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Naturework and the Taming of the Wild: The Problem of "Overpick" in the Culture of Mushroomers*

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Although nature often has been treated as an unproblematic reality, I argue for treating it as a contested concept, suggesting that "nature" is a cultural construction. Drawing on interactionist and ecological theory, I claim that the creation of social problems involving the environment is inevitably grounded in cultural choices. Through a set of ideological structures (a protectionist vision, an organic vision, and a humanistic vision), social actors develop templates for understanding the proper relationship between humans and nature. Based on an ethnography of mushroom collecting, I contend that these models lead us to experience nature through cultural eyes — wishing to be away from civilization, to be at one with nature, and to engage in the pragmatic use of nature for personal ends. Conflicting stances toward nature account for debate over the moral acceptability of the commercial collection of mushrooms and the "problem" of overpick. Templates of human-environmental interaction, leading to models for experiencing the wild, provide the basis for understanding the conditions under which environmental change is defined as a social problem.

Sociologists, like most citizens, comfortably draw a bright and shining line between culture and nature, between human society and the wild.¹ Although we now recognize previously taken for granted biological categories, notably race and gender, as ideologically constructed and grounded in social relations, nature has not been similarly examined. With few exceptions, environmental sociology has accepted an essentialist and positivist view of nature and addressed a set of "real" threats to ecosystems (Bell 1994; Dunlap and Catton 1994; Laska 1993).²

William Catton (1980:7, 12), a leader of this movement, writes in *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change*, "Nature is going to require reduction of human dominance over the world ecosystem. . . . We must learn to relate personally to what may be called 'the

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1. In this analysis, I use nature and "the wild" interchangeably. I do not claim that all nature is wilderness, but that, as Hewitt (1984) argues, nature must be interpreted as fundamentally uncontrolled by human action: not part of the built environment.

2. Slowly and fitfully sociologists have claimed the environment as their domain (e.g., Luhmann 1989; Buttel 1986). In the past twenty years, environmental sociology has emerged, both theoretically and in applied terms (Laska 1993). Research explores human attitudes and the effects of behavior in a cultural arena: popular attitudes toward pollution and environmentalism (Morrison and Dunlap 1986), the growth and development of social movements protecting the environment (Dunlap and Mertig 1992; Eder 1990), the effects of pollution and environmental degradation on human communities (Bullard 1990), and the ecological effects of technologies and population patterns (Catton 1980). The central thrust of "the new environmental paradigm" (Catton and Dunlap 1978) takes the environment as an externality, a social reality, rather than a socially constructed object. When I say that nature is taken-for-granted, I don't mean that sociologists do not study environmental disputes or the social creation of attitudes (Dunlap and Catton 1994:21-22); they do. Rather, I mean that what nature *is* taken-for-granted. This is dramatically evident in Molotch's (1970:131) examination of the politics of oil following the Santa Barbara spill. Molotch carefully analyzes the creation of political reality, but takes the effects on the environment as a given, speaking, for example, of the "pollution of their otherwise near-perfect environment." Molotch's contrast with a "near-perfect" environment underlines the presence of unstated values.

ecological facts of life.’” I do not argue with Catton’s policy vision, but dispute the environmental sociologist’s characterizing nature as a social fact, separate from the need for interpretation. Nature problems, like other social problems, do not simply “exist,” but need to be socially constructed.

Not surprisingly, given the *habitus* of academic environmentalists, it is widely agreed that all is not well with how humans “treat” nature: a point of accord among reform environmentalists (Stone 1974), social ecologists (Bookchin 1982), deep ecologists (Naess 1973, Devall and Sessions 1985), and ecofeminists (Salleh 1984). Each of these perspectives treats the environment as real and in danger (King 1995). As Mary Douglas writes: “Yet always and everywhere it is human folly, hate, and greed which puts the human environment at risk” (Tenner 1987:36).

While there is much to be said for an approach that protests threats to the “natural environment,” this view ignores the construction of the images and rhetorical tropes through which social actors define their environment, linked to a set of social values, leading to policy choices. In contrast, I examine how individuals define “nature” in light of cultural templates and then define their relationship to that environment: a process I term *naturework*. Naturework is the technique by which social actors individually and collectively make sense of and express their relationship to the environment, dealing with perceived threats to that environment. This process is linked to a set of core ideologies that specify the moral valuation of the relationship between culture and nature. From childhood, we are exposed to disparate views about how nature is to be treated, and from these texts and images — our ideological toolkit (Swidler 1986; Fine and Sandstrom 1993) — we express environmental “concerns.” As we enter various nature subcultures, these texts and images are expanded and specified, and our views of nature are linked to those of the groups to which we belong.

