

Cherished Places and Ecosystem Services

Mark Sagoff claims that if we are to explain what moves people to protect the natural environment, we will need to refer to their ‘cultural, aesthetic, and moral ties’ to the ‘places they cherish or love’. My aim here is not to dispute Sagoff’s very plausible claim. It is to consider how we should conceive of the relevant ties.

One option is suggested by a remark Sagoff makes in passing. Having noted that the US Environmental Protection Agency no longer sponsors much research on ecological risk assessment, he points out that ‘now it’s about ecosystem services’. And not just, I would add, at the EPA. It seems that wherever one turns nowadays, whether to pressure groups or to government agencies, talk about environmental protection is couched in terms of the ‘ecosystem services framework’ (ESF). In the environmental community, the ESF really does seem to be flavour of the month.

Can it provide a satisfactory account of the sorts of ties to which Sagoff refers? It might initially seem to have some promise. After all, the ESF is supposed to be able to account not just for the material benefits we obtain from ecosystems but also for non-material ones such as ‘spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation and aesthetic experiences’ (MA 2005: 29). Ecosystems are said to provide us with valuable ecosystem *cultural services*.

It is tempting to suppose that people’s cultural, aesthetic and moral ties to the places they cherish or love could be conceived in such terms. But there are, I believe, several reasons for scepticism. Consider, first, that distracting reference to *ecosystems*. As Thomas Kirchoff (2012) argues, when people derive non-material or ‘cultural’ benefits from the natural world they are typically responding to certain directly perceptible things, places and events, such as daffodils, upland valleys or the coming of spring, rather than to ecosystems per se. Poets, for instance, do not rhapsodise about ecosystems; landscape painters do not paint them. Indeed, given what Sagoff calls the ‘mixed up, contingent, fractious, intractable, unexpected, protean, erratic, changeable, unpredictable, fickle, variable, and dodgy’ characters of ecosystems, even ecologists find them hard to pin down.

In response to that line of criticism, defenders of the ESF could concede that ‘ecosystems’ might not be the best term for those more or less natural entities that provide us with cultural services (see, e.g., UKNEA 2011: Chapter 16.1.2). They could admit that some other term - ‘natural environments’ perhaps - might be better. But they would no doubt insist that their central point remains: that, whatever you call them, woods, wetlands and other such things provide us with a range of immensely valuable cultural services.

That would certainly strengthen the pro-ESF case. Dropping the reference to ecosystems really would make the notion of a cultural service easier to swallow. But grounds for scepticism remain. For there are reasons to think that the notion of a cultural *service*, even when stripped of the reference to ecosystems, remains dubious.

One such reason is indicated by the following passage from John O’Neill, Alan Holland and Andrew Light’s excellent introduction to environmental ethics:

actions are not just instrumental means to an end, but a way of expressing attitudes to people and things. Hence one cannot express one’s concern for one’s children by

saying, 'I love them so much that it would take at least one million pounds to give them up.' (2008: 84)

In response to the implied criticism, those who adopt the ESF will be quick to point out that they are not committed to quantifying – still less pricing - all services and that they are well aware that some services, particularly cultural ones, will be unquantifiable. Even so, one might continue to wonder whether there is something inherently irreverent about calling something a provider of *services*.

Again, supporters of the ESF will protest. They will point out that to say that something has value because it provides a service is not to deny that it might have other sorts of value. And they will rightly draw attention to the fact that those who adopt the ESF often do so because they value the natural world for its own sake – 'because it is beautiful, because it should exist for its own reasons and because we have no right to destroy it', as one advocate of services-talk puts it (Juniper 2012).

Yet the worry that talk of services is inherently irreverent is not so easily dispelled. (Indeed, the fact that those who favour such talk feel the need to stress the purity of their motives is telling.) So imagine, for comparison, how a daughter would react were her mother to tell her that she values her because of the valuable services that she provides. The remark is unlikely to go down well. The daughter would no doubt be upset to learn that she is regarded as a service provider *even if* her mother assures her that no one else could provide the relevant services, *even if* she is told that the value of those services cannot be quantified, and *even if* – finally - the mother tells her that she also loves her for her own sake. The very mention of services is likely to raise the daughter's hackles. It's an empirical question, of course, but I suspect that those people who cherish or love particular places would, similarly, take umbrage at talk of the cultural services those places provide. Devotees of the ESF will say '*valuable* services', yet those for whom such places matter are more likely to hear '*valuable services*' and, accordingly, take offence.

Assume that those who cherish or love certain places really would be offended by references to the cultural services they provide. In itself, this fact would not constitute a decisive objection to the ESF. It is, after all, one thing to show that environmentally concerned people are sometimes repelled or annoyed by talk of cultural services. But it is quite another to prove that their cultural, aesthetic and moral ties to the places they cherish or love cannot be conceived in such terms. Though some find it offensive, perhaps the ESF, with its notion of a cultural service, really is a good way to conceive of those ties.

Or perhaps not. Consider the example of a hill farmer. The area of upland in which he lives and works will have provided him with more than just shelter and land on which to raise sheep. Suppose that it has also helped to shape his sense of identity – that, for the farmer, the surrounding hills are part of who he is. It is clear that this particular semi-natural place will be of value to the farmer - and there is a *prima facie* case for saying that the fact that it is of value to him is something that should be taken into account by managers and policymakers. It would, however, be a mistake to say that the hills have value to him as a means to the independently-specifiable end of his obtaining a sense of who he is. For, on the contrary, it is not possible to describe the farmer's sense of identity without referring to the place which has helped to shape it. Providing a thorough defence of the point would take more space than I

have available here; however, it seems to me that in this case, as in many others when places are integral to our lives, the instrumentalist idiom of services, of *means* and *ends*, is unable to capture what is in essence a *constitutive* relation. It cannot accommodate the fact that the hills in which our imaginary farmer lives and works have value for him because they are partly constitutive of his sense of identity.

To sum up: Sagoff points out that if we are to explain why people try to protect the ‘places they cherish or love’, we will need to refer to their cultural, aesthetic and moral ties to those places. Although I have not tried to prove the point here, he is, I believe, right to say that those ties cannot be framed in terms of ‘the freeze-dried mathematical models that dominate theory in ecology’. I have argued that they cannot be adequately conceived in terms of the ESF either.

References

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