Conservation Biology

Letter

Metaphor and the Idea of a Dominant Conservation Ethic

In his editorial "The Thoreau Ideal as a Unifying Thread in the Conservation Movement," Matthew Child (2009) suggests that the primary purpose of the conservation movement "has always been to transcend the notion of economic progress." I deeply appreciate and respect Child's effort to challenge the modern division between conservation scientists and conservationists, but I would like to challenge the premise of Child's article. First, there is no one "conservation movement." The environmental ethos that arose out of the Progressive Era was (and still is) shaped by many conservation movements, some of which date back thousands of years. Public response to environmental degradation is not new: ancient Greek and Roman writers repeatedly linked environmental decline to human action (Plato, e.g., associated deforestation with erosion in Attica), and most religious traditions distinguish between desirable and undesirable environmental relations. Second, conservation movements often arise from competing interests regarding economic progress and capitalism. The support of railroad company lobbyists, for example, was critical in establishing U.S. national parks (e.g., Yellowstone, Yosemite, Glacier) and the National Park Service.

Confronting the stagnation of the conservation movement, Child argues for the integration of "conservation morals into a coherent ethic," going so far as to state that "each new conservation graduate should take a Thoreauvian oath, one that binds them to the ethical foundation of conservation biology and codifies the mission principles of the discipline." Child defines this Thoreauvian oath as a universal adherence to "the Thoreauvian mantra 'less is more'" and the "Thoreau ideal of preservation for intrinsic worth and 'human excellence.'" Problematically, Child attributes a unified ethos to Thoreau—an author who often intentionally contradicted himself. Thoreau, who cared deeply about local processes and individual rights, would likely shudder at the idea of a unified global ethic. Perhaps one of the reasons modern conservationists have appeared, in Child's words, "disunited, disorganized, and slightly desperate," is that conservationists repeatedly describe their ethos as the domain of a few deceased white men. Thoreau, Emerson, and Muir are important conservation figures, but they do not stand alone—historical and contemporary social movements have developed in response to ecological crisis in every culture (e.g., Taylor 1995), and non-Western thinkers shaped many of the ideas now understood as fundamental to Western Progressive Era conservationists. Thoreau, for example, drew upon a bookshelf that was international in authorship and scope. In his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau (1849) quotes multiple Hindu texts, and literary scholar Randy Moon (2000) suggests that "Thoreau's entire literary corpus cannot be fully appreciated without realizing the primacy he gave to Native American culture in his own constantly evolving philosophy and critique of the dominant culture."

Child continues, suggesting that the failure of the global conservation movement can be attributed to the reluctance of scientists to cast themselves as "doers" or "practitioners" rather than "thinkers." In this sense, Thoreau becomes an interesting example. It is worth reflecting on Thoreau's modern success as a counterculture writer who has enjoyed long-standing popularity. Why have Thoreau's writings endured? The answer lies as much in Thoreau's writing style as his content. Thoreau was not a disciplinarian: he drew from many types of knowledge, weaving his essays with humor, passion, and self-reflection.

Since the second half of the 20th century, scientists have shied away from "subjective" words such as *ethical*, *moral*, and *beautiful*. Do these words actually represent a threat to scientific objectivity? Is it possible to be a credible, objective scientist and a passionate environmental activist at the same time? In a special series on advocacy, Brussard and Tull (2007) describe four types of "acceptable" advocacy for conservation professionals: professional advocacy, advocacy for science, advocacy for ecosystem services, and advocacy for the natural world. The authors suggest that conservation professionals should be encouraged to contact policy makers, distribute journal articles, develop educational programs, and increase public awareness about the scientific process. Good literature can accomplish all of these aims. Scientists often approach the process of writing as an afterthought or an inefficiency in the experimental process. From a young age, we are taught that there are two types of people: left-brained (rational) and right-brained (creative). Rather than shy away from the literary world, we need to embrace writing as a craft and an art. Thoreau is one of many authors responsible for inspiring generations of conservationists through beautiful prose. I am not arguing that every scientist should also be a writer or

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an activist, but it is hard to argue that the world would be worse off if there were a few more scientists who actively sought to engage public interest in science.

Child's call for a "culture of care" is more compelling than his call for a unified Thoreauvian ethic. As conservation professionals, we strive to foster a culture of care for the human and nonhuman world. In promoting such a revolution, our choice of strategies matters. Professional conservation societies should encourage creative and artistic responses to environmental degradation.

Our metaphors matter. Rather than a Thoreauvian club, perhaps we should strive to be an organic and evolving community.

Laura Martin

Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University, 312 Fernow Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853, U.S.A., email LJM222@cornell.edu

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