everyday.

To show why I believe aesthetic value of nature to be important to debates about environmental protection, I outline how aesthetic valuing is involved or embedded in our relationships with nature. I point to the possible ways aesthetic value supports moral value, and then consider how some ecological values are underpinned by aesthetic qualities such as variety, diversity and harmony. In the last part of my talk, I examine aesthetic value as instrumental in so far as it contributes to the restorative benefits of spending time in natural places. But at the risk of glossing over the importance of aesthetic value in its own right, I

would like to begin by sketching out some of the reasons – misplaced I think – why aesthetics has not been given the attention it deserves in policy debates.

2. The seriousness of aesthetic value

Just as we find that funding for the arts – in the public domain, in schools, etc. – takes the back seat to other kinds of activities, in environmental conservation, although aesthetic value is often mentioned, it is given low priority, and more often scientific considerations on the one hand or economic ones on the other hold the most sway in environmental debates. Why is this? There are at least two interconnected reasons. Aesthetics is the decorative, the icing on the cake, the froth.² It belongs to the realm of human concerns that are attended to only after we have dealt with the fundamental necessities of life – food, shelter, clothing, work. In turn, aesthetic value is often considered less important, even trivial, compared to other more ‘serious’ environmental values.

A second reason is certainly the common sense view that ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’. Although the philosopher David Hume once held such a position, this remains a highly contentious view in philosophical aesthetics. Much critical work on aesthetic judgment attempts to show the objectivity or intersubjectivity of our aesthetic judgments. This kind of argument is especially important in environmental aesthetics; if it can be shown that aesthetic value is objective, then this type of value is more likely to be given a voice in environmental debates. It is the perception of aesthetic value as subjective preference that has led to its weak voice in these debates. Values which are underpinned by scientific or quantitative support, values which are assumed to be objective, are more commonly taken seriously. An unfortunate result of identifying aesthetic judgments with subjective preferences is that, for example, a community’s aesthetic experience of an urban green space will be left out of the equation.

Instead, that which is more easily measurable, such as the economic or housing benefits of that space, will figure.

In keeping with the aims of this presentation, which are broad, I cannot enter into the complex arguments against the subjectivity of aesthetic value. I have argued elsewhere that aesthetic judgments have an intersubjective grounding, and that through aesthetic communication, we share aesthetic experiences, sort out reasons for disagreement and may arrive at agreement in aesthetic matters, even if disputes remain.³ Allen Carlson has argued more strongly for aesthetic objectivity in the environmental context by grounding aesthetic judgments through scientific cognitivism, where appropriate or correct aesthetic judgments are grounded in scientific knowledge.⁴ Outside environmental aesthetics, others have argued for aesthetic objectivism through different kinds of realism.⁵ So, there are many strong theoretical arguments against the common sense view that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

I do not underestimate the difficult battles fought to protect the environment from harm and development, and I am not suggesting that aesthetic value have priority over other values. My plea here is simply that through a critical understanding of aesthetic value we may better grasp why it deserves serious treatment in environmental policy debates.

3. Aesthetics and ethics

A different strategy for showing how central aesthetic valuing is to environmental concern is to show ways that it supports or informs other environmental values – values that are taken more seriously in policy debates. Several environmental philosophers have suggested that developing a relationship with nature through aesthetic experiences – that is, first hand, multi-sensory, emotional and imaginative engagement – can encourage or contribute to a moral attitude toward nature.⁶ In his ‘Land Ethic’, Aldo Leopold encourages us to develop our

aesthetic sensibility in order to judge what is 'esthetically right'.⁷ These writers recognize how basic the aesthetic response is to valuing nature, and they seek to build upon a foundation that is also fairly democratic in terms of the range of people and communities who may have aesthetic access to natural environments, whether that is wild nature or the modified environments of urban parks and gardens. They recognize that aesthetic experience is first-hand and immediate, sometimes the most visceral, felt experience we can have of nature, and in that sense it can be very penetrating, have a strong impact and just *stay with us*.

Care is needed though in how far one takes this suggestion. There is no necessary connection between positive aesthetic valuing of nature and ethical treatment of environments. However, there is at least intuitive strength in the idea. At least in cases of environments one knows and loves, or natural places one visits over and over again, one is more likely to treat them with respect, for aesthetic and other reasons (for example if a mountain is enjoyed not just for its sublimity but also for its recreational opportunities). The saying, 'Not in My Backyard' speaks volumes here in so far as it pins down our tendency to protect the environments we cherish because they are in fact our backyards – or places close to our backyards. But this also points to some of the problems in aesthetics underpinning an environmental ethic. If the most reliable connection between 'beauty and duty', as Holmes Rolston has put it,⁸ is going to be generated by relationships between humans and cherished environments, what happens to those places that are strange, unfamiliar, and ugly? How will valuing based in aesthetic experience motivate care and respect towards environments with which we have not developed relationships?

