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Environmental Stewardship: Human-Centered or Nature-Centered?

By Toby Svoboda on October 4, 2009 2:32 PM| 0 Comments | 0 TrackBacks

The idea of environmental stewardship holds that humans have an obligation to preserve the natural world. Assuming that this is correct, what is the purpose of such stewardship? Is this obligation human-centered, such that preservation of nature is necessary in order for present and future humans to enjoy healthy and valuable lives? Or is this obligation nature-centered, such that preservation of nature is valuable in itself? According to the human-centered view, one should preserve species and wilderness so that other humans can enjoy them, for example in aesthetic experiences. According to the nature-centered view, one should preserve species and wilderness even if doing so does not benefit humans, because non-humans are somehow valuable in their own right.

It is sometimes the case that human and non-human interests converge. For example, healthy barrier islands serve the interests of both humans (by providing protection against hurricanes) and non-human animals (by providing habitats), so both humans and non-humans have an interest in the preservation of barrier islands. However, sometimes the interests of humans and non-humans conflict, and in such cases it makes a significant difference whether one adopts a human- or nature-centered view of environmental stewardship. Do the interests of non-humans count for anything when they conflict with those of humans? If yes, then how much do they count? Do the interests of non-humans ever trump those of humans?

These are no doubt difficult questions. The issue of environmental stewardship will be broached by panelists at the Stewardship or Sacrifice conference at Penn State's University Park campus on October 7-8. In particular, the second panel on the 7th (start time at 2:00 pm) will discuss different versions of environmental stewardship from religious perspectives. The conference, which is free and open to the public, will take place at the Pasquerilla Spiritual Center.

Tags: Climate Ethics, Ethics, Events, Humans, Nature, Obligation, Religion, RockEthics, Stewardship, Stewardship or Sacrifice

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