



# Value Systems and the Environment

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# Value Systems and the Environment

## 1. The Challenge: Death of Environmentalism *Category, Framing, and Vision* Problems.

**My Question: Is Environmental Ethics Meeting  
the Challenge?**

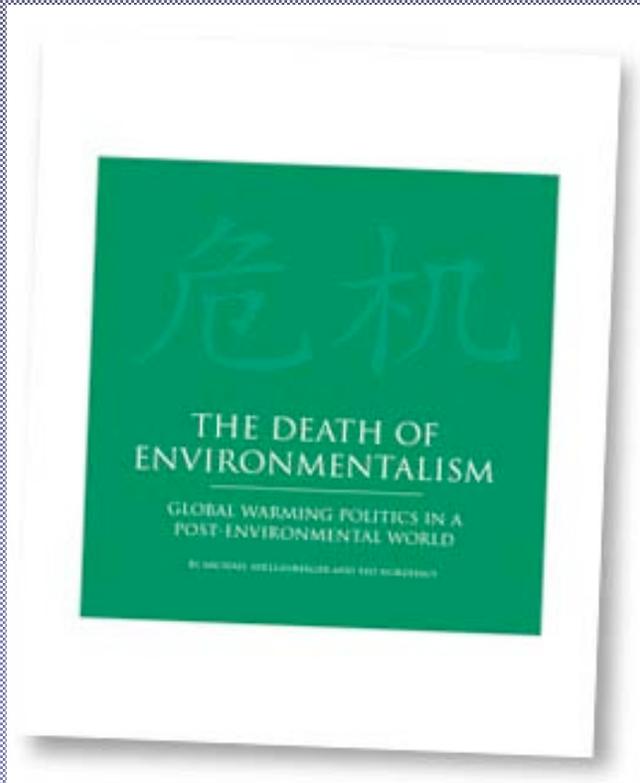
## 2. The Category Problem: Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism.

## 3. The Framing Problems: Direct vs. Indirect Arguments for Natural Value.

## 4. *Some* Vision Solutions: Ecological Citizenship and Sustainable Infrastructure.

# The Challenge: Death of Environmentalism

## About the Essay



- Michael Schellenberger is executive director of Breakthrough Institute, an organization advancing strategic initiatives to build a progressive majority; president of Lumina Strategies a political consulting firm.
- Ted Nordhaus is vice president of Evans/McDonough, one of the nations leading opinion research firms.
- The essay was first released in October 2004 before the Environmental Grant Makers Association

**Thesis:** “The environmental community’s narrow definition of its self-interest leads to a kind of policy literalism that undermines its power.”

-- Schellenberger and Nordhaus  
“The Death of Environmentalism” *p. 7.*

“What the environmental movement needs more than anything else right now is to take a collective step back to rethink everything. We will never be able to turn things around as long as we understand our failures as essentially tactical, and make proposals as essentially technical.”

# What is causing this crisis in environmental politics?

- Category problem
- Framing problem
- Vision problem

# The Category Problem

What does the “death of environmentalism” entail?

Environmentalism should be abolished as a distinct category of political identification.

Why?

1. “Environmentalism” has landed in the political ghetto of special interest groups.
2. Environmental problems, particularly climate change, are not *just* environmental problems.

# The Framing Problem

**Our category of identification has trapped us in a methodology that does not work.**

1. Define the problem in scientific terms.
2. Craft a technical remedy.
3. Sell the technical proposal to legislators.
4. Thus we unnecessarily limit our framing of these problems: “Literal-sclerosis can be seen as an assumption that to win action on global warming one must talk about global warming instead of, say, the economy, industrial policy, or health care.”

