

The Ethic of Sustainability and the Tatshenshini/Windy Craggy Debate

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Introduction

Once again the public is being called upon to weigh the relative merits of preserving a wilderness area or extracting the resources therein. In this case, the issue involves “North America’s wildest river,”¹ the Tatshenshini River, versus a “world class copper deposit,”² the proposed Windy Craggy mine. The wilderness area, in which these two features occur, lies in the extreme northwest corner of British Columbia;³ the debate over the fate of the area has, however, expanded beyond local and provincial affairs to become an international concern.⁴

Underlying this all-too-common conflict lies a larger, more global issue—environmental protection versus economic development—which received intensive scrutiny from a United Nations Commission. Established as the World Commission on the Environment and Development (WCED), this international body met with political and business leaders and conducted “open public hearings in every region of the world”⁵ to

1. Re-examine the critical environment and development issues and to formulate realistic proposals for dealing with them;
2. Propose new forms of international co-operation on these issues that will influence policies and events in the direction of needed changes; and
3. Raise the levels of understanding and commitment to action of individuals, voluntary organizations, businesses, institutes, and governments.⁶

Four years after its creation, the WCED tabled its report, drawing attention to one of its inescapable realizations: the economy and the environment were inseparable.⁷ From this, the WCED concluded that, if further degradation of the planet were to be

averted and if living conditions for much of the world's human population were to be improved, then concerns for the environment and the economy had to be integrated. This integration they termed "sustainable development."

This paper attempts to advance current understanding of sustainable development by presenting it as an ethic and argues that the Tatshenshini River and its surrounding wilderness ought to be preserved. In making this argument, the paper does not concern itself with the technical aspects of the debate, such as the potential impacts of the service road or tailings pond. Instead, it examines the issue in the context of sustainable development. For sustainable development, as an ethic, requires a profound shift from dualistic to non-dualistic thinking and from an anthropocentric perspective to an ecospheric perspective. From this ethical perspective, the paper then argues that the Tatshenshini River and its surrounding wilderness ought to be preserved.

Sustainable Development and Ethics

The WCED (1987) originally conceived sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."⁸ Yet vagueness and ambiguities inherent in this definition have caused much confusion about what sustainable development actually means.⁹ One author, Michael Redcliff (1991), perceives sustainable development as "unapologetically normative" as it "places both the responsibility for problems, and the political will to overcome them, in the hands of the human actors."¹⁰

Normative statements typically evolve out of questions of right and wrong and may provide basic guiding principles for behaviour. When they do, such statements are considered ethical.¹¹ With sustainable development normative, or ethical, considerations encourage more harmonious human conduct in relation to the environment. By way of example, the WCED (1987) stated that the adoption of sustainable development would require:

- lowering consumption standards;
- avoiding the foreclosure of future options with respect to the use of non-renewable resources;

- conserving plant and animal species; and
- incorporating non-economic values, such as education, health, clean air and water, into the definition of human needs.¹²

Acting on these principles would inevitably lead to a profound change in the notions of growth and of progress. As the commission noted:

a hydropower project should not be seen merely as a way of producing more electricity; its effects upon the local environment and the livelihood of the local community must be included in any balance sheets. Thus the abandonment of a hydro project because it will disturb a rare ecological system could be a measure of progress, not a setback to development.¹³

The proposed Windy Craggy mine, as will be shown, fails to meet the commission's principles on several counts; like the fictitious hydro project, therefore, it should be abandoned. To see how such an action could "be a measure of progress [and] not a setback to development," we must look at things very differently.

The Ecospheric Perspective

In several places in its report, the WCED noted that a change in attitude is critical to achieving sustainable development. In this the commission is not alone; the connection between attitudes, values, and beliefs, and environmental problems has not gone unnoticed. In very recent years an astonishing array of authors representing such diverse fields as economics, biology, physics, and education have called for a fundamental change in thinking as an attack on the root cause of current environmental problems.¹⁴

In the Western world the dominant way of thinking has a strongly anthropocentric perspective, one that is dualistic and serves to separate humans from nature. It asserts that humankind "is to be valued more highly than other things in nature. . ." while the things of nature only have value insofar as they serve as 'instruments' to human needs."¹⁵ From this way of thinking comes the notion that nature is a storehouse of neutral stuff that, through the application of science and technology, yields resources. To not use nature or its resources is considered a waste.¹⁶ In practice, these ideas play out as the duality of

use (resource extraction) versus non-use (preservation of nature).

