The Ethics and Politics of Environmentalist Deception

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The extinction 'crisis' as a case study in environmentalist exaggeration

Major changes in national policies in a democracy usually follow value changes promoted by a dedicated vanguard. The evangelical elements of the environmentalist movement are such a vanguard. They advocate changes to the structure and preferences of the values of large numbers of people. If and when conversion takes place, the zeal of the reforming ethic so generated becomes a potent proselytising and political force.

To change beliefs requires that an interconnected set of propositions be accepted.

The core of the 'deep Green' ethic is an apocalyptic vision of world crisis, an absolutist environmental ethic and an ideological critique of liberal, market economies. The key propositions underlying this vision are as follows:

(i) The natural world and species are under severe and immediate threat; there is an ecological 'crisis'.

(ii) The environment and other species are intrinsically valuable and protecting them is an absolute responsibility.

(iii) Human population growth, expanding human consumption, and spreading industrialisation are the fundamental causes of pollution, exhaustion of resources, environmental degradation and threats to biodiversity. There is therefore an immediate moral responsibility laid upon mankind to eliminate these causes.

(iv) Underlying these immediate causes of the crisis and driving the whole process is a malignant engine of destruction and exploitation identified as liberal capitalism and the market.

(v) The evidence for the crisis is apparent in that:
   (a) there is a dangerous hole in the ozone layer due to the release of chlorofluorocarbons by human action;
   (b) global temperatures are rising as a result of the release of 'greenhouse' gases because of industrial and agricultural activities, etc., with catastrophic long-term implications;
   (c) thousands of species are becoming extinct each year because of destruction of habitats for forestry, agricultural, industrial and domestic purposes;
   (d) mankind is rapidly approaching the 'limits to growth' because of the depletion of mineral and natural resources, which will soon be exhausted.

(vi) Accordingly, decisions will have to be taken now, by national governments and international convention, to reverse present trends and to ensure that growth is 'sustainable'.

(vii) Sustainable growth entails establishing more community control over economic activities.

(viii) A market economy takes no account of community-environment interactions and interdependencies; and market failures and externalities, as the major causes of despoliation, can only be eliminated or mitigated by government regulation.

The foregoing is an 'ideal type' characterisation of the blended belief structure and ethical position that sustains environmentalism as a radical movement. I am not suggesting that the 'facts' could not be added to or varied, that every environmentalist subscribes to every proposition, or that all who want to conserve or preserve are to be identified with it. But I would argue that something very like this set of beliefs would be substantially found in many present day movements and their active adherents.

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Accordingly, the validity or otherwise of these core beliefs is crucial in justifying and reinforcing environmentalism as an ethical stance. The scientific status of the propositions and predictions supporting environmentalist movements becomes quite crucial.

Raising the Alarm

What we find when we examine the various factual propositions behind the beliefs is not plain statements, but highly coloured ones offered in alarmist terms. It is, of course, quite usual for those impatient to change the status quo to characterise it in disturbing and challenging terms. Thus, the abiding *themes* accompanying the statements coming from many environmentalist movements, in addition to the constantly repeated call for the ethical subordination of human interests to biocentric interests, are *urgency, exaggeration, omission of contradictory evidence,* and *certainty.* Action cannot be delayed because the situation is so serious and widespread *now;* and the issues and courses of action to be taken are not complex, probabilistic and uncertain, but clear-cut and predictable.

Typical of this sort of approach is a leaflet on biodiversity prepared and distributed by the Australian Conservation Foundation (1992):

> *The expanding human population with its voracious appetite for land and natural resources, now threatens the very fabric of life on earth.*
>
> *All species have an inherent right to exist.*
>
> *It is important that humans relinquish the anthropocentric view of nature that places our species above all others.*
>
> *Climate change caused by the Greenhouse Effect will impact drastically on species trapped in shrinking or altered habitats.*

Falsehoods and Fears

To compare what some prominent environmentalist individuals and organisations have said and predicted with what in fact is the case and with what in fact has come about, is to be struck with their cavalier ethics. There are many examples where scientific caution and stress on the complex nature of environmental phenomena have been swept aside in favour of alarming pseudo-facts and firm predictions based on flimsy evidence.

The locus classicus of this technique, published in 1972, is the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows 1972). On the basis of computer modelling, it predicted that continued economic growth would rapidly exhaust natural resources, leading to economic collapse and global catastrophe. Needless to say, the implicit villains were headlong capitalism and free markets.