**The result is that we have lost the power of moral vision that the right uses so effectively, e.g., partial birth abortions.**

# The Vision Problem

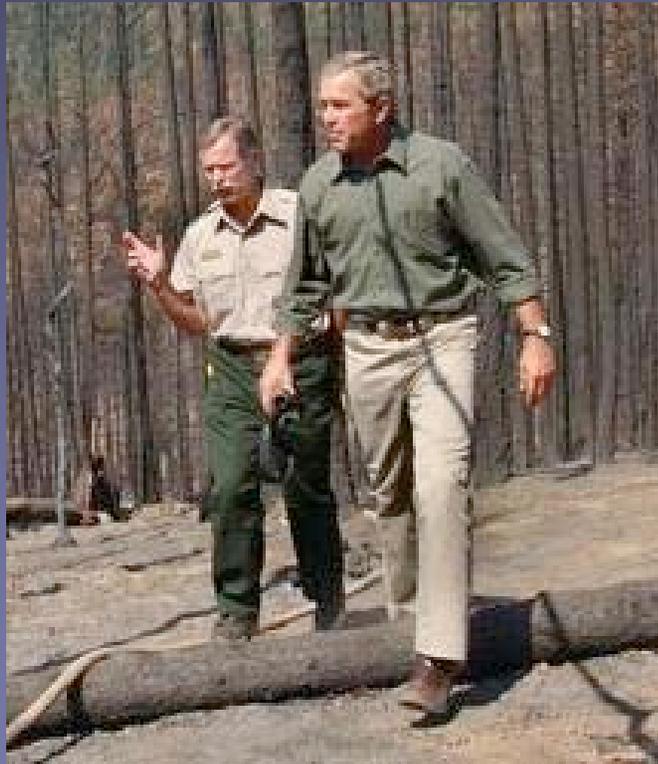
“I have a dream.”

vs.

“I have a nightmare.”

“Once environmentalists can offer a compelling vision for the future we will be in a much better position to stop being Pollyanna about the state of their politics. And once again have an inspiring vision.”

## 2. The Category Problem: Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism



## 2. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

- What is Environmental Ethics? Formal Academic Field around 1973 -- papers by Naess, Sylvan, Singer.
- Two Primary Questions: (1) How has philosophy contributed to the creation of environmental problems? (2) What could philosophers contribute to the resolution of those problems commensurate with their talents?
- In answer to (1): Anthropocentrism in ethics.
- In answer to (2): Nonanthropocentrism.

## 2. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

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anthropocentrism: The restriction of direct moral obligations only to humans.

non-anthropocentrism: The expansion of direct moral obligations to living things other than humans.

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anthropocentrism: The restriction of direct moral obligations only to humans.

non-anthropocentrism: The expansion of direct moral obligations to living things other than humans.

intrinsic value: The worth objects have in their own right, independent of their value to any other end.

instrumental value: The worth objects have in fulfilling other ends.

## An Economist



## 2. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

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“It is increasingly said that civilization, Western civilization at least, stands in need of a new ethic (and derivatively of a new economics) setting out people's relations to the natural environment, in Leopold's words, 'an ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it.' It is not of course that old and prevailing ethics do not deal with man's relation to nature; they do, and on the prevailing view man is free to deal with nature as he pleases, i. e., his relations with nature, insofar at least as they do not affect others, are not subject to moral censure.”

Richard Sylvan, “Is there a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?” Proceedings of the XV World Congress of Philosophy, 1973, 1.

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## 2. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

“. . . the question of whether environmental ethics is distinctive [Sylvan's question] is taken as equivalent to the question of whether an environmental ethic must reject anthropocentrism. . . . Environmental ethics is seen as distinctive vis-á-vis standard ethics if and only if environmental ethics can be founded upon principles which assert or presuppose that nonhuman natural entities have value independent of human value. (. . .)

**Anthropocentrists are therefore taken to believe that every instance of value originates in a contribution to human values and that all elements of nature can, at most, have value instrumental to the satisfaction of human interests.”**

Bryan G. Norton, “Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism,”  
Environmental Ethics 6 (1984), 182-183.