Ideological perspectives on nature provide pools of images with which individuals establish models for experiencing the wild (and describing that experience) and for analyzing the existence and severity of natural social problems. Through naturework human actors ascribe meaning to the natural environment, and situate themselves within this world. Natural objects are transformed from things into symbols (Fine and Christophorides 1991; Greider and Garkovich 1994; Weigert 1991). This process of construing meaning makes nature *culture*, simultaneously channeling and organizing our cultural choices.

This approach does not deny the physical, botanical reality of trees, plants, or streams, nor does it deny that alterations to an ecosystem may have effects (although we must specify our values and who or what will benefit or lose). The actions of institutions or organizations may dramatically alter ecosystems. As Weigert (1994; see Mead 1964:366) asserts, environmental events can be consequential. One denies at one’s own risk the effects of a natural disaster or a toxic mushroom. Outcomes are real, even while they must still be interpreted.³ However, recognizing the reality of the environment as obdurate, I assert that the labels “nature,” “the wild,” and “the environment” are socially constructed categories of objects, linked to “environmental” ideologies (Fine and Sandstrom 1993).

No matter how egalitarian we may wish to be, plants and animals do not participate in a dialogue: either we embrace *laissez faire* or social control. Every theory of nature *by virtue of the agent of change* and *by virtue of its audience* is anthropocentric. We don’t ponder how owls should treat field mice or beavers, pines. Protecting the environment involves limiting or directing human action, leaving natural selection and the food chain to do the rest.

We cannot speak with other species, although we often speak for them. Other species make no claim on us, although we read claims through role-taking (Coutu 1951; Nagel 1974). By virtue of the demands of discourse, environmental ethics are anthropocentric. The

3. Natural disasters, real in their body counts, need to be interpreted. Is an earthquake a random perturbation of geological forces, a message from God, or a warning from “nature” not to build in certain quake zones? Do the deaths reveal a profound, needless human tragedy or simply actuarial chance?

environment must be culturally mediated to be meaningful; this process is dependent on human values and specified through social communication (Luhmann 1989:112). Giddens (1991) writes of “socialised nature,” the process by which nature is tamed for human appreciation.

“Nature” is a creation of civilization (Evernden 1992:20), despite our feeling that nature and culture are different realities. The idea of “nature” implies a contrasting reality of “culture” (Harrison 1992:ix). As Lewis Mumford wrote: “‘Nature’ as a system of interests and activities is one of the chief creations of the civilized man” (cited in Ekirch 1963:3). In the words of David Wilson (1978:14), “persons brought up in western culture know nature when they see it.” While individual trees and birds exist, nature as a *concept* derives from human cognition, cultural activity, and social organization. In practice, the definition of nature often excludes human impact. The extent of human transformation defines the boundaries of “nature,” enshrining “wildness” (Bell 1994). As a result, we force nature to live up to our expectations: actively transforming national parks to make them feel “authentic” (Catton 1993; Chase 1986).

While natural objects have “agency” (Pickering 1993), shaping human interpretations, the meanings of nature derive from human templates. In this sense, the nature-culture division is fundamentally misleading (Livingston 1981:69). The preference for preserving certain biotic entities as nature is a cultural choice, as is the willingness to see an ecosystem transformed.

In order to specify how nature is seen as a distinct realm of reality and how it is seen as threatened, I draw upon a small corner of the world of naturalists: amateur mycologists. This strategy permits me to specify the human orientation to nature, analyzing how members of a focused subculture discuss their environment. Social problems, while usually linked to large social systems, often characterize segments or subsocieties within the larger society. By analyzing one, seemingly minor, subculture, I explore the development of concerns within a bounded community. The members of this subculture, distinct in their beliefs, attitudes, worries, and behaviors — as all focused groups are distinct — stand for other naturalists by their attempts to make sense of the wild: to tame it within a cultural logic for their own ends and to prevent it from being misused by others.

I begin by postulating three ideological templates, each depicting a moral stance of humans to “the environmental other,” and pointing to dangers to this natural reality. These I label the Protectionist View, the Organic View, and the Humanistic View. While each stance has its partisans, they also represent rhetorical resources that most naturalists blend and select from in their interpretations and defenses of nature. To understand how human actors “process” their experience of nature, I describe how amateur mushroomers and other naturalists talk about and act toward the natural environment, emphasizing the links between the three ideological templates and models of experiencing nature.

These generalized orientations take us only so far toward understanding how communities of interest create social problems and images of the public good (Williams 1995). I focus on a potential “threat” that is currently a topic of concern and debate among mycologists: the problem of “overpick.” As mushroomers talk about overpick, they reveal their images of the proper relationship between humans and nature. The relevant question is: How many (or what proportion) of mushrooms should be picked? Given that the large majority of mushroomers define themselves as environmentalists, the claim that their activity could damage “nature” carries considerable force. How can people simultaneously “love” nature and “despoil” it? This issue has become more sensitive as the market for wild mushrooms has expanded over the past decade and as more specimens and species are being harvested. Will excessive harvesting destroy future mushroom fruitings; are particular mushroom species being threatened or becoming extinct? The culture of mushroomers and their location within this leisure world determines in part which of the orientations to nature they will draw upon

in determining whether and how mushrooming should be restricted, but because of the threat of “overpick” to the identity of mushroomers, this concern must be dealt with and diffused.