In the words of one reviewer at the time, the book was described as 'empty', 'misleading', and a 'rediscovery of the oldest maxim of computer science: Garbage In, Garbage Out' (Salmon 1992: 54-6) . Nevertheless, *Limits* was endlessly recycled as environmental gospel, with profound and lasting effects on public perceptions of environmental threats.

Similarly, in a reminiscence on the publication of Rachel Carson's enormously influential *Silent Spring* (1963), Bruce Ames and Thomas Jukes (1993:36-7) recall how:

> *The book starts with a romanticised vision of a world in harmony, followed by a horror story of an 'evil spell that settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died... Children... would be stricken and die within a few hours... The few birds seen anywhere were moribund... and could not fly... a white granular powder... had fallen like snow upon the roofs and lawns, the fields and streams.*

The powder, of course, was DDT which, as Professors Ames and Jukes go on to point out, actually saved tens of millions of lives. Condemned as a significant carcinogen, it has been shown not to be so; and there is uncertainty about its supposed effect in thinning the eggshells of birds.

Silent Spring and *Limits to Growth,* and their influence despite their falsities and inaccuracies, are typical of much of the material that helps form the belief systems of many of those who become environmental zealots, as well as the attitudes of ordinary concerned citizens wanting to protect their environments against what, on the misleading evidence they are given, seem powerful threats.

Ultimately, the significance of these two deeply flawed books rests not merely in their lack of truth, but in establishing a *mode* of politico-environmental debate whose apocalyptic sensationalism has remained a model to this day. The technique is one of making a startling and foreboding claim, without qualification and on flimsy or incomplete evidence, to draw unjustified conclusions, and then to use these conclusions as the basis for a call to political action. This, without putting too fine a point on it, is less than honest or, to be charitable, at least disingenuous. But its value, for those whose fortunes are tied to radical environmentalist causes, is in its public and political consequences; first in recruiting public alarm and then in using this alarm to pressure governments into hasty regulatory action which has two effects valued by those attached to the ideological belief structure I have earlier

described:

(i) it enhances their influence and prestige;

(ii) it moves more economic and social power over industry and commerce to the governmental centre.

That all of this may have costs and unintended consequences that damage a variety of legitimate human interests, or that reduce environmental amenity further down the track, is ignored. There are several examples, of which the DDT controversy is one. As one of the cheapest and most effective pesticides, it made a major contribution to more abundant and cheaper food, to the elimination of disease-carrying insects and therefore to better health and longevity throughout the world. Insofar as it helped to raise agricultural productivity on existing land, it reduced the demand for the opening up of virgin land and wilderness. The effects on bird populations are uncertain, but if it does pose a threat on this score, this has to be balanced against the costs of not using it.

Is There an Extinction Crisis?

Few issues provide as much leverage for promoting radical changes to Western ways of life as the call for preservation of species. One consequence of growing affluence in the West has been increased interest in wild creatures and their habits. Nature programs on television, whale-watching holidays, and wildlife safaris, are immensely popular. Media reports of threats to species, especially the larger, more charismatic creatures, accordingly elicit instant protests and calls to action. In short, all of this is simply one aspect of the increasing value placed by more and more people on a variety of natural and environmental amenities. It is a ready source of social and political energy that may be exploited to serve a variety of purposes. Since virtually any industrial, agricultural, mining, forestry, domestic or recreational activity can be construed as 'threatening habitats', and thus biodiversity and the continuance of species, the freedom of action to engage in those activities can be quickly put at risk if the cry of 'extinction' or 'species threat' is raised.

In seeking to answer the question of whether or not there is an extinction crisis, we once again confront the ethically-dubious technique of raising alarms on the basis of extravagant claims supported by estimates and conjectures of doubtful scientific merit.

As we saw with *The Limits to Growth* and *Silent Spring*, a single report or book can determine the direction of subsequent discussion and, despite deficiencies of fact and argument, become a gospel justifying far-reaching policies. The common feature is a few startling claims which, when accepted, colour the whole course of what follows, including treatment of issues in the media and public perceptions.

The paradigm document in the case of the 'biodiversity crisis' is the 1980 *Global 2000 Report to the President of the United States.* It forecast that between 1980 and 2000: 'Extinctions of plant and animal species will increase dramatically. Hundreds of thousands of species – perhaps as many as 20 percent of all species on earth will be irretrievably lost as their habitats vanish, especially in tropical forests' (1980: 1:3).