## 2. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

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**Verdict: Some Environmental Ethicists are Guilty of the Category Problem.**

## 2. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism



The desire to create a new, distinctive field of ethics has created “The Flag Problem.”

Eddie Izzard on the British Empire encountering India:

“Do you have a flag? No? No flag no country!”

## 2. Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism

### Alternative Views:

- **Stewardship**  
Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (1974)
- **“Weak” Anthropocentrism**  
Norton (1987) and Hargrove (1992)



### 3. The Framing Problems: Direct vs. Indirect Arguments for Natural Value.



### 3. Direct vs. Indirect Arguments for Natural Value

Example: Mid 1970s-'80s Environmental Ethics  
splits in two:

- animal ethics: individualists
- land ethics: holists

individualists: Extension of moral consideration beyond humans should be limited to other individuals, namely, those individuals who could be argued to have interests (or with sentientism, are sentient) otherwise there is no coherent basis for ascribing value to non-human entities.

holists: Extension of moral consideration beyond humans should not be limited to individuals because individualism fails to offer direct reason for moral consideration of collective entities, e.g., ecosystems, wilderness or endangered species.

### 3. Direct vs. Indirect Arguments for Natural Value

#### Classical Problems between Individualists and Holists: Deer Hunting. Exotic species.

Example of Peter Singer and the rabbits. “Australian farmers and environmentalists are united in attempting to reduce the number of rabbits from Australia. From the point of view of an ethic of concern for all sentient beings, rabbits are beings with interests of their own, capable of feeling pain and suffering.”

Still, no attempt by Singer to justify saving rabbits at the expense of the ecosystem. Argument seems to be more over who can provide a **direct vs. an indirect** argument for the moral consideration of an entity.

### 3. Direct vs. Indirect Arguments for Natural Value

- If indirect reasons will suffice for Singer, why not indirect reasons for environmental protection which appeal to human interests?
- If the answer is that appeal to human interests fails to identify a unique identity for environmental ethics as a discipline then we have traded off an academic niche for practical relevance.
- Given the stakes, practical relevance seems overwhelmingly more important than having a flag.

### 3. Direct vs. Indirect Arguments for Natural Value

- If indirect reasons will suffice for Singer, why not indirect reasons for environmental protection which appeal to human interests?
- If the answer is that appeal to human interests fails to identify a unique identity for environmental ethics as a discipline then we have traded off an academic niche for practical relevance.
- Given the stakes, practical relevance seems overwhelmingly more important than having a flag.

**Verdict: To avoid the Framing Problem we should also seek indirect reasons for environmental protection which overlap with other human interests.**

## 4. Some Vision Solutions: Ecological Citizenship and Sustainable Infrastructure



## 4. Some Vision Solutions

**First Claim: *We are caught between two futures:***

***One is unthinkable and the other is unimaginable.***

- **The unthinkable: Consequences of Global Warming and other Environmental Problems to humans and non-humans.**
- **The unimaginable: The necessary changes required to solve these problems or at least mitigate their worst effects.**

## 4. Some Vision Solutions

First Claim: *We are caught between two visions:*

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- The unthinkable: Consequences of Global Warming and other Environmental Problems to humans and non-humans.
- The unimaginable: The necessary changes required to solve these problems or at least mitigate their worst effects.

### Americans Less Concerned About Global Warming

*Personally concerned...*

	A great deal	A fair amount	Only a little/ Not at all	DK
	%	%	%	%
United States	19	34	47	1
Great Britain	26	41	32	1
Spain	51	34	14	2
France	46	41	14	0
Germany	30	34	36	1
Russia	34	31	34	*
Indonesia	28	48	23	1
Egypt	24	51	23	1
Jordan	26	40	34	*
Turkey	41	29	23	8
Pakistan	31	25	39	5
Nigeria	45	33	20	2
Japan	66	27	7	0
India	65	20	13	2
China	20	41	37	2

Based on those who have heard about the "environmental problem of global warming."

