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Conservation Ethics: The Web Linking Human and Environmental Rights

Meghan Sittler

The Earth should be seen as an ecological whole. Environmental and human rights should be fashioned in a similar horizontal plane rather than in the traditional concept of a vertically arranged hierarchy. Examining the management practices of vast ecosystems on two continents provides examples of the integral relationship of all organisms in an ecosystem. The Serengeti Ecosystem in Africa and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in the United States are characterized by both cultural and ecological extirpations. The comparing of cultural and ecological issues concerning these diverse and distinctive ecosystems demonstrates the intricate web connecting human and environmental rights.

> "*There is no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it...A land ethic changes the role of* Homo sapiens *from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such...Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.*" ---Aldo Leopold

Traditionally, proponents of human rights have been pitted against proponents of environmental rights. Humans have not been, and still are not, seen as having integral roles in ecosystems. Throughout history western civilization has seen itself as being "above nature" and has assigned "worlds" or "levels" of civilization much along these same lines. In Green Psychology; Transforming Our Relationship to the Earth (1999), Ralph Metzner states that members of the first world, meaning industrialized western nations, perceive indigenous cultures as beneath ours and as underdeveloped because they have an economy and culture "sustainably adapted to existing ecological conditions."

Human rights doctrines and conventions have been organized in a similarly hierarchical manner. First generation human rights were the first to be formally drafted and developed largely as part of western democratic thought. These rights include the right to life, liberty, security, and all those freedoms such as religion, opinion, property, movement, residence, and freedom from discrimination and persecution (Weston 1992). The core tenet of first generation rights is to protect individuals or social groups from abuses of political authority (Weston 1992). Second generation rights are centered on the ideas of economic, social, and cultural rights. Rights and freedoms encompassed under second-generation rights include those such as social security, adequate standards of living, and employment (Weston 1992).

Third and fourth generation rights have been formally drafted during the past thirty years and are much more holistic in

philosophy. Burns H. Weston (1992) classifies the rights to a "healthy, balanced environment," to peace, self-determination, economic and social development, and to participate in, and benefit from, shared "earth-space resources" and information, as third generation rights. These final generations of rights seem to encompass the first two. However, many societies, governments, and individuals often perceive them, as inconsequential and separate from the preceding doctrines of human rights. In all actuality, third generation rights should be viewed as the most essential doctrines because they attempt to integrate humans and all other components of ecosystems into the same entity.

Human rights should not be arranged in a vertical organization. Rather, they should be organized on a horizontal plane. Management and conservation ethics in the Serengeti ecosystem in Africa and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in the United States provide examples of the integral relationship of all organisms, including humans, in an ecosystem. Through comparisons of ecological and cultural issues concerning these two ecosystems and certain management techniques which are unethical and in violation of basic human rights tenets, it will be demonstrated that neither human nor environmental rights can take precedent over one another; they are inextricably linked.

Africa's Serengeti Ecosystem

The Serengeti ecosystem of eastern Africa is home to extremely diverse flora and fauna covering approximately 25,000 square kilometers (Sinclair 1979). The region is not only diverse in plant and animal species but also in climate, geological features, and cultural groups. Masai pastoralists make up the largest percentage of the population in the western portion of the Serengeti region with other agricultural societies being located along the eastern portion. (Campbell and Hofer 1995). These agricultural and pastoral people have been present in the Serengeti throughout its entire history. The paleontological and archeological records suggest human presence in the Serengeti throughout the entire four million years of human evolution (Sinclair 1995).

The presence of humans throughout the history of the Serengeti ecosystem indicates humans are integral components of this ecosystem. Human cultures have co-evolved along side other predatory species such as the cheetah and prey species such as Thompson gazelles. The evolution of human culture, other predators, and prey species are intricately tied to one another; changes in any one species will affect the others. The relationship of all of these species has been altered as a result of the establishment of several large national parks and wildlife preserves throughout the Serengeti region during the past century.

Masai Mara Park in Kenya, as well as Tanzania's Serengeti National Park and Ngorongoro Conservation Unit are three large protected areas that have been established during the twentieth century (Sinclair 1979). During the establishment of these parks and preserves indigenous groups were forcibly removed from their traditional land base. They were also prohibited from hunting animals within the park and hunting with their traditional weapons (Packer 1996). Additionally, restrictions were placed on grazing resources and on gathering or cultivating crops (Hitchcock 1997). The parks and preserves were opened to tourists and, in some circumstances, sportsmen using modern weaponry to hunt game.

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) is defined as an area including Yellowstone National Park, Grand Teton National Park, surrounding national forests, preserves, and private lands. The GYE covers approximately 14 million acres that

are characterized by high biological diversity (Patten 1991). People are known to have inhabited the GYE over the past 11,000 years with the possibility of cultural inhabitation extending to 15,000 years ago following deglaciation (Connor 1998). At the time of Euro-American settlement, there were three to five different cultures of Native Americans either living in, or utilizing the resources of, the GYE and more specifically the area which was to become Yellowstone National Park in 1872 (Sellars 1997).

