2006

Toward Eco-Friendly Aeshetics

Sheila Lintott
sl025@bucknell.edu

Article

Journal Title: Environmental ethics
Volume: 28 **Issue:** 1
Month/Year: 2006 **Pages:** 57-76

Article Title: Toward Eco-Friendly Aesthetics
Article Author: Lintott, Sheila

Notes: Billing Notes: BRI Account no. BL 51-8205 / CISTI #DD724592

ILL Number: 192608322

Lending String:
*UPM,EXA,NJG,CKM,YCM,FGM,MUM,IUP,VLW,GDC,WYU,WCM,LAF,GZT

Request in processing: 20190103
1/3/2019

Call #: BJ57 .E5

Location: BA

Maxcost: 150.00IFM

ILL
Bertrand Library, Bucknell University
1 Dent Drive
Lewisburg, Pennsylvania 17837
United States

Odyssey: 134.82.9.33
Email: illdept@bucknell.edu

Toward Eco-Friendly Aesthetics

Sheila Lintott*

Environmentalists can make individuals more eco-friendly by dispelling many of the myths and misconceptions about the natural world. By learning what in nature is and is not dangerous, and in what contexts the danger is real, individuals can come to aesthetically appreciate seemingly unappreciable nature. Since aesthetic attraction can be an extremely valuable tool for environmentalists, with potential beyond that of scientific education, the quest for an eco-friendly is neither unnecessary nor redundant. Rather, an eco-friendly aesthetic ought to be pursued in conjunction with other efforts to protect nature.

INTRODUCTION

In recent philosophical literature a good deal of attention has been devoted to the relationship between aesthetics and ecology. The examination of this relationship is worthwhile for several reasons. Perhaps the best reason is the initially surprising extent to which aesthetic tastes and preferences can have remarkable ecological effects. They do so in part because our aesthetic tastes have the ability to encourage affection as well as to motivate behavior. That is, we tend to feel a greater affectionate attachment to and desire to act in a way respectful toward those things we judge aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, aesthetically driven affection and motivation are often more influential than the affection and motivation underwritten by more practical values, such as financial or health concerns. It is in this way that the power of aesthetics can be an extremely valuable tool for environmental ethicists, scientists, and activists (hereafter, environmentalists). However, there is also a more vexing reason that the relationship between aesthetics and ecology deserves our scrutiny. It is an unfortunate fact that dominant aesthetic tastes are not always eco-friendly. Contemporary aesthetic factors frequently conflict with what is judged to be in the best ecological interest of various environments and/or creatures. When conflicts between ecology and aesthetics arise, again, perhaps

* Department of Philosophy and Religion, Appalachian State University, P.O. Box 32104, Boone, NC 28608. Lintott is involved in research on issues in aesthetics, the philosophy of art, ethics, and applied ethics. She has published in aesthetics and ethics, including essays on feminist aesthetics, nature appreciation, philosophy of art, and ethics. She is especially interested in ethical and aesthetic issues concerning nature and feminism. The author thanks Gene Hargrove and two anonymous reviewers of this journal, Allen Carlson and James Liszka, for the feedback they provided on earlier versions of this essay. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the form of a commentary on essays by Yuriko Saito and Glenn Parsons at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics in Minneapolis. The author is appreciative of all who attended that session for their comments, especially Yuriko Saito, Glenn Parsons, and Allen Carlson.

surprisingly, ecological health is regularly sacrificed for aesthetic satisfaction. The deleterious effects of such conflicts being settled on the side of ecologically dangerous and aesthetically driven desires are grave.

EXAMPLES OF THE TROUBLING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND ECOLOGY

Frequently, one of the top reasons people support environmental causes is due to considerations of beauty or other aesthetic factors. Average citizens wish to preserve scenic landscapes, such as mountain waterfalls and ocean coasts, flowering plants, such as water lilies and roses, and attractive animals, such as lions and koala bears, and will donate their money and sometimes their time to working toward such ends. Recognizing this phenomenon of aesthetics influencing ethics is not, of course, tantamount to advocating the grounding of all moral obligations in potential or actual aesthetic satisfaction. Admitting that aesthetic factors are of great practical import in increasing the likelihood of a cause's being championed by the general public is not the same as arguing that all of the morally relevant reasons to protect natural environments and creatures are reducible to aesthetic value (or any other kind of instrumental value such entities may hold for human beings). It may be that, as Aldo Leopold argues, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community."[1] However, even if Leopold is right, preserving aesthetic value is merely one of a number of morally defensible reasons to act in a respectful way toward the various entities that make up a community of living creatures and the entities upon which they depend. The purpose of this paper is not, however, to argue this point. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to bring further clarity to our understanding of the often troubling relationship between aesthetics and ecology with a very practical aim in mind: making allies of the two.

For aesthetic reasons some environmental causes are very good candidates for public support. All things being equal, it is relatively easy to rally individuals with diverse interests behind attempts to promote the health of picturesque landscapes and adorable animals. Due to the dominant aesthetic tastes in Western culture and contingencies of human biology,[2] for example, it is much easier for environmentalists to garner public support for bottlenose dolphins

---

[1] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 262.

[2] Regarding such contingencies, Stan Godlovitch argues that we should seek an acentric aesthetic because our present aesthetic tastes are arbitrary in that they are tied to contingent facts about our biological limits. He says, "If we were giants, crushing a rock monument, even a stony moon, would be no more aesthetically offensive than flattening the odd sandcastle is to us now." Stan Godlovitch, "Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics," in Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant, eds., *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (Orchard Park, N.Y.: Broadview Press, 2004), p. 111.

and baby seals as compared to creatures such as bats and snakes, which are generally deemed to be unattractive. This situation is ecologically problematic because it is frequently the aesthetically unappealing or aesthetically unimpressive creatures that are of the greatest ecological import.