See June 13, 2006 *America's Image Slips, but Allies Share U.S. Concerns over Iran, Hamas* at [www.pewglobal.org](http://www.pewglobal.org) for

## 4. Some Vision Solutions

**Second Claim:** *Even if one particular approach to understanding environmental problems is true, could it ever be persuasive to enough people sensitive to the time-horizon of environmental problems?*

Natural resource managers and the general public take an overwhelmingly anthropocentric approach to the assessment of natural values. To not appeal to the interests already in place for that audience is to give up on having an effect on the formation of better policies.

*The Environment Between Theory and Practice*  
Avner de-Shalit, 2000.

## 4. Some Vision Solutions

See studies by Minter and Manning, Environmental Ethics 21 1999, and Kempton, et. al. Environmental Values in American Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1997):

“We found that our informants’ descendants loom large in their thinking about environmental issues. Although our initial set of questions never asked about children, seventeen of the twenty lay informants themselves brought up children or future generations as a justification for environmental protection. Such a high proportion of respondents mentioning the same topic is unusual in answering an open-ended question. In fact, concern for the future of children and descendants emerged as one of the strongest values in the interviews.” (95)

## 4. Ecological Citizenship

- **Ecological Citizenship:** Expansion of classical (Aristotelian) conception of citizenship as the “required commitment to the common good and active participation in public affairs” to include responsibilities toward the environment. One’s duties to nature, as an ecological citizen, cannot be abstracted away from one’s larger duties to a human community.

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Ecological Citizenship offers an answer to the category problem = an alternative to dropping “environmentalism” (even if we could . . .)