It's not clear that it can, if what is important is the first-hand immediacy and impact of aesthetic qualities on us - rolling countryside, meadows of wildflowers, blue green mountains, fragrant pine forests or the invigorating, crashing surf of the ocean – or frequency of such

encounters, is what engenders significant relationships. Can we develop a caring attitude toward so-called ‘unscenic nature’, toward things we find just ugly, even if we know we ought to know better. Marshes and bogs are not obviously attractive places, yet a more intimate encounter with them reveals aesthetic as well as ecological interest.

One answer to these questions is that we can aesthetically value things with which we have not developed a close relationship. I’ve never visited the Sistine Chapel or the Grand Canyon, but I have seen pictures of them, and I know there is wide agreement on their beauty and sublimity. But this doesn’t take care of the problem altogether. I’ve picked out very familiar places; the distant and unfamiliar may still be out of aesthetic-moral reach. Also, what about environments for one reason or another unavailable to the senses, or perhaps even more difficult: environments which have given people very bad experiences? The answer overall is probably that we need to go beyond aesthetic experience to extend our understanding and grasp of environments we wish to protect. This may involve ecological education, as Leopold urged, or simply going beyond caring relationships and toward some other kind of environmental ethic.

One final worry about grounding ethics in aesthetics is the fact that moral and aesthetic values often conflict. What we find beautiful in nature may actually be harmful in some way, although I use the concept of ‘harm’ very loosely here. For example, there are numerous cases of very beautiful non-native species crowding out, damaging or even causing the extinction of other species.⁹ However, many environmental values conflict, and in this type of problem, one has to examine each case carefully to determine a solution. That the conflict exists does not mean that aesthetic value cannot support moral valuing of nature in other cases. Also, there are many cases of environmental degradation that coincide with aesthetic disvalue. The expansive, bland fields of industrial agriculture are produced with harmful fertilizers and pesticides and

cause severe erosion among other problems. The decrease of animal populations from destruction of habitat, especially birdlife, means that a key element in the aesthetic appeal of such landscapes is lost – the presence of birds and the rich soundscape of birdsong.

Let me conclude this part of my talk on a high note in favour of the close relationship between aesthetics and ethics. I have shown that the connection is there, if not always stable or reliable. It is one to be encouraged and - although this is highly speculative - the more direct experience of nature the more likely one is able to develop feelings of care toward it, even if that means making the effort to get past prejudices and ignorance.¹⁰ This is presumably an underlying assumption of environmental education programs. But in addition to this, there is a history of arguments within philosophy which hold that ‘aesthetics is the mother of ethics’.¹¹ Indeed, this is undoubtedly the source of positions which seek to ground an environmental ethic in aesthetic sensibility. The idea is that various capacities that help in the development of moral character and in making skilled moral decisions are capacities practiced in a focused and deep way through aesthetic engagement. These include capacities such as perceptual sensitivity, imaginative freedom, creativity and emotional expression. For example, a well developed imagination may better enable one to empathize with another being, and so motivate moral action. This line of thought is promising for supporting the aesthetic-moral connection, even if it has to be kept in mind that aesthetically sensitive beings are not always morally sensitive.

4. Aesthetic values and science

Another way aesthetic values permeate practice is found in the use of various aesthetic concepts in the sciences and mathematics. Sometimes these are obviously aesthetic, when a proof or theory is described as beautiful. More often they are concepts that have a dominant aesthetic meaning and use but have been used in various non-aesthetic contexts so that their

connection to the aesthetic has become more distant. The most obvious examples of these concepts are harmony, integrity, coherence, variety and diversity. Harmony and especially integrity are used to describe ecosystems that are sound or in a good condition. These concepts are key to definitions of beauty in classical and medieval philosophy, being connected to qualities such as order, balance and symmetry. More recently, when Aldo Leopold said that, ‘A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, wrong when it tends otherwise’, he may well have intended for the concepts to have entailed each other rather than to be sharply distinguished.¹²