In a recent article, "Rattlesnakes Don't Get No Respect: Hard-to-Love Species is Increasingly Threatened," Kathleen McFadden reports John Sealy's struggles as an environmentalist working to save the threatened population of timber rattlesnakes in North Carolina:

> After speaking at length about the multiple threats to his favorite species, John Sealy sighs, "It's not a happy business being a rattlesnake conservationist." . . . "There is a lot of interest in conservation," Sealy notes, although he readily admits that the timber rattler doesn't make the top-ten list of most wildlife lovers, a phenomenon Sealy says has a lot to do with the fact that snakes don't "have big brown warm mammal eyes to blink at you."[3]

Clearly, environmentalists have a much easier task before them when they seek to protect places and creatures that the general public finds aesthetically pleasing. Furthermore, the support that comes so easily for the aesthetically appealing is equally as difficult to find for the aesthetically unappealing. Steven Jay Gould discusses this basic problem in terms of habitat as follows:

> . . . environmentalists continually face the political reality that support and funding can be won for soft, cuddly, and "attractive" animals, but not for slimy, grubby, and ugly creatures (of potentially greater evolutionary interest and practical significance) for habitats. This situation has led to the practical concept of "umbrella" or "indicator" species—surrogates for a larger ecological entity worthy of preservation. Thus, the giant panda (really quite a boring and ornery creature despite its good looks) raises money to save the remaining bamboo forests of China (and a plethora of other endangered creatures with no political clout); the northern spotted owl has just rescued some magnificent stands of old-growth cedars, Douglas fir, and redwoods (and I say hosanna); and the Mount Graham red squirrel may save a rare and precious habitat of extraordinary evolutionary interest.[4]

An aesthetically interesting "umbrella" species functions as the poster child for an environmental cause, thus environmentalists are able to protect unpopular species under the umbrella of protecting the popular species. The concern we must have about this approach, of course, arises in situations where the

---

[3] Kathleen McFadden, "Rattlesnakes Don't Get No Respect: Hard-to-Love Species is Increasingly Threatened," *The Mountain Times*, 1 July 2003.

[4] Steven Jay Gould, "The Golden Rule—A Proper Scale for our Environmental Crisis," in Susan Armstrong and Richard G. Boltzer, eds., *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), p. 290.

unpopular species needs our direct support and even more so in situations in which the support of the unpopular is incompatible with support of the popular. In addition to the frequent tension found between aesthetics and ecology when it comes to the protection of endangered species or threatened areas, there are instances when the tension is one we create with our own habits and ostensibly well-intentioned behavior. For instance, we are well aware of the problems of water and air pollution. Yet, individuals either ignore or underemphasize the extent to which they contribute to these problems in the pursuit of the perfect lawn, which is uniformly lush and green and accented by orderly trimmed hedges reminiscent of English gardens or, perhaps more familiar for most of us, favorite golf courses. The troubling truth of the matter is that we pay a rather large ecological cost for those lawns. Wild Ones, Natural Landscapers, an environmental group based in the Midwest is committed to spreading information about alternative, eco-friendly lawns, and asks us to consider the following statistics related to lawn care in the United States:

> Based on current calculations, EPA estimates that the amount of pollution emitted by a lawn mower operating for one hour is equivalent to the amount of pollution emitted by a car driven for approximately 20 miles; 30 to 60 percent of urban fresh water is used for watering lawns (depending on city); $5,250,000,000 is spent on fossil fuel-derived fertilizers for U.S. lawns; 67,000,000 pounds of synthetic pesticides are used on U.S. lawns; 580,000,000 gallons of gasoline are used for lawn mowers; $25,000,000,000 is spent for the lawn care industry; $700,000,000 is spent for pesticides for U.S. lawns; 20,000,000 acres are planted in residential lawns.[5] .

Combine the damage done by fossil fuels used to trim our lawns with the amount of water needed to hydrate our lawns and the further damage done by the pesticides, chemical fertilizers, insecticides, and herbicides used in attempts to tame unruly lawns, and we have a real ecological threat. Consider the damage done by well-intentioned individuals aiming to care for their lawns and to thus make them beautiful. Cognizant of the relationship between aesthetics and ecology, Marcia Muelder Eaton discusses the problems of lawn care and other alleged instances of caring for the land:

> If it is true that positive aesthetic response leads to care, it is important for us to learn how to generate aesthetic responses. But it is also important for us to learn how to produce the right sort of care—for there is plenty of evidence that some actions that many people interpret as "caring for the landscape" are not sustainable:

---

[5] F. Herbert Bormann, Diana Balmori, and Gordon T. Geballe, *Redesigning the American Lawn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); reprinted in *Wild Ones Handbook*, http://www.epa.gov/greenacres/wildones/.

> mowing with small gasoline engines or fertilizing with chemicals that pollute the ground water. What we must aim for is generating aesthetic responses that will lead to sustainable care.[6]

Such realizations underwrite the current movement among landscape architects to promote ecologically and culturally sustainable alternatives to the traditional lawns, such as mossy ground covers or wildflower gardens. However, the movement and their suggestions are met by much resistance, and it is important to note the source of the resistance: most of the resistance is founded on aesthetic interests. The traditional lawn aesthetic remains a constant ideal among radically different individuals whose aesthetic tastes in other areas are widely disparate. As Joan Iverson Nassauer explains, "Cultural expectations for the appearance of front yards are so uniform, so well known, so closely identified with the character of the inhabitant that we violate those expectations only at great social risk."[7] Despite the fact that alternative lawns are likely to be less costly to the individual and less costly ecologically, people resist implementing them on the sites of their homes because they claim to find these alternatives less attractive than the well-trimmed lawn.

