Why Should We Save Nature's Hidden Gems?

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I want to talk today about aesthetic preservation. This is the idea that, although the development of some natural area X could provide economic benefits, we should forgo these benefits and preserve X in its natural state because of its aesthetic value. Now in real life, debates over the preservation of natural areas are rarely, if ever, couched solely in aesthetic terms. To make their case, proponents of nature preservation typically appeal to a range of factors: economic, ecological, moral, and so on. But the aesthetic value of nature is a recurrent theme in preservation debates. As Holmes Rolston once put it, "Ask people, "Why save the Grand Canyon or the Grant Tetons" and the ready answer will be 'Because they are beautiful. So grand!"[1] So the idea of aesthetic preservation, although it is by no means the only potential rationale for preserving nature, is an important one.

As a rationale for preserving nature, however, aesthetic preservation raises many questions. For instance, if someone suggests saving natural area X because it has aesthetic value, we can ask how X's aesthetic value has been determined. Can we be sure that area X is, in fact, aesthetically excellent? When proponents of development question X's aesthetic excellence (as they always do) what do we say? Even if we can establish that X is aesthetically excellent, we are faced with the difficult question of how to weigh this aesthetic value against other kinds of values (economic ones, for instance). Say that area X is aesthetically excellent, but that developing it would deliver 300 well-paying jobs for the next fifty years. Aesthetic preservation requires that the aesthetic value here outweigh the economic benefit. But is this really so? What if the number of jobs was 3000, or 10,000?

These are some of the difficulties surrounding the idea of aesthetic preservation. They are important difficulties, but I do not want to discuss them today: rather, I will assume that we can address them.[2] Here I want to address a different problem that arises for aesthetic preservation in certain peculiar cases: I call it the 'hidden gems problem'. Let us assume that the natural area in question, X, is aesthetically outstanding, and that its aesthetic value outweighs whatever economic benefits might be reaped by developing X. The problem is that area X is so inaccessible and/or fragile that actually visiting X to enjoy its aesthetic value is either impossible or else imprudent, because it would irrevocably harm or destroy it. Since no one can actually enjoy the aesthetic value of the natural area, its aesthetic value seems to become useless as a justification for its preservation.

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[1] "From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics", in A. Berleant (ed). *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives of Environmental Aesthetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 140.

[2] I discuss some of them further in *Aesthetics and Nature* (London: Continuum, 2008), chapter seven.

No doubt the hidden gems problem rarely, if ever, occurs in the simple, form I have described. But I think that the general problem is a feature of many real life instances of aesthetic preservation, and to illustrate I have an example.

Sable Island

Sable Island is a small sandy outpost, barely 25 miles long, about 180 miles off the coast of Nova Scotia. Its fame rests chiefly on its menace to shipping: Atlantic storms drive ships onto its shoals, and there are more than 300 known shipwrecks off the island's coast. But it is also a starkly beautiful place. A mariner who came to the island in 1916 said "[It was] the most striking landscape I had ever seen; the island appeared to be made of burnished gold and the hills, which faced me, had the angularity of waves in a storm".[3] The island appears golden because it is composed entirely from sand. Adding to its mysterious allure is the continual shroud of fog (present for a third of the year), its populations of rare migrating sea birds, and perhaps most famously, its wild horses. Domesticated horses were brought here at some point in the eighteenth century, and their feral descendents have roamed the island ever since.

Although it seems odd to think of such a destructive place as fragile, the island's landscape is very sensitive to human activity. Lighthouse keepers who manned the island found that the removal of even small amounts of the native vegetation could cause entire sand dunes to be washed away by storms. To date, human intrusion hasn't posed much threat to the island, due to its remote location and the fact that the Canadian government has strictly controlled access. However, this is changing. Well-heeled tourists have recently been spotted on sightseeing excursions to the island. Also, it was recently discovered that Sable Island sits directly on top of one of the largest natural gas fields in North America. Currently there are four offshore drilling platforms operating just off the island, pumping gas onshore via an underwater pipeline.