The establishment of Yellowstone National Park brought the expulsion of indigenous groups from the park and much of the surrounding area (Stevens 1997). The federal government under the premise of "preserving nature" removed Native American tribes. The government resettled Native Americans onto lands completely foreign to them in favor of the agricultural and economic utilization of surrounding lands by white settlers. The rigid boundary formed by the establishment of the national park, the removal and resettlement of indigenous people, and the encroachment of white settlers, brought the mismanagement and eventual extirpation of another of the park's top predators, the Gray Wolf (*Canis lupis*).

Paleontological and archeological evidence indicates the presence of Gray wolves as natural predators of the GYE and much of the northern and central Rocky Mountains (Cannon 1992). Gray wolves, like indigenous groups, were seen as "bad predators." They preyed upon prized animals such as elk and bison and occasionally a rancher's cattle or sheep. The demonization of Gray wolves by settlers, in addition to the National Park Service's desire to protect the "good animals," led to the systematic killing of wolves, mountain lions, and coyotes in the later part of the 1800's and early 1900's (Yellowstone National Park 1997). By the 1930's wolves were completely eliminated from the GYE (Defenders of Wildlife 1995).

The idea of strict nature protection by classifying animals as either "good" or "bad," and prohibiting settlement along with all subsistence or commercial uses of natural resources encompassed in a designated protected area has been defined as the "Yellowstone Model" (Stevens 1997). The Yellowstone Model has become the central focus of the management policies of protected areas throughout the United States as well as other portions of North, Central, and South America, Australia, Africa, and Asia (Stevens 1997). The adoption of this management notion has had far-reaching, detrimental results on the health and rights of all components of the affected ecosystems.

The Dialogue of Conservation Ethics and Human Rights

Removal of any top predator, or a specific alteration to one component of an ecosystem, has a compounding impact on each component as you move around the web-like organization of the ecosystem. Additionally, the introduction of any exotic population into an area promotes significant alterations in the behavior and health of all other species within the region. Both the Serengeti ecosystem and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem have undergone, and continue to undergo, episodes of both removal and introduction of populations.

The removal of indigenous groups from parks and preserves in the Serengeti and the introduction of exotic populations of tourists and sport hunters have damaged the health of the Serengeti ecosystem. Indigenous groups were forcibly resettled around the rigid boundaries of the established protected areas (Western 1997). Settlement has become more densely concentrated in these peripheral areas. As with any resource scenario, an increase in density of a population and in the use of a common resource, such as grazing or cultivable land, brings over-use of the resource (Hardin 1968). The land surrounding the park is being over-grazed

resulting in erosion caused by the loss of plant life and decreased productivity of the land (Western 1997). The health of the indigenous groups is threatened because they are no longer able to sustainably use the natural resources to which they have traditionally had access.

The impact of removing indigenous groups as traditional predators has affected the health of the gazelle populations and other prey species. The absence of human hunting allows the population of gazelles and other prey species to increase causing overgrazing, starvation, and disease. Cheetahs, and other predators, are adversely affected by the decline in the health of populations of prey species primarily through the spread of disease and change in range patterns (Kelly et al. 1998).

Finally, the introduction of exotic populations such as tourists and sport hunters have altered the ranges of prey and predator species and changed the vegetation patterns through the development of roads and the altered grazing range of large herbivores. The effects of the removal of native predators and the introduction of exotic populations can be displayed through resource depletion and the health of both predator and prey species.

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem provides a slightly different view on the dialogue of conservation ethics and human rights. Indigenous groups were removed from Yellowstone National Park and the GYE and resettled in territories distant from the boundaries of the park. The encroachment of the exotic population of Euro-American settlers and the livestock they brought with them, coupled with the removal of predators such as Native Americans and the Gray Wolf, has altered the GYE significantly.

The elk population of Yellowstone increased almost geometrically with the removal of the wolves from the ecosystem. As the population of the elk increased and no natural predator was present to remove the weak or unhealthy members of the population, the overall health of the elk decreased as the area of overgrazed flora increased (Yellowstone National Park 1997). The resulting increase of populations of elk, moose, bison, and deer, resulted in their migration outside parklands. Concerns of disease transmission and overgrazing were voiced by surrounding landowners as a result of the migration (Yellowstone National Park 1997).

As stated earlier, the Yellowstone Model of managing protected areas has been the leading premise in establishing and managing protected areas on a cross-cultural basis. However, within the past decade there has begun to be a reevaluation in the focus of the ethics of conservation of these "natural" areas. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources' (IUCN) definition of a protected area provides evidence of this change.