I offer these examples, of the perils of slimy, grubby, and ugly creatures and the perceived unruliness of the untamed lawn, as evidence that our aesthetic tastes are frequently not in line with the best interest of natural environments and creatures. So it appears that despite the common conception that aesthetic concerns are merely superfluous additives to the serious business of practical living, these examples provide strong evidence that our aesthetic concerns actually factor into our lives in significant and seriously deleterious ways.They do so because our aesthetic values affect not only how we judge, but also how we treat nature, artifacts, and even our own bodies. In short, we try to mold and shape the world around us to fit our aesthetic ideals. All too frequently, while aiming to design, create, and protect an aesthetically pleasing environment, we create or contribute to a series of greater and lesser ecological problems. In addition, it seems almost too obvious to point out that human beings seem to feel a deeper attachment to those objects we find aesthetically appealing than to those we do not. The implication of this tendency is that we usually treat those objects of aesthetic delight with greater respect. So, given that aesthetics appears to have considerable power to encourage affection and motivate people to act in certain ways, creating widespread eco-friendly aesthetic tastes is clearly a laudable goal.

---

[6] Marcia Muelder Eaton, "Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (1998): 149.

[7] Joan Iverson Nassauer, "Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics and Ecology," in Joan Iverson Nassauer, ed., *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997), p. 71.

UNDERSTANDING AESTHETIC TASTE IN EVERYDAY LIFE: THE GENERAL RULE OF ATTITUDE

As it turns out, our aesthetic sense is of considerable practical import and it is in the interest of natural environments that an ecologically informed aesthetic dominate in our everyday lives. Because the proposed project is to transform aesthetic tastes as they function in everyday life, we must begin by taking an honest look at what underwrites such aesthetic taste. Let's examine a few examples of such everyday aesthetics at work.

First, consider the example of a biased dog show judge. Imagine that I am the sole judge of a dog show in which my dog, Sam, is a contestant. The truth is that there is very little doubt that Sam will win a show in which I am solely responsible for choosing the winner. Why? It is not because I am a cheater or dishonest; I'm not. Rather, it is simply very likely that I will sincerely see my dog as the most handsome and most charming in the lot.

Second, newborn babies can be an aesthetically challenged lot. A similar phenomenon to the one we saw in the dog show example occurs in what we might call the aesthetic appreciation of newborn babies. Surely, many of us have seen an infant or two that we found to be less than aesthetically pleasing. (Many readers will recall the highly amusing Seinfeld episode with *the baby* as illustrative of this point.) Truth be told, newborn infants can be downright hard to look at. However, the mothers of those babies appear to inevitably see beauty in the red, wrinkled, and swollen faces of their newborn infants.

For a final example, let's think about gardening. Imagine a gardener who has invested much time and effort in the nurturing of a particular rose bush through vulnerable times. If she then has the opportunity to behold the smallest bloom on that bush, perhaps pale in color and weak in structure when compared with those produced by her other bushes, she will likely find it to be the most beautiful flower in her garden.

It is not my intention to debate whether any or all of these cases involve a mistaken aesthetic evaluation. In the context of our present discussion whether they are examples of aesthetic mistakes is beside the point. The aesthetically, and hence, as we have seen, ecologically relevant point here is the predictability, in some cases, the seeming inevitability, of the positive aesthetic judgments in these examples. We are, after all, not even remotely surprised that there are many instances in which people's aesthetic judgments are biased. Does this bias show that we are not honest aesthetic evaluators? Not necessarily. In each of the three cases described, the person is likely to report in complete honesty that he or she thoroughly believes the truth of his or her judgment (which, of course, is not to say that he or she is or is not correct).

This result should be expected, provided that we admit that beliefs and attitudes influence whether we find something aesthetically appealing. The judgments in our examples are secured by the special relationships between the appreciator and the appreciated in each. Dog owners, mothers, and gardeners

care about their dogs, babies, and flowers. When we care about an object of appreciation, we are therefore interested in it. Such interest motivates us to look for the aesthetic value in the object, rather than looking to see if there is aesthetic value. That is, if we care for and are therefore interested in someone or something, we presume there will be aesthetic value and go about trying to find it.

This general rule works in the opposite way as well. If a person has mostly negative feelings for an object or if an object makes her uncomfortable in some way, he or she will be likely to honestly report that he or she finds it aesthetically unappealing. For example, unruly lawns seem to make many people uncomfortable and most people will agree with you if you claim that spiders, rodents, or snakes are not at all aesthetically pleasing. Ridding the world of unruly lawns, spiders, rats, and snakes, therefore, seems to many people a perfectly reasonable and worthwhile endeavor.

This set of examples is particularly telling. It tells us something about the way individuals make aesthetic evaluations in their everyday lives. Many people have a difficult time responding to some of these entities—spiders, rodents, and snakes—with any affection or sympathy. Thus, it might appear that the reason people do not report feeling affectionately toward spiders, rodents, and snakes is due to their complete lack of aesthetic appeal. For example, some would conclude then that the inability to see the aesthetic appeal in mice is responsible for the general public's lack of affection for them. Rather, I think the situation is just the opposite. On reflection, one must realize that he or she has no grounds to say whether or not the mouse in his or her kitchen is aesthetically appealing in the least if the truth is that he or she is so overwhelmed with fear at the sight of it that it is not possible for him or her to pay the mouse the necessary attention one must in order to aesthetically appreciate it. If a person cannot look at a creature, clearly, he or she really doesn't know what it looks like.

Although many of us are not aesthetically open to mice, rats, spiders, or whatever sends us running, perhaps we can learn to be. Jerome Stolnitz argues that when we aesthetically appreciate something our attitude differs from the "practical attitude" we normally adopt.[8] The "aesthetic attitude," according to Stolnitz, is both disinterested and sympathetic. It is disinterested insofar as our appreciation of the object is not governed by any ulterior purposes, such as cognitive interest or ownership. Stolnitz offers the example of a book collector whose financial interest in a rare book is quite distinct from the aesthetic enjoyment one may get from reading the book. Although both are reasons people are fond of books, the aesthetic enjoyment of reading a book is disinterested, while financial satisfaction in owning it is not.