The separation of humans from nature rests upon a split between self and other, with the needs of the self taking precedence over those of the other. Here lies the base for contemporary, neo-classical economics that encourages acquisition of individual wealth with little regard for the needs of the community.¹⁷ The effect of these dualities (humans versus nature, self versus other, individual versus community) is a serious underestimation of the importance of the environment in the calculus of economic growth.¹⁸

In the face of a steadily and rapidly deteriorating global environment and increasing economic disparity, economist Herman Daly and theologian John Cobb declare:

at a deep level of our being we find it hard to suppress the cry of anguish, the screams of horror — the wild words required to express wild realities. We human beings are being led to a “dead” end — all too literally. We are living by an ideology of death and accordingly we are destroying our humanity and killing the planet.¹⁹

The solution, they believe, lies in shifting our thinking from the anthropocentric perspective to the ecospheric perspective.²⁰

An ecospheric perspective evolves through the cultivation of ecological consciousness which is the “ever-deeper questioning of ourselves, the assumptions of the [anthropocentric perspective] . . . , and the meaning and truth of our reality.”²¹ Through this process, we commence to cast off the belief in ourselves as isolated egos and start to realize that we do not “really experience the boundary of self as the epidermis of the body, but rather as gradient of involvement in the world,” as a “field of concern or care.”²²

As we continue to cultivate ecological consciousness, our sense of self expands to encompass not only other humans but also non-human entities, be they animal, plant, river or mountain. Ultimately, the sense of self becomes the sense of “self in Self” where the capital “S” self signifies organic wholeness.²³ The Self has also been referred to in other ways in various traditions including God, the Tao, Creator, and the Force. In ecological consciousness, then, there is both the self and other and no self and other, only Self.²⁴ In this way ecological consciousness involves a shift from dualistic to non-dualistic thinking.²⁵

With this change in thinking comes yet another basic insight: that since all things are, in essence, the Self (God, the Tao, the

Creator or the Force), then all things have inherent worth and equal right "to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization within the larger Self-realization."²⁶ This "biocentric or ecocentric equality" forces the recognition that humans are not the possessors of ultimate value, rather, all things, including humans, are equal.²⁷

Self-realization and ecocentric equality contribute to an ecospheric perspective which acknowledges both the self and the self-in-community (where the community includes the land and all that dwells on it). The perspective tempers the gratification of narrow self-interest with respect to fundamental needs, which are not so much materialistic as psychological or spiritual, of the self-in-community. In this perspective, then, the purpose of an economy would be to "serve the community."²⁸

Not too surprisingly the ecospheric perspective also requires a completely different orientation to the use of nature since it possesses both inherent worth (intrinsic value) and instrumental value (through its use serving human needs). Consideration of both these value sets moves humans from a position of domination to harmonious cooperation with and stewardship of nature.²⁹ In this latter position, the land is to be both used and not used (protected, preserved).

The ecospheric perspective insists that both the needs of the non-human community (environmental protection) and the needs of the human community (economic development) can be met within the context of a land-community ethic. Such an ethic was articulated by Aldo Leopold more than forty years ago.³⁰

Leopold's Land Ethic

"Ethics," according to Leopold, "are possibly a kind of community instinct-in-the-making" because they rest on one fundamental assumption: "that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts" that includes "soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."³¹ Thus "an ethic may be regarded as a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernable to the average individual."³²

Leopold thought the extension of ethics to the land-community was an "evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessi-

ty," meaning that it could occur either through a voluntary shift in thinking or through change forced by mounting ecological crises.³³ The possibility of a voluntary change in conduct depended particularly on overcoming one significant barrier. "The key-log," he said, "which must be moved to release the evolutionary process for an ethic is simply this: quit thinking of decent land-use as solely an economic problem."³⁴ Instead, he urged: "Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as 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."³⁵ This last sentence encapsulates the core of Leopold's land ethic.

Leopold did not mean to prohibit any use of nature although he used the term "preserve." Indeed, he pointed out:

A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of . . . "resources," but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in some spots, their continued existence in a natural state.

In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It also implies respect for his fellow-creatures, and also respect for the community as such.³⁶

We can see, then, that Leopold's ethic encompasses both preservation and use, with the good of the ecospheric community being the ultimate measure of the moral values, the rightness or wrongness, of actions.³⁷

Ecospheric Perspective, Land Ethic and Sustainable Development

Since Leopold's formulation of the land-community ethic, there has been a growing realization that environmental protection and economic development must be integrated. In recent years the hoped-for new relationship between humans and the environment has been termed sustainable development. As has been argued, this relationship requires a profound shift in thinking, from an anthropocentric to an ecospheric perspective. From the latter perspective, sustainable development takes on normative overtones much like Leopold's land-community ethic. The imperative of sustainable development to meet "the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy

their aspirations for a better life”³⁸ sounds like the principle of ecocentric equality where “all” includes both the human and the non-human world.

