Collaborating for a Shared Purpose

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Collaborating for a Shared Purpose

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The benefits of collaborative approaches to addressing ecological problems from multi-disciplinary perspectives have been explored in recent academic publications, and studies of religious groups demonstrate their eagerness to be scientifically well informed when advocating the resolution of problems from their faith perspectives (Schaefer 2014). Underscoring this trend, the Society for Conservation Biology recently initiated the Religion and Conservation Research Collaborative to investigate issues that require involvement of both communities and subsequently established the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group to collaborate with religious communities in areas where problems are occurring.
Ben Minteer, associate professor of Environmental Ethics and Policy at Arizona State University, enters this discussion critical of the field of environmental ethics for turning inward theoretically instead of focusing on problems that need to be resolved. In *Refounding Environmental Ethics*, Minteer draws on the social sciences and especially on the conception of democracy proffered by John Dewey, the philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, to identify a pragmatic philosophical approach that attempts to accomplish the original goal of the environmental ethics field—to help people recognize their environmental values and their choices as moral agents within the community of Earth.

In nine chapters, Minteer makes an impressive case for reorganizing environmental ethics as a branch of applied philosophy. Beginning with a historical overview of the field of environmental ethics, which he describes as having become “arid theorizing and parochial” (p. 11), he argues for an empirical, dynamic, adaptive, and integrative problem-solving approach. He proceeds in subsequent chapters to justify democratic life as an essential condition for intelligent problem solving and to specify interest among members of the public as a prerequisite for making and acting on policy. He reviews non-anthropocentric value theories (e.g., intrinsic valuing) but favors Dewey’s understanding of “natural piety” (a posture of humility toward other living and inanimate entities with whom humans constitute Earth), which does not require becoming entrenched in mere theorizing. Turning to animal rights theories, he examines the conflict between holistic environmental ethics and individualistic animal rights approaches, which have resulted in intellectual stalemates, and advocates a move toward dispute resolution and consensus building. He advances several pragmatist tenets, including the inclusion of many views when addressing an environmental problem, consideration of its natural context, and the use of social and natural science methods for understanding and analyzing the problem from an ethical perspective.

Minteer concludes his monograph by pointing to the need for a new model of conservation policy and action that is necessary to address problems that have global ramifications (e.g., climate change). Because traditional preservationist arguments for saving species and wilderness areas will become increasingly untenable as environmental change occurs, a view other ethicists share (e.g., Sandler 2012), he proffers a model that is inclusive of interests and perspectives and that is relativistic, dynamic, and builds toward consensus. He is hopeful that this new model will guide decision making and restrain destructive human behavior. His model may achieve these goals if some rules of involvement and engagement are established, if scientific and other pertinent information is made readily available and understandable to the parties involved, if their views (including the faith-based underpinnings that motivate their involvement) are respected, and if a skillful dispute-resolution practitioner facilitates the discussion.

Lucas Johnston looks at religious groups that are collaborating under the widely used but variously grounded and nuanced term *sustainability*. In *Religion and Sustainability: Social Movements and the Politics of the Environment*, the assistant professor of Religion and Environmental Studies at Wake Forest University turns to secular, religious, and interfaith communities to explore their specific definitions of *sustainability*, their goals, and their advocacy practices. He concludes that sustainability cannot be described as a concrete goal to be achieved. Instead, he insists persuasively that sustainability is “a conceptual device” for connecting community values, strategizing, and positing “an ideal state toward which political processes, exchange activities, and social formations move” (p. 25).
Johnston presents his subject in 10 chapters divided into 3 sections. In the first section, he demonstrates the model he developed for investigating the role of religion in social movements. Based on his investigation of religious groups, he illustrates the religious dimensions of the concept that motivate and guide members to act individually and collectively in their communities. Sustainability becomes “a contagious meme” (p. 31) that captures the faith-based appeal of the concept through which the groups express their values. His historical review of contributions that religious leaders and groups have made to public discourse on sustainability issues is informative and perceptive. Especially insightful is his discussion of the emotive and spiritual language used by faith-based advocacy groups (e.g., relationality and interconnection) which correspond with language used by social scientists.

Particularly impressive in Johnston's concluding section are his explanations of the ethnographic data derived from his investigations when observing participants, interviewing them informally, and conducting 25 in-depth interviews of leaders who represent religious, interfaith, and secular non-governmental organizations that focus on sustainability issues. He carefully identifies the common threads that run through these diverse groups and points to core values expressed by their members that motivate their collaboration.

Recognizing the importance of collaborating with religious communities to protect sites that have both sacred and biological diversity significance, Gloria Pungetti (Research Director of the Cambridge Centre for Landscape and People), Gonzalo Oviedo (Senior Advisor for Social Policy at the International Union for Conservation of Nature), and Della Hooke (honorary fellow at the Institute for Advanced Research in Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham) compiled and edited 28 essays that comprise Sacred Species and Sites: Advances in Biocultural Conservation. Their efforts follow the biocultural diversity movement affirmed by the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Barcelona in 2008 and the publication in 2010 of Biocultural Diversity Conservation: A Global Sourcebook (Maffi & Woodley 2010) that linked cultures to ecosystems.

Four well-researched essays appear in each of the seven parts of Sacred Species and Sites. Beginning with a theoretical preamble to valuing biocultural diversity and current directions in biocultural diversity conservation, the essays in the first part explore spiritual values and conservation practices among indigenous peoples of South America, varied management strategies at sacred sites in protected areas around the world, protected areas and sacred lands and waters that have much in common, the spiritual role of waters in some ancient traditions, and the relatedness of these topics to Christian and pagan sites. Essays in subsequent parts of this exemplary anthology explore the spiritual value of various types of landscapes in Italy and England; the bonds between sacred sites and indigenous peoples in South America and New Zealand who are striving to live sustainably; the role of taboos and traditional beliefs in aquatic conservation in Madagascar; sacred species of national marine sanctuaries of the West Coast of the United States; sacred animals (lizards for the Maori in New Zealand, pheasants for Sichuanese in China, and bears for ethnic groups in Russia); and sacred trees in India, Ghana, and ancient England. Throughout these sections, many pictures and graphics facilitate understanding.

The essays in the final part convey enthusiasm for management strategies that recognize and build on the links between conservation biology goals and cultural values. Study projects are underway throughout the world to assess possibilities for collaborative strategies that conserve biocultural
diversity. An added bonus is information on how indigenous societies use natural sources prudently and with restraint in their daily lives. Though the authors are optimistic about biocultural diversity conservation, some expressed concern that younger members of indigenous societies may no longer subscribe to traditional practices and rituals through which their values are conveyed, that migrants will change the social fabric of their cultures as the global climate changes, and that cultural values will become lost as people are forced to move from places they consider sacred.

Like Minteer, several essayists underscore the need for a democratic decision-making process that involves all relevant religious, indigenous, and conservation communities. The authors also point to the need for encouraging indigenous and religious communities to educate their youth about their traditions of valuing their sacred species and places and about their rituals through which they show their values so they can be passed on to future generations. The insight in this section and findings that are shared astutely in all other essays should inspire a broad research agenda for the emerging field of biocultural diversity conservation.

Together, these three books point to the increased likelihood of achieving mutual goals when diverse communities genuinely collaborate to address shared ecological problems. All should be added to academic libraries and made available to students seeking degrees in environmental studies, science, and ethics.