Variety and diversity are central concepts to understanding biodiversity, which very generally refers to the number, variety and variability of living things. Biodiversity is desirable for healthy ecosystems and more diverse species often contribute to the aesthetic appeal of an environment. But I am trying to get deeper here, to understand how biodiversity as a scientific concept entails the aesthetic concepts of diversity and variety. Diversity and variety are commonly contrasted with monotony, dullness and lack of interest. Variety and intricacy are central qualities of the 18th century aesthetic theory and landscape taste of the picturesque, where garden design and scenery were valued for a diversity of elements and variety of forms and colours.¹³ There is also psychological evidence for preferences for variety and richness alongside coherence in landscape elements.¹⁴ Some studies in evolutionary psychology show a marked preference for savannahs with trees, and landscapes ‘with water; a variety of open and wooded space...trees that fork near the ground...vistas that recede in the distance, including path or river that bends out of view but invites exploration...and variegated cloud patterns.’¹⁵

Finally, one may simply speculate that aesthetic preferences underpin biological theories and arguments. Matthew Chew argues that ‘invasion biologists view alien species, and in particular, successful “invaders” as biological kitsch....ecological nativists employ

aesthetically repugnant and troubling archetypes to reinforce intra-disciplinary cohesion as well as to recruit public support for the anti-alien species project.’¹⁶ Although Kant held that botanists could not aesthetically appreciate plants because their knowledge got in the way, two out of three botanists I have asked deny this and say that their interest in plants was motivated by their beauty.¹⁷ The wonder of the natural world is often cited as a motivation for studying it and protecting it, and ‘wonder’ is certainly a concept with a strong, if not exclusively, aesthetic meaning.

So, it appears that aesthetic concepts find their way into a variety of scientific concepts. This shows how the aesthetic motivates and underlies scientific studies and theories to some extent and shapes some key scientific values, such as biodiversity. In this way, one could argue, the aesthetic is already brought into important environmental values, albeit through the kitchen door.

5. Aesthetics and well-being

Earlier I pointed out that aesthetic value is given low priority in environmental debates at least because it is perceived as a luxury, something we attend to only after vital needs – physiological and social - have been met. Aesthetics is associated with self-fulfilment rather than self-preservation.¹⁸ But what if it can be shown that aesthetic and other experience of the natural environment promotes well-being, that without it we are essentially deprived?

There is a long tradition in literature, poetry and philosophy celebrating the restorative value of nature. The romantic tradition is replete with humanistic reverence for natural beauty and sublimity, and their uplifting effects on human emotions and imagination. These lines from Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ illustrate the healing power of nature:

These beauteous forms,

Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration: -- feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: -- that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on...¹⁹

Thoreau is well known for his reflections – based on first hand experience – of the uplifting qualities of contact with wild nature:

My spirits rise in proportion to the outward dreariness. Give me the ocean, the desert, or the wilderness!...When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most terminable...the most dismal swamp....The wildwood covers the virgin mould and the same spoil is good for men and for trees. A man's health requires as many acres of meadow to his prospect as his farm does loads of muck.²⁰

Wilderness has long been valued as a tranquil haven from the chaos, noise and pollution of the city and a cure for the stresses of modern life. In a new book, *Nature Cure*, British naturalist and conservationist Richard Mabey gives a deeply moving account of his gradual recovery from serious depression through the restorative effects of his explorations and discoveries in rural nature.²¹

Evolutionary and psychological research supports all of these reflections. Edward O. Wilson's 'Biophilia hypothesis', the genetic basis of our need for and affinity with nature, has been used (and misused!) to show the survival benefits of nature.²² Rachel and Stephen

Kaplan's research is the most frequently cited psychological evidence, but there are many studies which show how nature promotes well-being.²³ Some of the most interesting support is found in discussions of people-plant relations. Gardening creates feelings of peacefulness and tranquillity, and various health benefits, while urban community gardens 'promote sociability, reduce vandalism, and generate neighbourhood revitalization'.²⁴ Isis Brook has shown how the 'person-plant-place relationship' develops into a caring attitude towards place, and grounds place-attachment. She says, 'the most powerful way of establishing co-nurturing relationships is by engaging with plants first-hand: planting seeds, nurturing growth, learning about their needs and shaping their and our environment through such interaction'.²⁵

The benefits of wild and cultivated nature for human well-being are clear. Leisure activities such as gardening and just spending time outdoors engage us more intimately, more concretely, with environment, and aesthetic experience lies at the heart of these experiences. Qualities such as tranquillity and beauty are appreciated for themselves but also for their relaxing and emotionally uplifting effects. These are strong reasons to protect both wild and other green spaces, and some conservationists are already using these reasons to argue for new management policies.²⁶ As Brook points out, the relationships we may develop are 'co-nurturing', in other words, as we nurture ourselves we may in turn nurture nature.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, let me just say that I have said little about how aesthetic value might underpin a non-instrumental valuing of nature. In other words, that aesthetic valuing is a route to valuing nature for its own sake rather than any benefits it has for people. This strategy could support a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic. But this is the topic of another paper, so I merely suggest it here as a possible direction.²⁷ I confess also that rather than getting bogged down in

metaphysical debates, I have wanted to show other, more pragmatic avenues for understanding how aesthetic valuing of nature might support environmental protection, namely by pointing out how it is already a given in many other environmental values. If aesthetic value is embedded in the practices I have outlined above – moral, scientific, leisure and otherwise, it has a key place which needs proper recognition. Perhaps in this way the fundamental importance of aesthetic experience will become plain.