Eleven years later we find those figures quoted in 'Biological Diversity in Australia' distributed in 1991 by the federal Department of the Arts, Sport, The Environment and Tourism (DASET), as supporting material for the development of a National Strategy for the Conservation of Biological Diversity. A variation on the figures is presented in another DASET document, *Biolinks* (1991:1) where we are told:

> *The need to protect the planet's biological diversity has never been more pressing. It has been estimated that one plant, bird and mammal species and some 50 other species are lost from the earth's tropical forests every day. This estimate of extinctions would increase significantly if species lost from other equally important ecosystems such as temperate forests, coastal wetlands, and inland waters were also included.*

The figure of 53 species lost every day from tropical forests, plus 'significant' [by what measures and on what evidence?] losses elsewhere, translates to more than 19,345 species lost each year. What is the evidence for these figures?

This, and related questions, have been dealt with in some detail and with scientific rigour by Professor Julian Simon and the late Professor Aaron Wildavsky in *Assessing the Empirical Basis of the 'Biodiversity Crisis'* (1993). What follows is a summary of their discussion and conclusions.

The estimate of 20 percent loss of species by the year 2000 is made by Thomas Lovejoy in the *Global 2000 Report.* However, 'none of Lovejoy's references contain any scientifically impressive body of experience' (Simon and Wildavsky 1993:5-6) and the tables composed by Lovejoy are based on earlier estimates in Norman Myers' *The Sinking Ark* (1979). Myers' estimates are in turn based on a 1974 gathering of scientists who 'hazarded a guess that the overall extinction rate among all species, whether known to science or not, could now have reached 100 species per year' (Myers 1979:4-5).

On the basis of this 'guess' and extrapolating 'present [i.e.1979] patterns of exploitations' of species-rich, tropi-

cal moist forests, Myers 'supposes' that the final quarter of this century will see 'an average extinction rate of 40,000 species per year, or rather over 100 species per day'. As Simon and Wildavsky put it: 'so an upper limit for the present that is pure guesswork has become the basis of a forecast for the future which has been published in newspapers to be read by tens or hundreds of millions of people and understood as a scientific statement' (1993:7).

Indeed, the circulation to mass audiences via the daily press of precisely this kind of material, allied with the alarmism which has proven so potent in the past, continues unabated. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reprinted in its *Good Weekend* magazine an article by Professor Edward 0. Wilson of Harvard University on extinction of species. The reprint is given billing on the dinosaur-illustrated cover of *Good Weekend* with the words: 'Hell-Bent on Extinction: Can Humanity Survive Itself ?'. Inside, the heading of the article becomes: 'Death Wish: Guess Which Species is Heading for Extinction... Ours!'

The article begins with the familiar doom-laden, highly-suspect litany of impending disasters – overpopulation, exhaustion of soil and mineral resources, ozone-thinning, and greenhouse effect from excessive carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Man, the destroyer and polluter, is characterised as 'an environmental abnormality'; which is another way of saying (absurdly for a biologist) that man is the only non-natural thing in nature. Perhaps the only way to restore 'normality' to the environment is to get rid of man.

But the major part of the article is devoted to the extinction of species and the destruction of habitats, especially the tropical forests, by mankind. We are told that: '*Mass* extinctions are *reported* with increasing frequency in *every* part of the world' (emphasis added). One might ask what the scientific basis is for these 'reports'. For example, what are the 'mass extinctions' that have presumably taken place, with 'increasing frequency', in Australia, and where are they 'reported'? Then there is the further claim that: 'Vast numbers of species are *apparently* vanishing before they can be discovered and named' (Wilson 1994:16) (emphasis added). It is reasonable to conjecture that as species-rich environments disappear, as is happening with tropical rainforests, some as-yet unidentified species will be lost. But 'vast numbers' is no more than a guess, as the qualifier, 'apparently', in the quotation suggests; and there is evidence (see below, Simon and Wildavsky 1993) that species loss is by no means proportional to habitat loss.

Then comes another familiar-sounding estimation: '... it is reasonable to project a reduction by 20 percent or more of the rainforest species by 2020, rising to 50 percent or more by mid-century, if nothing is done' (Wilson 1994:16). Why is it reasonable? Wilson's answer is that: 'Even a small loss in area reduces the number of species. The relation is such that when the area of the habitat is cut to a 10th of its original cover, the number of species eventually drops by half' (p.16).