In 1969 the IUCN defined a protected area as:

> *"an area where one or several ecosystems are not materially altered by human exploitation and occupation and where the highest competent authority of the country has taken steps to prevent or eliminate, as soon as possible, exploitation or occupation in the whole area," (Stevens 1997).*

This definition directly follows the premise held within the Yellowstone model and was a precursor to the removal of many indigenous groups from areas such as the Serengeti.

The definition of a natural protected area has come to take into account the intrinsic role of indigenous groups in those environments as an outcome of conventions such as the 1992 World Congress of National Parks and Protected Areas at Caracas, Venezuela, and the IUCN General Assembly in Buenos Aires Argentina in

1994 (Stevens 1997). The IUCN has now begun to include local people in the design, management, and membership of ecosystems encompassed by protected areas. The IUCN is now taking a more holistic approach and considering all components, including prey species and predator species such as humans and wolves, in the dynamics of an ecosystem.

The modification of conservation and management ethics by the IUCN is beginning to be realized in the Serengeti and the United States. Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDP's), such as Communal Areas Management Program For Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE), are being implemented throughout Africa including the Serengeti (Hitchcock 1997). The United States is lagging behind in including local persons into management decisions and programs, and largely still conceptualizes humans as being outside of "natural" ecosystems. However, management of protected areas is beginning to take a more holistic approach; the manifestation being the reintroduction of Gray wolves into Yellowstone National Park and the GYE in 1995 (USF&WS 1995).

Indigenous groups have not been, and most likely will not be, reintroduced as native predators. However, strides have been taken to recreate the once natural balance at least through the reintroduction of one native predator. The United States and National Park Service now face the task of integrating local people into the balance of the GYE to resolve conflict over the presence of a once, and still, feared "bad" predator.

Conclusion

> *"Harmony with the land is like harmony with a friend; you can not cherish his right hand and chop off his left. That is to say, you can not love game and hate predators. The land is one organism."*---Aldo Leopold

The relocation of indigenous groups points to specific human rights violations in both the first and second-generation doctrines. Forcibly removing and relocating people from their ancestral land base is in direct contradiction to the core tenet of first generation human rights. This tenet provides individuals or social groups protection from the abuses of political authority. More specifically, the governments are violating an individual's right to freedom of residence, movement, property, and religion, as most indigenous cultures perceive themselves as intricately and spiritually tied to the land they have traditionally inhabited. The economic and cultural viability of indigenous groups is threatened by restricting the resources available to them and placing them in areas where they are forced into over-using communal resources. One of the most striking examples of violations against the rights of indigenous groups is the instances where members of indigenous groups who were attempting to utilize resources, to which they had traditionally had access, were killed by wildlife officials and military personnel because they were violating newly established management policies, (Hitchcock 1997). This is obviously a direct violation of human rights, as it constitutes murder. Furthermore, it raises the question of whether killing human beings in the name of protecting biodiversity is in all actuality promoting the opposite.

In the Yellowstone example, the same violations took place against the Native Americans who had inhabited the region for millennia. The removal of the Gray Wolf provides an opportunity to expand the argument further through examining the deleterious effects the removal of another key predator had on ecological soundness of the GYE. Decreasing the soundness of the environment intrudes on the rights of humans to experience and utilize a healthy and balanced ecosystem.

The Yellowstone Model displays the gap believed to exist between human and

environmental rights. The traditions behind this model and the belief that humans are not components of ecosystems have led to many violations of human rights. Violations against any component of an ecosystem can be viewed as violations against the right to a healthy environment; altering one entity comprising part of an ecological web affects the vitality of the whole. The removal of indigenous peoples in Africa and the extirpation of wolves as well as Native Americans in Yellowstone have had negative consequences on all biotic and abiotic entities encompassed within the ecosystems and continue to cause disruptions in the organization of the ecosystem.

The reintroduction of Gray Wolves in Yellowstone, the reintegration of indigenous peoples into protected areas through programs such as CAMPFIRE, in addition to the IUCN's revised philosophy concerning protected areas, provide opportunities for a necessary co-management philosophy to become the central premise in conservation ethics. Co-management and the belief that humans are integral parts of the environment will allow the third generation right to a healthy, balanced environment to fill its actual and necessary role as the starting point and central premise to human rights.

Ecosystems are now described by ecologists as "webs;" each component being intricately tied to one another; each being as important as the other. Human rights should also be viewed as a web rather than in hierarchical manner. It is impossible to view humans as separate or above the environment, and therefore, equally as impossible to protect the rights of humans without viewing them as directly dependent upon the health and rights of nature.

The Gaia Theory supports the ecological view of the world being organized into individual webs that are all connected to form a singular massive web. The theory, simply stated, is the idea that each individual organism on earth, including humans, is a "cell" of the larger organism, the Earth (Metzner 1999). The present cyclical dialogue between proponents of environmental rights and proponents of human rights must cease. Humans must be able to see themselves as small pieces of a greater whole to prevent further abuses against the earth as an entire organism.

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