Apparently in response to these developments, in January of this year the Canadian government proposed turning Sable Island into a national park. The plan, however, was greeted tepidly by Sable enthusiasts. Many took issue with the government's stated intention to "manage the current and likely increased interest and ability of the public to access the Island with programs to facilitate visitor experience."[4] The 'Hands off Sable Island' Facebook group is insisting on precisely that: a complete ban on sightseers, whose presence would jeopardize its unique landscape.

In this position lies precisely the hidden gems conundrum. The issues involved in the Sable Island case are complex, but for our purposes let's focus attention just on the idea of preserving Sable for aesthetic reasons. It seems impossible to say "Save Sable for its beauty!" when no one, outside a handful of government-approved scientists, can ever experience this beauty. Doesn't the fact that no

[3] Quoted in Bruce Armstrong, *Sable Island: Nova Scotia's Mysterious Island of Sand* (Halifax: Formac Publishing, 1987), p. 9.

[4] "Sable Island to be Protected under Federal Law", Government of Canada Press Release, 25 January 2010, online at http://news.gc.ca/web/article-eng.do?m=/index&nid=508239 .

one, or only a very few people, can enjoy it aesthetically destroy the logic of preserving it on aesthetic grounds? This is the question I want to explore.

Some responses

One reply that the proponent of aesthetic preservation might give to the hidden gems problem is that the amount of enjoyment we get from Sable's aesthetic value is irrelevant, since the aesthetic value of natural areas is an intrinsic value. In this context, "intrinsic value" refers to value that is independent of any effects on human beings (it is, in other words, 'non-anthropogenic' value). If this claim is true, then nature can have aesthetic value even if it is unable to produce any aesthetic enjoyment.

Some philosophers have supported this claim, or claims like it, arguing that aesthetic value does not depend upon the capacity to provide aesthetic experiences (G.E. Moore had a famous argument to this effect). But whatever the merits of these arguments, this view has the serious drawback of making the idea of aesthetic value difficult to grasp. A more common approach takes all value to be anthropogenic: on this approach, value is not 'out there in the natural world', so to speak, but rather attaches to things only in virtue of their relations to desirable human experiences. This is the more common view, I take it, because it is fairly easy to understand. If this isn't right, and aesthetic value *is* 'out there in the natural world', then what exactly is aesthetic value? Is it a property that, like other natural qualities, we can measure in some objective fashion? How does aesthetic value fit into the scientific picture describing the rest of the natural world?

Of course, these questions will not deter some philosophers from introducing value into the natural world. But this move is a particularly awkward one for the proponent of aesthetic preservation to make. The reason is that one of the most attractive things about aesthetic preservation is that, unlike non-anthropogenic value, aesthetic value—the capacity to produce aesthetic enjoyment—is familiar and easy to understand.[5] Turning aesthetic value into a creature of darkness destroys one of its main virtues as a rationale for nature preservation. Thus, I will assume that the proponent of aesthetic preservation will not favour this rather drastic response to the hidden gems problem.

A more promising response might be based on the idea that we *can*, in fact, enjoy nature's hidden gems, despite not being able to directly experience them. For instance, one might say that it doesn't matter that we can't actually get to Sable island, since we can aesthetically appreciate it via the imagination. I think it's probably true that we can aesthetically appreciate Sable in our imaginations, although the nature of this appreciation would require some clarification. The problem with this response is that it proves too much: if we can appreciate Sable through pure imagination, it no longer seems to matter, so far as aesthetic enjoyment goes, whether it actually exists or not. We can also use imagination to aesthetically appreciate Tolkien's Middle-Earth, or Dante's Hell, and not only do these places not exist now, they never existed at all. What the aesthetic preservationist really

[5] On this point, see Eliot Sober, "Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism", in B.G. Norton (ed), *The Preservation of Species: The Value of Biological Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp.173-194.

requires, then, is a way of aesthetically appreciating Sable island that doesn't require going there, but does require its continued existence.

