

The Scope of Concern: Environmental Ethics and Public Policy

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Abstract

Environmental problems challenge the traditional idea that public policy is based on concern for citizens in the same political community in which policies are enacted. Environmental destruction adversely affects foreign peoples, future generations, and all other living things. We must therefore examine which categories of external parties ought to be taken into consideration in the policymaking process. The present article explores this question by critically examining major theories in environmental ethics and related areas. First, the suppositions of the discussion are enumerated. In a liberal democracy where citizens coexist and cooperate irrespective of the presence of conflicting visions of the good life, public policy is to be justified without relying on any one of these visions. In the light of this presumption, deep ecology, a powerful ecocentric movement, fails as a paradigm for public policy for three reasons.

First, deep ecology tends to overlook conflicts among human beings; second, the movement is a proponent of only one particular vision of the good life; and third, that might violate basic rights of individuals. Animals and plants are considered merely instrumentally for human interests.

Next, the article argues that foreign peoples and future generations fall within policy considerations. After a critical examination of so-called lifeboat ethics, the author proposes two arguments regarding international concerns. The first is an argument derived from international justice. When the environment in one country is polluted by corporations in another, the concept of corrective justice requires that the government of the latter country shall compel the polluters to compensate victims. To protect the global environment from industrial and social activity in each country, the idea of distributive justice demands that governments cooperate to develop a fair

international scheme, according to which every country shoulders the cost of environmental protection in proportion to the benefit from its past activity. The second argument presented is one of service assistance. Environmental aid is justified by a general principle stating that when a government cannot afford funds and skills for public service, other governments have an obligation to assist. Concern for future generations is justified neither by natural affection for our posterity nor by the alleged rights of future individuals. Rather the principle of intergenerational fairness is invoked, meaning that present generations, who received the natural heritage from past generations, have a duty to bestow the heritage on future generations.

Finally, a comprehensive system of continuously increasing environmental taxes is recommended. This system is intended to promote energy-productive innovation, to induce consumers to adopt an environment-conscious lifestyle, and to foster ecologically sound visions of the good life.

Keywords: deep ecology, environmental taxes, future generations, international relationship, liberal democracy