Leopold notes, however, that ecocentric equality can only be a principle. Meeting essential human needs obviously requires the use of the environment; out of respect for the inherent worth of non-human entities, however, preservation must also be achieved. This non-dualistic kind of thinking is clearly reflected in the WCED’s report, as it urges both the expansion of the world’s protected areas and the acknowledgment that “every ecosystem everywhere cannot be preserved intact”³⁹; species are to be used for their instrumental value in satisfying human needs and to be protected for their inherent worth.

Achieving non-dualistic thinking in decisions involving the apparent either-or choice between economic development or environmental protection can only occur within a community context. It is the sense of self-in-Self within the experience of community which recognizes the sacred nature of wilderness and acknowledges it with preservation. As Fox (1990) states:

To let things be is to declare the holiness of all things. For when we sense holiness or praise holiness precisely what we are declaring is that this thing, person or event “needs no changing.” “It is good,” we are saying. (Which is what the Creator first said.)⁴⁰

Additionally, reverence and respect for the non-human community requires a substantial change in human lifestyles so “human welfare no longer opposes itself to values in the environment.”⁴¹ The change is manifested as a shift in the quality of growth in which lower consumption becomes an important measure of human happiness.

The idea that humans “should value nature because it is good” has profound implications for economic development as “it puts the onus of justification on those who want to disrupt natural cycles, rather than on the preservationist, as it often is now.”⁴² Under these conditions, economic development would strive to avoid intruding on remaining wilderness areas,⁴³ while elsewhere doing everything possible minimize its repercussions on the environment.

Conclusion

The time has come when development decisions, such as the proposed Windy Craggy mine, must be submitted to not only

economic and environmental impact assessment, but also to ethical scrutiny. The WCED has urged that to achieve sustainable development, development should avoid foreclosure on future use options with respect to non-renewable resources, conserve plant and animal species, and protect rare ecological systems. It also stated that sustainable development requires "meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life."

As argued in this paper the above statements, taken together, provide the basis for the articulation of an ethic for sustainability. Further, this paper has proposed that the ethic must rest on an ecocentric perspective which recognizes the inherent worth of all things. Lastly, once adopted, the ethic would shift the "onus of justification" onto developers.

Under the ethics of sustainability, then, the proposed Windy Craggy mine should not be permitted to proceed as it fails to meet many of the requirements set forth by the WCED. It will contribute to the further depletion of a non-renewable resource; it will disrupt wildlife and degrade its habitat.⁴¹ Of particular concern are the potential effects on the Glacier bear, a rare sub-species of the black bear. The proposed development will destroy what is becoming an increasingly rare ecosystem: wilderness. As noted, perhaps less than one-third of the earth now remains as wilderness and this is being rapidly reduced. Finally, the proposed mine will prevent the Tatshenshini River from continuing to unfold as it has for thousands of years, thus denying its inherent worth and right to self-realization.

Lest there be any confusion: the issue is not whether or not there should be any mining at all; it is, rather, whether or not there should be mining in this place.

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NOTES

- ¹ Tatshenshini Wild. (1990). Issue Summary. December.
- ² Geddes Resources Limited. (1990). Geddes resources delivers Windy Craggy environmental report to B.C. government (Press release). February.
- ³ See map accompanying the introduction. -Editor.
- ⁴ Tatshenshini Wild.

- ⁵ Jim McNeil. (1989). Strategies for sustainable economic development. *Scientific American*, September, p. 155.
- ⁶ World Commission on Environment and Development. (1987). *Our Common Future* (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York), p. 4.
- ⁷ McNeil, p. 155.
- ⁸ WCED, p. 43.
- ⁹ See, for example: William E. Rees, 1988. "Sustainable Development: Economic Myths and Ecological Realities." *The Trumpeter*, Vol. 5(4); David Runnalls, 1990. "Wanted: A Sustainable Development Strategy." *Inside Gulde*. Winter.; George Foy, 1990. "Economic Sustainability and the Preservation of Economic Assets." *Environmental Management*, Vol. 14(6); and Duncan Taylor, 1990. "Disagreeing on the Basics." *Alternatives*, Vol. 18(3).
- ¹⁰ Michael Redcliff, 1991. "The Multiple Dimensions of Sustainable Development," *Geography*, p. 37.
- ¹¹ Donald Scherer and Thomas Attig. (Eds.) (1983). *Ethics and the Environment* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs).
- ¹² WCED, pp 44-53.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp 53-4.
- ¹⁴ See Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr. (1989). *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Beacon Press, Boston); Stan Rowe. (1990). *Home Place: Essays on Ecology* (NeWest, Edmonton); Fritjof Capra. (1983). *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture* (Bantam Books, New York); and David W. Orr. (1991). "What is Education For?" *The Trumpeter*. Vol. 8(3).
- ¹⁵ W. H. Murdy. (1975). "Anthropocentrism: A Modern Version" in *Ethics and the Environment*.
- ¹⁶ Much of what passes as resource conservation is based upon the philosophy of Gifford Pinchot, the first chief forester for the U.S. Forest Service, who stated that there were only two things: people and resources. From this proposition, he coined the ethic "the greatest good for the greatest number over the longest run" where the greatest good (best use, wise use) was determined by economic efficiency." (See J. Baird Callicott. (1990). "Whither Conservation Ethics?" *Conservation Biology*. Vol. 4(1)).
- ¹⁷ Daly and Cobb, pp 91-2.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- ²⁰ The actual term the authors use is "biospheric," suggesting only a concern for living things; thus, I've chosen to use the more inclusive term "ecospheric" which encompasses everything within the global ecosystem.
- ²¹ Bill Devall and George Sessions. (1985). *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. (Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., Peregrine Smith Books, Salt Lake City). p. 8.
- ²² Neil Evernden. (1985). *The Natural Alien*. (University of Toronto Press, Toronto). p. 64. See also Stephen R. L. Clark. (1983). "Gaia and the Forms