A World of Fungus

Those unfamiliar with mushrooming might be startled to learn that the North American Mycological Association (NAMA) is an active organization of some 1800 members. In most major metropolitan areas, amateurs have banded to learn about and collect mushrooms. According to a 1993 list of NAMA affiliated state and local organizations, seventy-seven mycological clubs operate in the United States and Canada with an estimated ten thousand members (Friedman 1986). The Minnesota Mycological Society,⁴ the site for the bulk of my observations and interviews, was founded in 1898, making it the second oldest continuously active mushroom society in the United States. Mushroomers treasure the experience of hiking through forest and fields, the thrill of danger in the wild, and the satisfactions inherent in hunting for valued objects (Fine 1992). The thrill of discovery, identification, and (on occasion) consumption of natural objects of which others are unaware provides a powerful lure for participants.

As in many voluntary organizations, interest groups operate under the banner of the larger organization. While virtually all members of the organization pick mushrooms, and some 95% eat the mushrooms that they pick, their other mycological interests are more diverse. Some of the approximately 200 members are interested primarily in examining mushrooms from a quasi-scientific perspective — a group sometimes labelled amateur mycologists; some enjoy compiling lists or collections of the mushrooms they find; and others — “pot hunters” — hunt mushrooms to eat (i.e., for the pot). Still others love to photograph mushrooms. Although relations in the organization are friendly, tension occasionally flares over the division of club resources.

The Minnesota Mycological Society meets one evening a week for approximately two hours during the prime mushroom-picking months: May, June, September, and October. At these meetings the president describes the mushrooms that members bring and that the Identification Committee has identified. Members describe their memorable mushroom finds, and, consistent with norms of secrecy (Fine and Holyfield 1996), where and how their caches were discovered. At some meetings, members give talks (e.g., on cultivating mushrooms, mushrooms in other nations, or foreign travel), or show slides. In addition to these weekly meetings, the club annually organizes approximately half a dozen forays to state and county parks and to private properties. Two forays last for a weekend. The club holds a banquet during January, and organizes a mycology study group that meets monthly to examine mushrooms with microscopes and chemicals.

To examine how mushroom collectors understand nature, I draw on participant observation, in-depth interviews, surveys, and document analysis. For three years I attended most meetings, forays, and banquets of the Minnesota Mycological Society, compiling detailed field notes. These notes were supplemented by a questionnaire sent to all members (with a 66% response rate), and by two dozen in-depth interviews, lasting approximately ninety minutes each. In the course of my research I also attended a national foray organized by the North American Mycological Association, and two regional forays — one in the Midwest and one in the Northeast. I later mailed a survey to a ten percent sample of the members of the

4. Only one mushroom club operates in the Twin Cities area. I felt that it would be disingenuous to create a pseudonym that would not shield the identity of the group as a whole. Following standard ethnographic practice, I use pseudonyms for individuals, except when quoting published materials.

North American Mycological Association (with a 60% response rate). These data are supplemented by newsletters published by some two dozen mycological societies, personal correspondence, and fieldguides and other publications (memoirs, cookbooks, and collections of essays). I also examined the first twelve years of *Mushroom, The Journal of Wild Mushrooming*, a quarterly periodical for amateur mushroomers with a national circulation of approximately 2,000.

Embracing Metaphor

Understanding “nature,” like any socially significant concept, involves metaphor. The question is not “What is nature?,” but “What is nature like?” and “What is the proper relationship between humans and their environment?” Drawing on environmental literature, I suggest three competing metaphorical visions of nature — a protectionist view, an organic view, and a humanistic view — providing guides for attitudes and behaviors. Of course, as social constructions themselves, these labels do not perfectly capture nature discourse.⁵ In practice, few embrace a position with such consistency that they hold a single schema in all circumstances. Yet, these three ideological perspectives provide models that reveal possible interpretations of the appropriate relationship between culture and nature. They differ in whether nature and human society are to be sharply distinguished (protectionism and humanism) or not (organicism), and, if distinguishable, whether human impact must be sharply limited (protectionism) or not (humanism).

