

Planet Earth and Eco-Sensitivity

Abstract:

Environmental ethicists have long wrestled with a basic problem: how do you get people to connect with nature while preserving the sustainability of oftentimes fragile ecosystems? As one possible – if only partial – solution to this problem, I believe that the visual imagery provided by filmmakers and photographers allows us to enter into worlds that would have otherwise remained forever foreign. As a prime and relatively recent example of this, the BBC series *Planet Earth* (broadcast in America on the Discovery channel) can serve as a tremendous pedagogical tool – imparting, quite spectacularly, knowledge about even the remotest parts of the world while engendering, I would argue, an eco-sensitivity that would have formerly required direct, first person contact. At a time when the most threatened of our ecosystems and species could largely benefit from a lack of human intrusion, the virtual access provided by films like *Planet Earth* proves invaluable. Our current ecological crisis, rooted as it is in both interference and indifference, can only be mitigated to the extent that we reach a proper balance of *connecting with nature* while simultaneously *letting it be*. As I see it, *Planet Earth* strikes this balance beautifully, thereby reaffirming the long-held (though often enough forgotten) connection between aesthetics and ethics, re-imagined in our modern technological age.

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Paper:

Let me begin with a bit of a confession: I love the television series *Planet Earth*. For the uninitiated, *Planet Earth* is an eleven part nature documentary produced by the BBC which first aired in the United Kingdom in 2006 before airing a year later in America on the Discovery Channel. Shot in high definition, each part of the series focuses on a different region of the Earth – be it deserts, jungles, or caves –, revealing many never before filmed images that earned it both popular and critical acclaim. So much for the details. For my purposes, what matters most is the fact that, on any given night, you're likely to find me camped in front of the television watching a particular episode for what may be the fifth or sixth time, each successive viewing being equally if not more satisfying than the first. I include this confession since I believe that it, more than anything, speaks to the power of the series, namely its ability to enthrall, educate, and perhaps even motivate us. As I will argue here today, the beauty of *Planet Earth* engenders an environmental ethic and, as such, can serve as an effective pedagogical tool both in and outside of the classroom.

Though I have yet to use *Planet Earth* in a course on environmental ethics, I, along with a colleague of mine in the biology department, used the series on several occasions in an Evolution class that we taught this past semester. Using several clips to show natural and sexual selection in action, the students found the series to be not only informative, but downright captivating, to the point that they were disappointed when we hit the stop button on the DVD player (a disappointment which I'm sure had nothing to do with us resuming our lectures). What quickly became clear was the fact that the examples resonated so well with the students. Male-male competition was no longer a dry, abstract concept, but a real, living principle that conjured

up images of male ibex locking horns on the mountainsides of Israel. *Planet Earth* brought evolution to life in a way that, to me at least, seems environmentally promising.

I begin with my experience of using *Planet Earth* in my evolution class as it speaks to both the problem and potential solution which I hope to address here today. First, to the problem. The numbers – not to mention my own experience – suggest that Americans are as skeptical of climate change as they are of evolution. In a recent article in *Newsweek* entitled “Their Own Worst Enemies: Why scientists are losing the PR Wars,” Sharon Begley offers the following:

Like evolutionary biologists before them, climate scientists also have failed to master “truthiness” (thank you Stephen Colbert), which their opponents – climate deniers and creationists – wield like a shiv. They say the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is a political, not a scientific, organization; a climate mafia (like evolutionary biologists) keeps contrarian papers out of the top journals; Washington got two feet of snow, and you say the world is warming?¹

Now while as a philosopher I recognize the value of a healthy skepticism, in these two regards I admit to being less than tolerant. As such, I take myself to be in line with most of the scientific community, a community which, though well-equipped with truth, may indeed be lacking when it comes to “truthiness.” As little as we may want to admit it, there is a public relations dimension when it comes to the truth. Rather than resting content with the idea that the truth will eventually prevail, we must sometimes come to grips with the fact that the truth must be sold. As *Planet Earth* seemed to do well with an admittedly small sample size when it came to the

¹ Sharon Begley, “Their Own Worst Enemies,” *Newsweek*, March 29, 2010.

forces of evolution, I believe it can do the same with global climate change and environmental responsibility.

At this point, critics who have seen the series may point out that there are very few overt environmental messages and virtually no practical directives. Though segments on polar bears, the rain forest, and the blue whale, for example, conclude on an environmental note, most of the series is devoted to simply showing and explaining natural wonders that most of us have never seen before.² In short, ethics takes a rather clear backseat to scientific fields such as botany, zoology, and ecology. But there is, I would suggest, something more going on here than a mere descriptive analysis of the series' content suggests. Above all else there is an undeniable aesthetic dimension that conveys a deeper sense of the truth than any scientist or ethicist can verbalize. Here lies the true power of *Planet Earth* where beauty becomes an argument in and of itself.