The obvious candidate here is appreciation via visual representations produced through some direct causal chain terminating with Sable island: photographs or films, for instance. The Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History maintains a website on the island which states "As it is a place most of us will never visit, this web site brings Sable Island to you."[6] And so it does, in a way, by displaying photographs of island. There's no question that these have some aesthetic value. Perhaps this suffices to address the hidden gems problem: we should preserve Sable Island in its natural state because it is required to produce a set of visual representations (film, photographs) that can provide widespread aesthetic enjoyment.

Some will object here that experiencing the aesthetic value of photographs of Sable island is not the same as experiencing the aesthetic value of the Island itself. More strongly, it may be said that such representations do not allow us to experience the location's aesthetic value at all.[7] These claims may be right. But it remains true also that such photos and videos do bring aesthetic enjoyment of some kind, and if they do, the enjoyment they provide might be a basis for preserving the 'raw material', as it were, for their production.

However, this response to the hidden gems problem seems ultimately unsatisfactory. One difficulty lies in the threat of diminishing returns. It may be worthwhile to spare a natural area so that its aesthetic excellence can used to produce an aesthetically excellent set of photographs. But once such a visual record has been produced, and is made available for enjoyment, is it worthwhile to preserve the area in question so that further visual records can be produced? This depends obviously on how comprehensive a photo record we possess, but at some point we must ask: How many pictures does one need? There may come a point at which the new visual records generated no longer produce sufficient aesthetic payoff to justify foregoing development of the area.

A deeper problem with this response lies in the assumption that the continued existence of the natural area is required to produce these visual representations. This probably was true in the past, when techniques for 'doctoring' and enhancing visual representations were limited. But with current technology, it seems highly doubtful that the only way we could produce beautiful Sable Island photos and films is by photographing or filming Sable Island. To return to the Middle Earth example, Peter Jackson's popular *Lord of the Rings* films provided a stunning visual record of Tolkien's Middle Earth, contrived largely through digital effects. There seems no principled reason why the nature photography industry could not employ similar techniques to produce Sable-ish photos without Sable itself.

At this point, one might object that such doctored or as it were 'faked' pictures just wouldn't be the same: we wouldn't respond to them as we would respond to standard photos of Sable Island. Indeed, we might come to regard these representations as a kind of Art: 'digital landscapes' (and hence, akin to traditional landscape paintings), rather than nature photography. But our question

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[6] Online at: http://museum.gov.ns.ca/mnh/nature/sableisland/english_en/index_en.htm

[7] On both claims, see Allen Carlson, "Formal Qualities in the Natural Environment", *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 13 (1979) 99-114, reprinted in *Aesthetics and the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000).

then becomes 'Why do we need to have nature photography instead of digital landscape Art? The reason for insisting on the latter seems not to be purely aesthetic, since we can obviously derive aesthetic satisfaction from landscape Art. The purely aesthetic case for preservation has, once more, slipped between our fingers.

Another approach

No doubt there is more to say about these responses, but perhaps enough has been said to motivate a different approach. A problem with the responses covered so far is that all of them focus only on the impact of development on the *quantity* of aesthetic enjoyment produced. Perhaps we would do better to focus instead on the impact of development on the *quality* of aesthetic enjoyment.

We can develop this idea by turning to a classic text on the quality of (what we would call) aesthetic responses: Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste". In that essay, Hume singles out those with superior taste—in our terms, those with aesthetic responses of superior quality—whom he calls the 'true judges'. One of the characteristics of the true judge is being experienced in making comparisons between the different "species and degrees of excellence". Hume says that "a man, who has had no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him". Hume's basic idea is plausible enough: someone who only read drug store romance novels would probably have a skewed standard of literary excellence, being unaware of many of the more impressive things that can be achieved with the novel form.