---

[8] Jerome Stolnitz, "The Aesthetic Attitude," in George Dickie, Richard Sclafani and Ronald Roblin, eds., *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 334–41.

Furthermore, the aesthetic attitude is sympathetic insofar as we allow the object to speak to us, as Stolnitz puts it, "on its own terms."[9] Thus, criticizing a work of abstract art for its lack of representational realism is to be unsympathetic and thus is to fail to appreciate it in the proper "aesthetic attitude." To be sympathetic to a work of art is to allow the work's own unique vocabulary and method of communication to work on us and to be open to what the work has to offer by way of its special features.

Although a more accurate description of aesthetic appreciation and the notion of disinterestedness than that offered by others, Stolnitz's conception of the "aesthetic attitude" nonetheless fails to capture fully the way aesthetic appreciation happens in practice. For one thing, we are aware that what we know does affect what we perceive. Despite the fact that Stolnitz recommends bracketing any practical or background information we may know about the object of our aesthetic attention during appreciation, doing so may not be feasible. Is it possible, for example, to look at a photographic representation of Adolph Hitler without the awareness of his atrocious acts factoring into the appreciation and hence the judgment? And even if it is possible, is it desirable? Is such an attitude one we wish to recommend in all cases of aesthetic appreciation? Arguing that not all of nature has positive aesthetic value and moreover, that it would be morally inappropriate to appreciate natural phenomena that cause suffering for humans, Yuriko Saito explains that

> Some phenomena in nature overwhelm us with their endangering aspects, making it very difficult for us to have enough distance, physical and/or conceptual, to listen to and aesthetically appreciate their story. Furthermore, even if we are able to do so, I question the moral appropriateness of doing so.

She questions doing it, she argues, because

> Whether desirable or undesirable, wise or unwise, our human oriented moral sentiments do dictate that we not derive pleasure (including aesthetic pleasure) from other humans' misery, even if it is caused by nature taking its course.[10]

Second, as George Dickie has argued, what Stolnitz uncovers is not best understood as a special sort of attitude, but rather as disclosing the importance of paying close and careful attention.[11] The person who pays attention to the financial worth of a book is simply distracted from the book as a work of art. He or she is paying attention to his or her portfolio, not the book in question. Dickie argues that we cannot differentiate ways of paying attention according to the

---

[9] Ibid., p. 337.

[10] Yuriko Saito, "The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 2 (1998): 109.

[11] George Dickie, "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1964): 56–66.

motivations of the agent paying the attention. The only way to differentiate ways of paying attention is by degree: one person pays closer attention than another. However, one person does not pay a different kind of attention, for there is no such thing as an allegedly aesthetic attention; nor is there any such thing as an allegedly economic attention. Just as one cannot pay economic attention, one cannot pay aesthetic attention, although one can and does frequently pay attention to the economic or aesthetic features of something.

I agree that there may not be any such special aesthetic state of mind and I also agree that, as Dickie argues, the *aesthetic* attitude is a myth. Yet, it does seem plain that some attitudes make us more or less amenable to finding something aesthetically appealing and it is my conviction that it is in this way that attitudes are of critical import in aesthetic (or any other kind of) appreciation. Certain attitudes are conducive to, while other attitudes tend to obstruct aesthetic appreciation. So, Stolnitz *is* right when he points out that attitudes "organize and direct our awareness of the world" and "prepare [us] to respond to [an] object."[12]

The second element of Stolnitz's alleged aesthetic attitude is informative here: that of "sympathetic attention." In order to find an object aesthetically appealing, on his theory, "we must make ourselves receptive to the object and "set" ourselves to accept whatever it may offer to perception."[13] Certain emotions and cognitive states make this openness extremely difficult. Stolnitz offers the example of an Anglophobe—a person who dislikes or fears anything or anyone British. Such a person will not be able to appreciate anything British because the Anglophobe will at best "divert his (or her) attention" away from or at worst will "try to destroy" anything British.[14] Although the necessity of the relationship between sympathetic openness and positive aesthetic appreciation may not be convincing, I believe there is good reason for confidence that such sympathetic attention usually increases the likelihood of finding an object aesthetically appealing.[15]

CHANGING MAINSTREAM AESTHETIC TASTES: EXPLORING SOME OPTIONS

How then should we go about changing mainstream aesthetic preferences? Remembering that the goal is an eco-friendly aesthetic, one, for example, that

---

[12] Stolnitz, "The Aesthetic Attitude," pp. 335, 337.

[13] Ibid., p. 337.

[14] Ibid., p. 335.

[15] I hesitate to accept the claim of necessity because there are instances of aesthetic appreciation that are seemingly instantaneous, for example, when one's attention is captured without any effort on the individual's part—by a striking sunset or a gorgeous human being, etc. Instances like this do not seem to require any special attitude or effort on the appreciator's part. However, it is possible that the attitude is there and that if it were not, the effect would not be so sudden or powerful.

would find some aesthetic appeal in spiders and swamps, we can see that we have several options. To combat the tyranny of the closely trimmed lawn, we might slowly introduce the aesthetically undervalued yet ecologically desirable unruly lawn into mainstream landscaping. We would do well to do so using familiar clues, such as borders and fences, as landscape architects working to promote alternative lawns recommend.[16] Over time unruly lawns may become the standard and perfectly trimmed lawns may then be seen as outdated, unimaginative, *unnatural*—and thus as aesthetically unappealing.

Nevertheless, although I have hope that this approach will work to alter many of our habits and practices, I suspect that this route will not lead to success in other equally important cases because many of the changes that must come to pass involve entities people find bizarre and baffling or of which they have specific and strong fears. With such frustration and fear at work, for most of us, aesthetic appreciation is blocked.