Going back at least as far as Plato, many philosophers have seen a deep connection between aesthetics and ethics, the beautiful and the good. As evil is, more often than not, rooted in self-interest and self-absorption, beauty cannot help but have moral import for its ability to call us out beyond ourselves to a world *of which* we are a part and *to which* we are held accountable. Nowhere is the connection between the good and the beautiful expressed (dare I say) more beautifully than in the Speech of Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. Ascending the ladder of beauty, the lover who loves rightly overcomes his more petty obsessions to recognize beauty in all its forms, becoming a better person along the way. Indeed, by the end of Diotima's speech, the beautiful and the good have become indistinguishable, aesthetics and ethics morphing into a

² In fairness, the script for the original BBC production tends to be more overtly environmental, something for which the American version has been criticized. In light of what I argue here, however, such differences may not be as important as they initially seem.

common pursuit. And yet, despite Plato's undeniable influence on the Western philosophical tradition, many, in this regard, failed to follow suit. Ethics and aesthetics became largely separate disciplines, the perceived subjectivity of the latter rendering it, for many, unworthy of any serious study. Perhaps there are a few absolute moral truths (though in an age of cultural relativity some would be unwilling to grant even that), but aesthetics? Please. There is only one aesthetic truth that effectively denies the possibility of all others: beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Nothing else need be said.

At the risk of unfairly categorizing those of you gathered here today, I dare say that most of us in this room believe there is a good deal more to it than that. In fact, I would join with many others in saying that aesthetics has the power to transform the world, an incredibly convenient power given that the world is in need of such a transformation, particularly when it comes to the way that human beings relate to and treat their natural surroundings. But, as Aldo Leopold made quite clear, better treatment requires a better appreciation, "a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind."³ I turn to Leopold here as I agree with J. Baird Callicott's claim that Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* is every bit a *land aesthetic* as it is a *land ethic*. It has been said that in the days of the prophet Mohammed, many Arabs immediately converted to Islam upon hearing the words of the Qu'ran, not so much because of its content but because of the beauty of its prose. I believe that reading Leopold can occasion a similar conversion experience, albeit with nature taking the place of Allah. The ethic engendered by Leopold's musings, however, is by no means arbitrary. It is informed, it is purposeful, and it is increasingly timely. Here we find a forerunner to the ethic implicit in the aesthetics of *Planet Earth*.

³ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 177.

Noting that America's conservation efforts have largely been informed by aesthetics rather than ethics, Callicott maintains that this aesthetic has been largely misguided.

Appreciation of natural beauty, as far as Callicott can tell, is a rather recent philosophical phenomenon, most historical works on aesthetics focusing on human artifacts, be they poems, paintings, or statues.⁴ Natural beauty, in other words, only becomes apparent in light of manmade beauty, something worth noting, for example, as a potential landscape for an impressionist painter or romantic poet. According to Callicott,

Western appreciation of natural beauty is recent and derivative from art. The prevailing natural aesthetic, therefore, is not autonomous: it does not flow naturally from nature itself; it is not directly oriented to nature on nature's own terms; nor is it well informed by the ecological and evolutionary revolutions in natural history. It is superficial and narcissistic. In a word, it is trivial.⁵

By stark contrast, Leopold's evolutionary-ecological aesthetic values and glorifies nature for what it is, without placing priority on the scenic or picturesque. It is not an aesthetic that is easily won, but requires a trained eye that can recognize the many shades of beauty in the natural world. One must, like Leopold, see the beauty in a Kansas plain or a northern bog just as well as she can see it in the Grand Canyon or a mountain lake. Such "seeing" requires work, but the benefits are indeed great, as we see in Leopold's description of the sandhill crane in his "Marshland Elegy":

Our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in

⁴ For all the merits of Plato's *Symposium*, it should not be overlooked that beauty is associated exclusively with the human beings and their accomplishments.