Now in order for a true judge to engage in such comparisons, he must have access to objects spanning the range of species and degrees of aesthetic excellence. If someone has nothing to read but drug store romance novels, he will be stuck with his skewed standard of literary excellence: one needs some masterpieces as a contrast. And it is here that I propose to offer the initial justification for preserving nature's hidden gems: they serve as masterpieces with which aspiring true judges can compare the more common objects of appreciation. Thus, a man might come to over-rate the beauty of his mediocre local landscape, but viewing an outstanding landscape such as Sable Island might jolt him out of his complacency, put his previous assessments into a better perspective, and improve his judgement, just as reading Shakespeare might do for the reader of romance novels.

Of course, this point seems not much of an advance on our problem. For all we have established is that the hidden gems can enhance the quality of aesthetic experience of the happy few who get to experience them: they make these visitors more apt to be true (or truer) judges than they otherwise would be. But the whole problem of the hidden gems is that the benefits to the few allowed to visit, real as they may be, are insufficient to outweigh the benefits that would accrue to society from development. What we lack is any connection between the benefit to the small group of visitors and the good of society at large. I think we can draw such a connection, however, by reflecting on the question: What is so valuable about true judges, anyway?

In one sense, the question seems trivial. True judges are, well, true judges, and that is precisely what is valuable about them. They make better appraisals of the features of objects and of

their aesthetic value—they are more able to get it right about such matters—and perhaps this is just obviously a good thing. But there is also another good thing about true judges: they also play a useful role in helping *the rest of us* to improve *our* taste. This happens in a number of ways, but the key one here is the true judge's ability to deliver informed verdicts on the aesthetic value of particular things. Good literary critics, for instance, make appraisals of the aesthetic value of literary works that call our own preferences into question, help us to see key things that we've missed, and draw us toward works we may have unduly neglected. In doing these things, they lead us toward the improvement of aesthetic judgement. My suggestion is that true judges of aesthetic value in nature can help improve all of our tastes in landscape in a similar way. Since nature's hidden gems are often requisite training materials for true judges of aesthetic value in nature, we have a reason to preserve them.

To conclude I'd like to consider an objection to this solution to the hidden gems problem. It rests on the grounds that there are important disanalogies between the cases of art and nature here. For instance, one of the main ways in which literary critics familiar with the masterpieces help improve our literary taste is by moving us to read those masterpieces. To return to my example, if the devotee of romance novels is moved by a good Shakespearean critic, she will probably read *Macbeth*. But when someone in a dreary corner of the Midwest reads a description of Sable Island, even if she is moved to go see it, she cannot, precisely because it is a hidden gem. Thus, one might doubt whether true judges immersed in the beauties of nature's hidden gems are capable improving the general taste in landscape, since the masterpieces that they know are inaccessible to us. However, this does not follow, I think, and we can see why by considering a hypothetical case involving artworks.

Imagine that something bizarre happens to Vermeer's paintings. One day, the images seem to disappear: the canvasses are now simply black. At first it is suspected that the canvasses have been stolen and replaced with blackened ones (perhaps as a joke), but this is ruled out by scientific analysis showing the canvasses to be Vermeer's. Furthermore, it soon comes to light that the images have not truly disappeared at all, because a handful of people are still able to view the images, in their original colour and condition (to them, the canvasses do not look black, as they do to the rest of us). Upon further study, it is discovered that some chemical oddity in Vermeer's paints has caused this change, and that a rare genetic quirk allows the visual systems of a very select few to perceive the original image, despite the change. Furthermore, scientists reveal that the chemical change is now causing the canvasses to rapidly deteriorate: this deterioration can be prevented, but only by an extremely costly treatment that must be applied continuously.

Now the question I want to pose about this example is: Do we have good reason to pay the cost of maintaining Vermeer's canvasses in existence? I think the answer is yes. The reason to preserve them is that the opportunity to experience these masterpieces will allow those afforded this opportunity to become truer judges, which is a boon to us all. It is true that these critics will never get us to experience Vermeers, since this is impossible for those of us lacking Vermeer-sight. But these critics are a boon to us nonetheless: their greater experience translates into more accurate and incisive verdicts about works we can appreciate. Facilitating this experience, therefore, a prudent investment for any society that views as worthwhile the aesthetic dimension of life.