of Life" in *Environmental Philosophy*. Edited by Robert Elliot and Arran Gare. (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park).

- ²³ Devall and Sessions, p. 8.
- ²⁴ Matthew Fox. (1990). *A Spirituality Named Compassion*. (Beacon Press, Boston).
- ²⁵ As Fox (1990) observes: ". . . I am not only I" but also "we are one another" and fundamentally "we are also God." pp 8-10.
- ²⁶ Devall and Sessions, p. 67.
- ²⁷ As Herman Daly and John Cobb (1989) explain: "The world is as God knows it because God's knowledge is God's undistorted inclusion of all things. God knows and values each sparrow and knows and values each human being as well. The sparrow is of value in itself, and human beings are of value in themselves . . . It is in God that each value is just what it is and in proper union with all other values" (p. 397). Remembering that God (the Self, the Creator, the Force) dwells among and within us, then it is possible for each of us to achieve this knowledge of "enlightenment" through ever-deepening questioning, reflection, contemplation and meditation.
- ²⁸ Daly and Cobb, p. 19. This notion runs counter to that part of neo-classical economics based on Bentham's ideas regarding community interests. "The community is a fictitious *body* composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members*. The interest of the community then is, what—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it." (Bentham as quoted by J. Baird Callicott in "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair" in *Ethics and the Environment*. Bentham's reductionist stance, however, ignores the likelihood that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, i.e., it disregards the importance and meaning of relationships.
- ²⁹ This latter concept has been used by many First Nations people to describe their traditional relationship with the land. Essentially they believe they were born of the land (Mother Earth) in a particular place and, in exchange for caring for the land and all of its creatures (obligations), they were allowed to use it (rights).
- ³⁰ For a good discussion of Leopold's transformation from the anthropocentric to ecospheric perspective, see *Thinking Like a Mountain* by Susan Flader, (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1978).
- ³¹ Aldo Leopold. (1970). *A Sand County Almanac* (Sierra Club and Ballantine Books, San Fransisco and New York), p. 239.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 262.
- ³⁵ Ibid. Emphasis added.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 240.
- ³⁷ Callicott, p. 61.
- ³⁸ WCED, p. 44.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 43.
- ⁴⁰ Fox, p. 91.

- ⁴¹ Janna L. Thompson. (1983). "Preservation of Wilderness and the Good Life" in *Environmental Philosophy*.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 95.
- ⁴³ This is critically important since human activities now dominate two-thirds of the planet surface and are rapidly eroding the remaining third. J. Michael McCloskey and Heather Spalding. (1989). "A Reconnaissance-Level Inventory of the Amount of Wilderness Remaining in the World" *Ambio*. Vol. 18(4).
- ⁴⁴ Many agencies, both Canadian and American, have spoken against the proposed mine on the basis of its potential effects on wildlife. For examples, see letter from Director, Pollution Abatement and Compliance Branch, Pacific and Yukon Region, Environmental Protection, Environment Canada to Chairman, Mine Development Steering Committee (MDSC), Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources dated June 25, 1990; letter from Project Analyst, Office of the Governor, State of Alaska to Director, Pollution Abatement and Compliance Branch, Pacific and Yukon Region, Environmental Protection, Environment Canada dated May 10, 1990; and letter from Regional Supervisor, Habitat Division, Department of Fish and Game, State of Alaska, to Project Analyst, Office of the Governor, State of Alaska dated May 8, 1990.