⁵ J. Baird Callicott, "The Land Aesthetic," p. 151.

which he originated are long since entombed within the hills. When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies the daily affairs of birds and men.⁶

To see and appreciate the true beauty of the crane, we must understand it in its evolutionary and ecological context. A display case inside of a museum cannot do the crane justice in the way its native marshland can, and we must appreciate all of it, as it is, for what it is. “We cannot,” as Callicott says, “love cranes and hate marshes.”⁷

So does *Planet Earth* aesthetically accomplish what Leopold and Callicott require? As an artwork, which is to say a work of human hands, a product of *techne* rather than *phusis*, it would seem that *Planet Earth*, like any other nature documentary, would lack the aesthetic quality which Leopold and Callicott recognize in the natural world. Not unlike the landscape painting or nature sonnet, it would seem that *Planet Earth* represents nature on human terms, depicting that which can be immediately and universally recognized as beautiful. As such, is this not just a reassertion of the scenic or picturesque by way of a new visual media? Here I say “no” and would offer the following reasons as to why *Planet Earth* differs from works of art that have come before.

First of all, though choices must obviously be made in terms of what environments or species are portrayed, I maintain that *Planet Earth* does not restrict itself to what might be considered “classically” beautiful, but depicts nature in all its forms, allowing the viewer to see the beauty in what may have otherwise appeared grotesque. A perfect example is Deer Cave in

⁶ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 96.

⁷ J. Baird Callicott, “The Land Aesthetic,” p. 152.

Borneo where three million wrinkle-lipped bats join forces to produce a 300 foot high mound of guano on the cave floor. Now it admittedly proves more difficult to see the beauty in bat droppings than, say, a coral reef. But as the camera slowly pans to the top of this seemingly improbable mound, the viewer is overcome by a certain feeling of majesty and is left marveling at a natural phenomenon that she, more likely than not, had never been privy to before. The grotesque becomes beautiful, the repellent, sublime. And while the imagery alone may be enough to transform the viewer's perception of nature, there is something more that would warm the heart of Aldo Leopold – *Planet Earth* is an *informed* aesthetic, grounded in evolution and ecology. This, for Leopold and Callicott, makes all the difference.

Returning to our bat droppings example, it would have to be admitted that, on the surface of things, animal excrement is rather inglorious. But, probing deeper, we find that the entire food chain inside of the cave, from termites to centipedes to crabs, depends upon that 300 foot high mound. Altogether devoid of sunlight, the undigested bat remains become the stuff which makes cave life possible. Though many people have something of an aversion to bats (as vampire myths, for one, seem to suggest), one cannot help but be filled with a sense of wonder at the universe which bats make possible. And this is but one example of the transformative aesthetic that *Planet Earth* embodies. I could give similar examples of glow worms catching their prey from threads of silk or locusts swarming across the African plains. The point, however, would be the same. The images which *Planet Earth* supplies in conjunction with the well-informed scientific narrative provide the type of aesthetic which allow us to appreciate *all forms* of plant and animal life in a manner which would make Leopold and Callicott proud.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the task of engendering an environmental ethic in light of the apparent communication breakdown between the scientific community and the

American public. In agreement with eco-phenomenologists like David Abram and Alphonso Lingis, I believe that caring for the natural world begins with us opening ourselves to it, experiencing it in ways that our technologically innervated culture tends to discourage. This, however, presents a problem when it comes to fragile ecosystems where minimizing – if not downright eliminating – human presence proves most beneficial.⁸ We have, then, a bit of a conundrum: how do you get people to appreciate and, by extension, care for nature if human interaction with nature is the root of our ecological crisis? One solution, no doubt, has been the eco-tourist industry, which allows people to explore natural habitats with minimal interference. The World Wildlife Federation (WWF) offers such trips, which this year includes voyages to Madagascar, China and Brazil, among several others. Such trips, however, can be quite expensive and well beyond the means of the average citizen, present company included. If, for example, you'd like to travel to Borneo to check out Deer Cave or spend time with some orangutans, you can depart on June 4th for a cost of \$6,995 per person, based on double occupancy – well beyond the means of a lowly college professor! By comparison, *Planet Earth* is currently selling on amazon.com (in Blu-ray no less) for a price of \$49.95, offering up the wonders of our planet for a fraction of the cost of visiting these locations ourselves. As such, I believe that *Planet Earth* can serve as a powerful and effective pedagogical tool, offering an informed aesthetic which, in the words of Callicott, “enables us to mine the hidden riches of the ordinary; . . . ennobles the commonplace; . . . [and] brings natural beauty literally home from the hills.”⁹

⁸ Andrew Light, for this reason, argues that those living in an urban setting are environmentalists by default as a great number of people are confined to a smaller space. A large city like New York, then, is more eco-friendly than the suburban sprawl that dominates a large part of the country. See “The Urban Blind Spot in Environmental Ethics.”

⁹ J. Baird Callicott, “The Land Aesthetic,” p. 156.

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