This claim brings us back to Simon's and Wildavsky's paper, because the path being followed by Wilson is the familiar one that they so devastatingly criticise. On the particular point that a 90 per cent loss of habitat implies the eventual loss of 50 per cent of species in it, they note that this is a common 'rule of thumb' measure used by biologists. Yet there would appear to be no empirical evidence verifying the rule. On the contrary, empirical observations in Puerto Rico, quoted by Simon and Wildavsky, show that where human activity reduced the area of primary forest by 99 percent, species extinction was nowhere near the 50 percent claimed under the rule of thumb (Simon and Wildavsky 1993: 8). Additionally, a recent criticism of the 'biogeography' theory of extinction notes that 'only four of 22 predictions came with sufficient explanation to permit independent examination. All of the rest provide anecdotal support or none at all (Mann 1991: 737).

Assessing the 'Crisis'

It should be emphasised here that I am not attempting to dismiss extinction of species as a non-problem, or to suggest that it is so minor as to be of negligible importance. Concern is justified, and it would be foolish to let a dangerous situation drift without response. But the question is whether it *is* dangerous, and what we might mean by 'dangerous'. Policies of protection of species must be measured against the real size and nature of the problem. Gross overestimation or exaggeration can easily lead to extravagant, costly and altogether inappropriate responses; responses that might well be counterproductive in the long term. As we shall see later, this has already happened in Australia and elsewhere. So scientific accuracy about the facts, to the extent that it is available or within reach, is of the first importance. Only when we have this can we rationally consider the objectives to be aimed at and the institutional methods most likely to achieve them efficiently and justly; taking account, of course, of the variety (and sometimes opposition) of the human interests involved. One can understand the interests of committed biologists in recruiting public alarm in an area of intense professional and ethical concern to them. But that very concern, and a sense of urgency, can sometimes induce overreaction and loss of judgment. Fortunately, however, the scientific ethic itself is on the side of objectivity and balance, despite the

occasional backsliding and misdirected enthusiasm of some individual scientists. Ultimately, it is the continuing integrity of this ethic and the dispassionate enquiry it supports upon which we must depend. As we shall now see, that dependence is not misplaced when it comes to a scientific appraisal of the rates and risks of extinction of species.

Simons and Wildavsky (1993) report how, as a result of the criticisms and questions directed at *The Global 2000 Report* and the guesses and estimates on which much of the more alarming conclusions were based, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) commissioned a book, *Tropical Deforestation and Species Extinction* (1992), edited by Whitmore and Sayer, to investigate the extent of extinctions.

'The results of that project', Simons and Wildavsky declare (1993:8), 'must be considered amazing. All the authors continue to be concerned about the rate of extinction. Nevertheless, they agree that the rate of known extinctions has been and continues to be very low'. They then quote many of the findings, a few of which are reproduced below. The selection gives a reliable flavour of the rest (1993: 9-10):

> *Known extinction rates are very low. Reasonably good data exist only for mammals and birds, and the current rate of extinction is about one species per year.*
>
> *... the group of zoologists could not find a single known animal species which could be properly declared as extinct, in spite of the massive reduction in area and fragmentation of their habitats in the past decades and centuries of intensive human activity.*
>
> *It is impossible to estimate even approximately how many unrecorded species may have become extinct.*
>
> *While better knowledge of extinction rates can clearly improve the design of public policies, it is equally apparent that estimates of global extinction rates are fraught with imprecision. We do not yet know how many species exist, even to within an order of magnitude.*

And so on, in much the same vein. The general conclusions are inescapable that, globally:

- the prediction that 20% of all species will be gone by the year 2000 has no scientific basis;
- there is no scientific foundation for the claim that by the end of this century 40,000 species will become extinct each year;
- demonstrated loss of species in recent years is very low;
- estimates of species loss that depend upon correlating loss of species with percentage loss of habitat are unreliable.

All in all, the scientifically-reliable picture is much, much less alarming than the general public and politicians are being led to believe. This is no reason for complacency. It is, however, reason to be more deliberate and measured in dealing with the situation, and reason to avoid grand, comprehensive proposals and policies of unknown impact and unintended consequences that will be difficult to unwind if and when their inappropriateness becomes evident.

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