As a second option, we might attempt a cultural indoctrination of the practice of disinterested aesthetic appreciation, for truth be told, if the only considerations at work really were purely aesthetic, such as color, contrast, and design features, many of our judgments would be radically different. For instance, people would tend to find rattlesnakes at least as appealing as rabbits. But this approach is untenable and inadequate. First, it is untenable because in many important cases, disinterestedness is not a practical possibility. Believing, for example, that a rattlesnake is likely to bite you and that some individuals die from rattlesnake bites, will factor into your perceptual experience of it. Second, and more importantly, it is inadequate because it is not necessarily the case that what is aesthetically pleasing—even if the judgment is made disinterestedly (whatever that might mean)—is that which ecology would recommend preserving. For instance, garlic mustard is pretty, but if introduced in the wrong area it can kill all of the indigenous plants in its vicinity.

A third possible solution presents itself in the sublime. As an aesthetic category, the sublime encompasses those things that are initially frustrating to apprehend and thus the pleasure of the sublime is more complicated than that associated with the beautiful or the picturesque. As Immanuel Kant explains, "For while taste for the beautiful presupposes and sustains the mind in *restful* contemplation, the feeling of the sublime carries with it, as its character, a mental *agitation* connected with our judging of the object."[17] In the context of the present discussion it is Kant's notion of the dynamically sublime that is most relevant. Examples that Kant gives of the dynamically sublime include

---

[16] This is a suggestion offered by landscape architects and taken seriously by many philosophers, for example, Yuriko Saito, "The Efficacy of Aesthetics on Ecological Consciousness," presented at the American Society for Aesthetics Annual Meeting, Minneapolis, October 2001.

[17] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), p. 247.

"bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on."[18] Edmund Burke's conception of the sublime is also pertinent here. For Burke,

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operatives in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[19]

Thus, we see that in both Kant's and Burke's theories of the sublime, fear plays an important role. So, perhaps we should attempt to gain aesthetic approval for the class of objects we are concerned about here, namely, the ugly, the frightening, the grotesque, and the strange in line with the sublime. After all, many will admit that the power of the experience of the sublime is intense.

Yet, an appeal to the aesthetic ideal of the sublime suffers similar defects as does the appeal to disinterestedness, for, unlike the beautiful and the picturesque, that which we judge sublime is not immediately pleasing. In order to enjoy the sublime one cannot be sincerely afraid of the object in question. As Kant puts it:

> Just as we cannot pass judgment on the beautiful if we are seized by inclination and appetite, so we cannot pass judgment at all on the sublime in nature if we are afraid. For we flee from the sight of an object that scares us, and it is impossible to like terror that we take seriously.[20]

Burke discusses the necessity of keeping fear in check as follows:

> When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.[21]

Again, Burke tells us:

> The passions which belong to self-preservation turn on pain and danger; they are simply painful when their causes immediately affect us; they are delightful when

---

[18] Ibid., p. 261.

[19] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 39.

[20] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 261.

[21] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 40.

> we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances . . . whatever excites this delight, I call the *sublime*.[22]

It seems that encouraging more individuals to take pleasure in the sublime as a way of more closely aligning aesthetic tastes and ecological needs is a promising suggestion. Once more individuals are able to aesthetically appreciate creatures they initially judge as ugly or bizarre as sublime, we are likely to see greater general appreciation of such creatures. However, despite the promise of this approach, until the fear in question is significantly reduced, the sublimity of those things that are feared will go unnoticed, and those things will be unappreciated.

Because the fears in question must be dispelled or at least reduced and carefully contextualized prior to aesthetic appreciation in order to make our aesthetic taste more eco-friendly, the best avenue to pursue is one that couples scientific knowledge with efforts to alter aesthetic tastes. We can find some precedent for such a merger in Western culture. In his *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* Eugene Hargrove discusses the interaction that took place between artists and natural scientists throughout the modern period and points out that that which is of aesthetic interest to most of us is likely to be also of scientific interest to the natural scientist. In fact, considering natural history sciences, evidence suggests that scientific and aesthetic concerns are not neatly divisible from one another. Unlike some of the goals and motivations of the physical sciences, Hargrove argues that natural history sciences, such as botany, biology, and geology, were from their very inception inherently value-laden and concerned with a study of what we might correctly consider aesthetics.

While early physicists dealt exclusively with primary properties (measurable and quantifiable properties such as extension, figure, motion, and number), natural history scientists were forced by the nature of their subject matter to classify the objects they studied in terms of secondary properties (nonquantifiable properties such as color, smell, taste, and sound). It was this focus on secondary properties that not only sharply separated natural history science from physics but also provided it with important links with poetry, painting, and gardening, aesthetic disciplines also grounded in secondary properties.[23]

Hargrove suggests that the scientifically interesting is an aesthetic category and gives considerable evidence of an important interplay between the arts and science. He points to examples of landscape gardeners and landscape painters working with natural scientists, and nature poets making detailed observations of the inner workings of nature that rival any scientific observation. We can see evidence of this interplay in natural history books adorned with the most

---

[22] Ibid., p. 51.