Notes

¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Perigee, [1934] 1980), pp. 48-50.

² J. Douglas Porteous, *Environmental Aesthetics: Ideas, politics, planning* (Routledge, 1996), p. 6; Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 225.

³ Brady, 2003, pp. 191-214.

⁴ Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (Routledge, 2000), pp. 54-71.

⁵ For example, see Jerrold Levinson, 'Aesthetic Properties, Evaluative Force and Differences in Sensibility', in Emily Brady and Jerrold Levinson, eds. *Aesthetic Concepts: Essays After Sibley* (Clarendon Press, 2001).

⁶ Holmes Rolston, III, presents the most recent exploration of the problem in, 'From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics' in Arnold Berleant (ed.), *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 127-142. See also: Eugene Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Prentice-Hall, 1989), chap. 6; John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 189; Robert Elliot, *Faking Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1997), chap. 2. Mark Sagoff takes the view that loving care for nature can be developed through aesthetic experience. See 'Has Nature a Good of its Own?' *Hastings Center Report*, 21, 1991, pp. 32-40.

⁷ Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, [1949] 1968), p. 262.

⁸ Rolston, 2002.

⁹ Examples include the brightly coloured *rhododendron ponticum*, which is toxic and creates conditions in which plants cannot survive near it, and attractive ruddy ducks which have cross-bred with the rare white-headed duck in Spain, threatening that species.

¹⁰ Some environmental philosophers have argued that actively engaging in environmental restoration practices can enable an experiential involvement with nature that may actually better enable us to see the harm caused by human activities and restore our relationship with nature. See Andrew Light, 'Restoration or Domination?', in William Throop, ed. *Environmental Restoration: Ethics, Theory, and Practice* (Humanity Books, 2000).

¹¹ Philosophers who have explored this view are numerous. For an excellent discussion see Marcia Eaton, 'Aesthetics: The Mother of Ethics?' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 55:4, 1997, and her *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹² Leopold, p. 224-225.

¹³ Brady, 2003, pp. 39-40. Uvedale Price *On the Picturesque*, ed. T.D. Lauder (Edinburgh: Caldwell, Lloyd and Co., 1842).

¹⁴ Porteous, pp. 132-133.

¹⁵ Denis Dutton, 'Evolutionary Aesthetics' in Jerrold Levinson, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 697. The geographer Jay Appleton supports the biological basis for the human preference in savannahs in *The Experience of Landscape* (New York: Wiley, 1975). This preference is also shown in art in an interesting study by Komar and Melamid, who found a surprising cross-cultural agreement in preferences for scenic paintings with landscape elements of water, trees, domestic and wild animals, and human beings. (See Dutton, p. 698.)

¹⁶ Matthew Chew, 'The (Anti-?) Aesthetics of Invasion Biology', paper presented to International Society for the History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Biology conference, February 2005.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 1790.

¹⁸ See Porteous's discussion of A.H. Maslow's studies, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting The Banks Of The Wye During A Tour' 1798.

²⁰ Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking' [1862] reprinted in Susan J. Armstrong and Richard G. Botzler. Eds. *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), p. 111.

²¹ Richard Mabey, *Nature Cure* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2004).

²² Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Stephen Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, eds. *The Biophilia Hypothesis* (Washington: Island Press, 1995).

²³ For a discussion of these studies, see Porteous, pp. 132-138. See also, Johan Ottosson and Patrik Grahn, 'A Comparison of Leisure Time Spent in a Garden with Leisure Time Spent Indoors: On Measures of Restoration in Residents in Geriatric Care', *Landscape Research*, 30:1, January 2005, pp. 23-55.

²⁴ Porteous, p. 134.

²⁵ Isis Brook, 'Making Here Like There: Place Attachment, Displacement and the Urge to Garden', *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 6:3, 2003, p. 232. See also, D. Relph, ed. *The Role of Horticulture in Human Well-being and Social Development* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1992).

²⁶ See for example the 'Wild Ennerdale' initiative in the English Lake District which seeks to 'join urban need with rural opportunity and articulate the restorative and spiritual qualities of the wild.' (Paul Evans, 'Winds of Change', *The Guardian*, 26th January 2005.)

²⁷ See Brady, 2003.