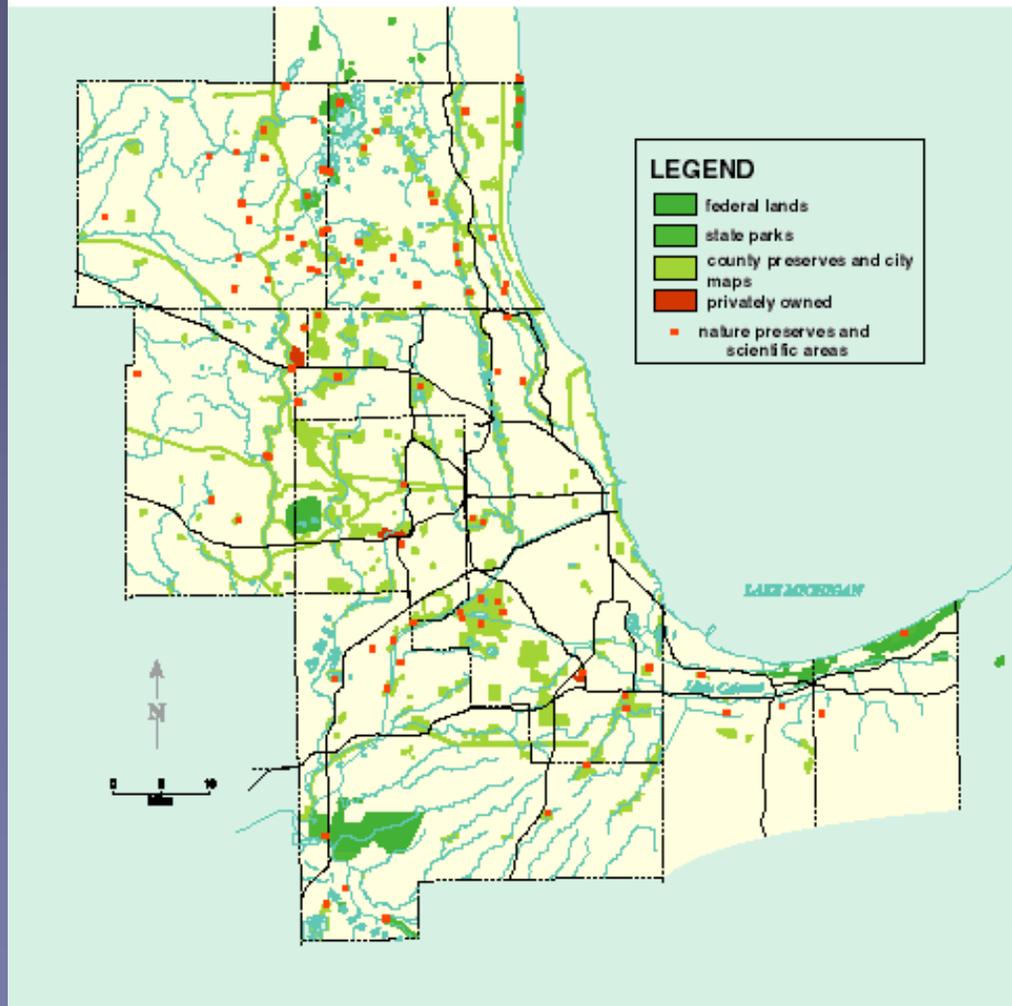
## 4. Ecological Citizenship

### Protected Lands in Chicago Wilderness Region

“Chicago Wilderness.”

Restoration of 14,000  
acres of Oak  
Savannah as of 1995  
(going up to 250,000).

~20,000 volunteers  
involved so far.



## 4. Ecological Citizenship

- Sociological studies suggest that volunteers in Chicago Wilderness projects gained a sense of “participation” (Miles, “Psychological Benefits of Volunteering for Restoration Projects,” *Ecological Restoration* 2000, 18:218-227). “Participation” understood as “being ‘part of a community,’ accomplishing something in a group.”
- Causal relationship can be established between critical mass of restorationists and development of sustainability initiatives by the city of Chicago.
- Helps to see a blind spot in Schellenberger and Nordhaus toward local environmental initiatives.
- BUT creating such opportunities is a moral choice.

## 4. Sustainable Infrastructure

- The creative classes of the environmental movement do a great job of providing reasons that explain environmentalists' intuitions about why they are environmentalists but a poor job of giving reasons for others to become environmentalists.
- Providing opportunities for ecological citizenship, like the Chicago Wilderness, will only go so far -- need to create an infrastructure where people live sustainably without having to think about it. So, consider the following:

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- The creative classes of the environmental movement do a great job of providing reasons that explain environmentalists' intuitions about why they are environmentalists but a poor job of giving reasons for others to become environmentalists.
- Providing opportunities for ecological citizenship, like the Chicago Wilderness, will only go so far -- need to create an infrastructure where people live sustainably without having to think about it. So, consider the following:
- Human population is estimated to level off by 2050.
- $\text{Overpopulation} = \text{Population} \times \text{Consumption} \times \text{Technology}.$

## 4. Sustainable Infrastructure

### Densely Populated Cities are Better for Environment

- More urbanized states consume less energy per capita than less urbanized states. Lowest consumption rate is New York state (215 BTUs on average). Highest is Alaska (1,139). Discounting for climate differences, New York still is better than any other less urbanized state with comparable heating and cooling demands.
- *Why?* Most New Yorkers live in NYC where they share walls and share heating costs. Most do not own cars, or if they do, drive them less than the national average (eight trips per day per four person family).
- Other consumption indicators are remarkably similar across states: food transportation costs (esp. fuel) are comparable in Missoula and Manhattan. Consumer spending (every dollar releases X quantity of petroleum) is equivalent and in many cases less in densely populated cities with less space available per person.

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**A new vision: Densely populated sustainable cities.**

## A Final Thought?

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We have reached a time at which we can finally get rid of the conviction common to Plato and Marx that there must be large theoretical ways of deciding out how to end injustice, as opposed to small experimental ways.” Richard Rorty

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