[23] Eugene C. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Denton, Tex: Environmental Ethics Books, 1996), p. 78.

realistic representations of nature possible at the time of publication. These images were created for scientific and aesthetic purposes. Moreover, contemporary artists continue to use the latest technology in an attempt to capture nature. For example, a recent *New York Times* article tells us of the work of printmaker Joseph Scheer, which the author, Carl Zimmer, argues can be understood as the latest successful attempt to create art that is "inseparable from science, whether that science is the latest in development in digital reproduction or an esoteric corner of entomology." Scheer collects moths and scans them using a high resolution digital scanner and a technique he developed for doing so without crushing them. He then produces large and captivating prints of the moths. Zimmer describes the Scheer's moths prints as "almost hypnotic in their details. They are covered in a coat of hair as plush as mink. . . . Their wings seem to be assembled from a million dabs of fine paint brush."[24] Whether or not one is fond of the art Scheer produces, it is difficult to deny the claim that there is much overlap in artistic and scientific attempts to capture nature. Indeed, it seems that much of the interest in nature is rightly considered both scientific and aesthetic. Such a sentiment is echoed nicely in the thoughtful words of Gould:

> Pliny's statement ["Nature is to be found in her entirety nowhere more than in her smallest creatures"] captures the essence of what fascinates me about natural history. In an old stereotype (not followed nearly so often as mythology proclaims), the natural history essay restricts itself to *describing the peculiarities* of animals—the *mysterious ways of the beaver*, or *how the spider weaves her supple web*. . . . Each [organism] instructs; its form and behavior embodies general messages if only we can *learn to read them*. . . . I was lucky to wander into evolutionary theory, one of the most exciting and important of all scientific fields. I had never heard of it when I started at a rather tender age. . . . Then I discovered evolutionary theory. Ever since then, the duality of natural history—*richness in particularities and potential union in underlying explanation*—has propelled me. I think that the fascination so many people feel for evolutionary theory resides in three of its properties. First, it is, in its current state of development, sufficiently firm to provide satisfaction and confidence, yet fruitfully undeveloped enough to provide *a treasure trove of mysteries*. Second, it stands in the middle in a continuum stretching from sciences that deal in timeless, quantitative generality to those that work directly with *the singularities of history*. . . . Third, it touches all our lives; for how can we be indifferent to the *great questions of genealogy*: where did we come from and what does it all mean? And then, of course, there are all those organisms: more than a million described species, from bacterium to blue whale, with one hell of a lot of beetles in between—*each with its own beauty*, and each with *a story to tell*.[25]

---

[24] Carl Zimmer, "The Face of Nature Changes as Art and Science Evolve," *New York Time*, 23 November 2004.

[25] Steven Jay Gould, *The Panda's Thumb* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), pp. 11–12 (emphasis added)..

Gould's own description of evolutionary theory and his personal love of it serves as a poignant illustration of how well-versed natural scientists are with aesthetic and artistic concerns, even if they themselves are not aware of it. Gould's praise of evolutionary theory amounts to praise of it as, in part, an aesthetic enterprise. We see evidence of this praise as he tells us of his fascination in natural science and especially evolutionary theory in that it focuses on the rich peculiarities and mysteries of particular creatures while seeking a unity amidst this variety, where that unity is the story of each beautiful creature and natural history as a whole with implications for the meaning of human life that are as deep as any Shakespearian drama.

THE AESTHETIC STANDARDS OF SCIENTIFIC COGNITIVISM EXPLORED

Before further discussing the claim that a scientifically informed aesthetic appreciator is better equipped to appreciate those portions of our natural world that are usually met with a response ranging from complete apathy to outright aggression, allow me to introduce some terminology. In his "Categories of Art," Kendall Walton discusses how an artwork's aesthetic properties are a function of the category in which the work belongs. Moreover, according to Walton, a work's being properly classified in a certain category is itself a function of which of the work's non-aesthetic perceptual properties are standard, variable, and contra-standard for that category.[26] Consider the example of abstract expressionism in painting. Abstract expressionism is a movement in art associated with painters such as Gorky, Pollack, de Kooning, and Rothko. In the works of these painters we see evidence of personal expression more so than we see evidence of careful and meticulous brushwork. Take, for example, Franz Kline's *Black Reflections*. This painting is a clear example of a work that can be properly classified as abstract expressionist. Now, according to Walton, standard properties are those that tend to be possessed by objects that belong in the category. A cursory examination of *Black Reflections* will reveal that the work exhibits the so-called free or gestured brush work that characterizes painting in this style. However, the particular color scheme, although perhaps not the intensity of it, chosen by Kline is a variable property. Variable properties are said to be irrelevant to the object's membership in the category. Finally, a property is contra-standard for a category if possession of that property counts against an object belonging to a certain category. For example, if Kline's work were to be perfectly symmetrical and otherwise mathematically precise, these would be contra-standard features of the work relative to the category of abstract expressionism.

[26] Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334–67.

Walton offers four conditions to help determine in which category an art work is properly a member. First, the work has a number of standard features and relatively few contra-standard features. Second, the work comes off at its aesthetic best under said category. Third, the work's artist intended the work to be perceived under that category. Fourth, the work fits into an established category of art. As articulated, Walton's theory of aesthetic perception seems limited to the world of artifacts since the last two conditions are not straightforwardly applicable to nature. Given the shortcomings of his account for the natural (non-artifactual) world, Walton argues that nature appreciation is not properly understood on the same model as art appreciation.

Many philosophers are unhappy with the relativistic implications of the apparent inapplicability of Walton's fixed-category model of aesthetic appreciation to nature. In response to the implication of relativity, many have argued against Walton's views. Allen Carlson has articulated a model for nature appreciation similar to Walton's art appreciation mode.[27] By making use of the general structure of Walton's model of appropriate art appreciation to illustrate appropriate nature appreciation, Carlson argues that there are correct categories of nature. The correct categories of natural entities are those supplied by the natural sciences. Science, Carlson argues, offers us the guidance that artists and the art world offer us in the artistic context. Moreover, Carlson defends a thesis called "positive aesthetics," according to which all of nature and its parts, when appreciated appropriately, have positive aesthetic value.[28] Science, on this view, is the corrective for the troubling cases of aesthetic appreciation we have thus far considered.

Let's look at an example of how science might supply such assistance. Consider the case of the carnivorous plant.[29] Looking at a Venus fly trap, a scientifically naïve person might see it as grotesque. It might be considered grotesque because it has jaws, which are contra-standard features for plants. But scientific knowledge can correct this conception by helping us to see the jaw-like features of the plant as variable, and therefore help us detect the beauty of the Venus fly trap. How can it do this?

Well, scientists might be able to articulate a range in regard to plants and their, let's say, carnivorousness. Perhaps the Venus fly trap is at one extreme of this scale but still within the standard range. On this account, although the jaw-like apparatus is variable, the presence of some number of the features that together comprise that apparatus is standard for plants. Initially this might

---

[27] See Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art, and Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. "Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity," pp. 54–71.

[28] Ibid., esp. "Nature and Positive Aesthetics," pp. 72–101.

[29] For another discussion of the implications of the case of the carnivorous plant for Carlson's aesthetic theory, see Glenn Parsons, "Nature Appreciation, Science, and Positive Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42, no. 3 (2002): 279–95.

seem like an odd suggestion, but it is actually quite plausible. Let's begin by taking a look at the definition of a carnivorous plant: "A plant is carnivorous if it *attracts, captures,* and *kills* animal life forms [and] . . . *digests* and *absorbs* the nutrients from the prey."[30]

Initially, this definition makes the Venus fly trap sound like a bizarre kind of plant, but independently none of these activities is very strange for a plant. We can put these activities and the features that make them possible on a continuum as follows: *all* plants *absorb* nutrients either through their leaves or their roots; *some* plants, namely flowering plants, also *attract* pollinators; orchids and water lilies "temporarily *trap* insect pollinators to ensure pollen transfer;" and other plants, such as "the Devil's Claw," *trap* and *kill* insects. In fact, this last sort of plant—"the Devil's Claw"—is sometimes referred to as subcarnivorous. The difference between it and what we would consider a "full-fledged carnivorous plant" is that it doesn't digest its prey. The International Carnivorous Plant Society offers the following answer to the question, *"What makes carnivorous plants different from other plants?"*[31]

> Really very little. Carnivorous plants are just like other plants, except they have a toolbox of abilities that, altogether, allow the plant to be carnivorous. Other plants have a few of these tools, but not all of them. The main tools are the abilities to attract insects, capture them, kill them, digest them, and absorb the resulting nutrients. Noncarnivorous plants have flowers to attract and even capture insects, toxic compounds to kill insects feeding on them, molecules that have digestive properties, and structures like roots to absorb the nutrients. Carnivorous plants just combine these features in an interesting way.[32]

If so, that is, if carnivorous plants just combine features common to plants in an interesting way, then scientific knowledge—it seems—would correct the mistaken judgment that Venus fly traps are ugly. Once we realize that Venus fly traps are really very similar to other plants—both sub and non-carnivorous ones—and that the jaw-like apparatus is an amazing amalgamation of features it shares with other plants, we see the carnivorous plant as fascinating, intriguing, or something along those lines, but *not* ugly.

Obviously there are more difficult cases than that of the Venus fly trap. The Venus fly trap is an example of an unfamiliar, seemingly strange, natural object. But some of the objects we tend to find ugly are neither unfamiliar nor strange. Rather, many cases of difficult aesthetic appreciation are difficult because phobias lurk behind many of the negative aesthetic judgments that have regrettable ecological implications. It is not coincidental that of the natural objects for which it is most difficult to rally public support are some of

---

[30] B. A. Meyers-Rice, *Carnivorous Plant, FAQ* v8.1 (2002), http://www.sarracenia.com/faq.html.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

the most commonly feared creatures: rodents, reptiles, and insects. Dominant aesthetic sensibility is unlikely to come to value these entities unless the fear of them subsides.

However, there is good news regarding the common strong and specific fears mentioned above—of reptiles, rats, and spiders. It is that many of these fears are obviously irrational, exaggerated, or only justified in specific contexts. Thus, whenever possible, the fears and the beliefs that feed them, underwriting negative aesthetic judgments of nature must be replaced with knowledge of their complete or relative harmlessness as well as of the connections between the health of the feared creature, its natural environment, and the well-being of humans. In short, my solution is to prejudice individuals toward the natural environment, to encourage a Stolnitzian "sympathetic attitude" toward natural objects. In other words, I believe that we should admit that aesthetic appreciation is rarely ever objective, especially in the everyday lives of individuals. As such, we should allow, even encourage, a biasing of aesthetics in order to make our taste more eco-friendly. While my bias here is an aesthetic one with morally relevant consequences, Karen Warren has discussed the biased nature of a feminist ethic as follows:

> . . . a feminist ethic makes no attempt to provide an "objective" point of view, since it assumes that in contemporary culture there really is no such point of view. As such it does not claim to be "unbiased" in the sense of "value-neutral" or "objective." However, it does assume that whatever bias it has as an ethic centralizing the voices of oppressed persons is a *better bias*—"better" because it is more inclusive and therefore less partial—than those which exclude those voices.[33]

It is my contention that one way to ensure that our aesthetic experiences of nature are biased in a better way is to rely heavily on the assistance of scientific education. This possibility underscores an important difference between the motivation behind Carlson's scientific cognitivism and my own endorsement of the scientific model of nature appreciation. Carlson argues that

> Science is the paradigm of that which reveals objects for what they are and with the properties they have. Thus, it not only presents itself as the source of objective truth, it brands alternative accounts as subjective falsehood and therefore, in accord with objective appreciation, as irrelevant to aesthetic appreciation.[34]

However, I am not arguing that science is able to yield objective truths whereas

---

[33] Karen Warren, "The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism," *Environmental Ethics* 12 (1990): 140.

[34] Allen Carlson, "Appreciating Art and Appreciating Nature," in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 219.

more ostensibly cultural lenses such as mythology or more obviously subjective lenses such as emotions are not. I am merely claiming that the bias of science is a useful tool in the aesthetic appreciation of nature, especially when we are aiming to forge the way for an eco-friendly aesthetic.

In closing, let me share a story about how one community's aesthetic taste was transformed via scientific education and a bit of aesthetic manipulation. The transformation in this case was made through education, dispelling of unfounded fears, clearing the path for aesthetic appreciation, which was then supplemented by familiar aesthetic cues, making the aesthetic appreciation and resultant affection a realizable reality.

In 1980 a bridge in Austin Texas—the Congress Avenue Bridge—was reconstructed.[35] Reconstruction included the addition of crevices under the bridge. It turned out that these crevices provided a great place for bats to roost. Soon thousands of bats made the new Congress Avenue Bridge their home. The locals' first reaction was a concerted effort to destroy the bat colony, but Bat Conservation International (BCI) intervened. It informed the locals of several facts about bats: (1) "bats are gentle and incredibly sophisticated animals," (2) "bat-watchers have nothing to fear if they don't try to handle the bats," and (3) "on nightly flights out from under the bridge the bats eat from 10,000 to 30,000 pounds of insects, including agricultural pests."[36] In short, they told the locals there is no need to fear the bats and having them here will help your garden grow. Because of the efforts of BCI, the bats stayed and presently the bridge is summer home to approximately one million bats. Furthermore, BCI's efforts to educate the locals and dispel myths had an even more remarkable effect. Not only are the bats tolerated, they are now an object of aesthetic appreciation. Tourists and locals bring blankets and picnic baskets and enjoy watching the nightly bat flights. In line with landscape architects' suggestion to provide familiar aesthetic clues, Austin has built a "Bat Observation Area" and employs "Bat Interpreters" on summer weekends. Local restaurants such as T.G.I. Friday's even offer dinner seating from an ideal spot for bat viewing.

As D. W. Yalden and P. A. Morris point out in their close study of bats, bats are worthy of our conservation efforts for a variety of reasons, not the least of which being that they are extremely scientifically interesting. Perhaps for that reason, as Hargrove suggests, bats are also aesthetically interesting!

> Conservation has become a public issue, but efforts have been dangerously arbitrary, concentrating on animals with plenty of public appeal. We must not choose which kinds of wildlife we will permit to live based upon capricious concepts of prettiness or social acceptability! Bats are among the most interesting, complex and highly developed of all animals . . . but in many places they need

[35] Bat Conservation International, "The Bats at Congress Avenue Bridge." From http://www.batcon.org/discover/congress.html.

[36] *Ibid.*

urgent help. They face decline, even extinction; against this somber and very final threat our whims are trivial, our prejudices criminal.[37]

The case of the bats in Austin, Texas gives us a model to follow. People generally fear bats and judge them ugly, going out of their way to avoid them, even, in fact, if that entails killing them. However, we see here a case where the general public became convinced that bats were not to be feared. As a result, the people of Austin were then able to give the bats an aesthetic chance. They soon learned that the once feared bats were actually objects of considerable aesthetic delight.

This case suggests that one possible way to encourage an ecologically informed aesthetic is to dispel fears and outline in clear and precise ways the manners in which the well-being of humans and all else depends on the well-being of such things as slimy slugs and ugly bugs, not in order to separate ecological from aesthetic concerns, but precisely in order to most successfully clear the way for the formulation of an eco-friendly aesthetic. Concerning aesthetic matters, at least of equal practical importance with the issue of how aesthetic factors affect our ecological awareness is the issue of how our awareness and attitude toward natural objects affects our aesthetic responses to them.

CONCLUSION

Despite my skepticism regarding the extent to which we can rely on current aesthetic tastes to be eco-friendly, nothing I have said is intended to refute the claim that an eco-friendly aesthetic will have positive ecological effects. Neither do I wish to claim that an aesthetic revolution can right all ecological wrongs. An aesthetic revolution should be part of but cannot, and should not, be expected to be the whole or the majority of the solution to the current ecological crisis. As Emily Brady explains:

> While aesthetic experience can support moral deliberation, it provides just one foothold among others. An aesthetic relationship to nature values nature disinterestedly; that is, without self-interest and on its own terms. A possible consequence of this is a more intimate engagement with nature, where we deepen and broaden our appreciation of it, but the relationship is at the same time respectful of nature's mystery, its "otherness." The trouble is that the same people who care about the natural environment often harm it. Even if aesthetic engagement engenders a sympathetic attitude, moral constraints, such as justice, are needed to provide the solid foundation required for a practical environmental ethic.[38]

---

[37] D.W. Yalden and P.A. Morris, *The Lives of Bats* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1975), p. 193.

[38] Emily Brady, "Aesthetics, Ethics and the Natural Environment," from *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics*, ed. Arnold Berleant (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002), p. 124.

What I hope to have underscored here is that in order to accomplish the aesthetic portion of this solution, environmentalists will do well to make individuals themselves more eco-friendly by dispelling many of the myths and misconceptions about objects in the natural world. It is worth mentioning that additional difficulties persist. These difficulties are due to the fact that there is much in nature that is a real and credible threat to human life; frequently, however, such threats only materialize when humans accidentally and inappropriately intervene in the lives of other creatures. By learning what is and what is not dangerous, and in what contexts the danger is real, we can clear the path for aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, through education we can also clear the way toward sublime experiences of nature that take as their object a dangerous entity, but from a safe vantage point.

Furthermore, making people more eco-friendly does not make the quest for an eco-friendly aesthetic unnecessary or redundant because aesthetic attraction can be an extremely powerful force with potential beyond that of scientific education. Convincing people, for example, that bats don't want to nest in their hair will only go so far. It will perhaps dissipate some of their negative feelings toward bats, but encouraging them to then see for themselves the aesthetic value of bats can go further by creating a positive affectionate attachment for them, which will likely be followed by a desire to protect them. Leopold is on the right path when he calls it inconceivable "that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value . . . in the philosophical sense."[39] To that important note we can add the claim of no less practical importance that our aesthetic appreciation is also intensified and encouraged by such love, respect, and admiration.

[39] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 261.