These ideological visions connect to experience in nature. An individual may find the experience of nature mundane, frightening, or richly emotional depending upon circumstance and on how cultural beliefs affect emotional response. Today large numbers of Americans confront nature in their leisure pursuits (Kellert 1984). Indeed, the past decade witnessed a rise in opportunities for organized “authentic” experiences, labelled “ecotourism” (Grahame 1993; Wilson 1992:19-51). Nature depends on cultural metaphors and is interpreted *in light of* experience. A challenge for naturalists is to describe their emotional thrill so that others can share this internal sensibility. Experiencing nature involves both the experience itself and the ability to describe that experience (Mitchell 1983); the connection between experience and rhetoric is not easily disentangled, as our experiences become meaningful when we *represent* them. Visions of nature affect appreciation, emotions, and actions. To understand how we confront a natural environment, I link ideological visions to the practice of naturework and policy demands. Ideologies, when effective, are models that actors draw on for determining moral action (Fine and Sandstrom 1993; Manning 1980).

The protectionist model is, as an ideal type, misanthropic, deprivileging human exceptionalism. For the protectionist, the contrast between the civilized and the wild gives the wild its power. The Otherness of nature is compelling. The quality of *being away* is central to protectionism, put into practice as embodied experience. Policy should keep humans at a distance from nature. In contrast, organic imagery suggests a model of incorporation. Rather than reveling in one’s distance from humanity, one embraces nature, erasing boundaries. If the protectionist vision reflects a push from civilization, organicism represents the pull of nature. To experience nature is to be *at one* with it, responding with reverence and respect. Humanism recognizes that nature is to be used. We attempt to satisfy cravings in the wild. The humanistic vision sees the wild as a resource for the satisfaction of human goals; its value relies on the *pragmatics of use*.

5. Various readers have pointed out other possible visions of nature, such as seeing nature in light of a Biblical ethic or as a “home.” No doubt other candidates exist as well. While models of nature easily could be multiplied, I suggest that these three perspectives cover many of the most significant themes found in nature writing.

A Protectionist Vision

A protectionist vision has been the standard strong environmental position. Nature is seen as authentic and uncontaminated, distinct from human life (Hewitt 1984). Nature and culture are sharply divided (Zerubavel 1991), leading radical environmental theorist Christopher Manes (1990:248) to conclude *Green Rage: Radical Environmentalism and the Unmaking of Civilization* by observing: “the time to make the choice between the natural and cultural worlds has come.” This view is evident in the name of the radical environmentalist movement, *Earth First!* Nature is a realm that humans can easily contaminate. Our goal is not to *manage* ecosystems, but to *protect* them from our incursions (Sagoff 1985:99). As such, environmentalism is an evangelical movement that attempts to “save us from ourselves” (Rubin 1994:10). Policy demands we sacrifice our interests (Taylor 1986:10).

We set aside wilderness, control industrial development, and limit the human “built” environment to protect natural purity, denying human moral authority over nature. Barry Commoner (1972:41) notes in his Third Law of Ecology: “Nature Knows Best.” One amateur mushroom collector averred: “Life on earth could exist very nicely without people, a hell of a lot better without people, but it couldn’t exist without fungi. Human beings are the biggest threat to nature. . . . We should try to have as little impact on the environment as possible” (personal interview). Another remarked, “I look at the number one problem in society as being people. . . . The human species is the biggest cancer on the earth” (personal interview).

Ultimately humans are distinct — for example, by virtue of being able to distinguish right from wrong — and have extra responsibilities and limitations. Animals (and plants) will not be concerned with the rights of others, while humans are constrained. Humans have extensive power to alter nature, but the powerlessness of nature with regard to human expansiveness becomes a moral virtue. Nature is among the “oppressed.” Some speak of Nature as being treated as a “Green Nigger” (Gray 1979), and speak of the environmental movement as providing “civil rights” for trees (Stone 1974). Protectionism represents a moral privileging: the wild reveals an innocent, uncorrupt purity, an Otherness.

As a means of interpreting natural experience, the protectionist model suggests that the cultural world is oppressive. The morally aware human must strive to gain distance from culture. To be away emphasizes that the contrast with “civilization” constitutes nature. As McKibben (1989:55) remarks in *The End of Nature*: “We feel the need for pristine places, places substantially *unaltered* by man.”

For those who cling to the protectionist vision, the further away the better. Time in the wild provides the basis for an account of discovery and exploration: an “adventure” (Wilson 1978:19). This awayness was expressed dramatically by Hal Borland, a nature essayist for the *New York Times*, who described his role as “like a foreign correspondent reporting an alien scene.”

Natural experience depends upon places experienced as unaltered, wrong though we may be objectively. Wilderness produces a mood, feeling, or state of mind: a space that is good to think (Levi-Strauss 1962). Nature is an arena that — no longer threatening — is viewed sentimentally with affection and nostalgia (Ritvo 1987:3).

Seeing nature as Other contains two related beliefs. First, nature provides a necessary *rejuvenation* from the demands of civilization. This view is in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, and, from a different tradition, Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents*, emphasizing that restrictions and constraints of civilized life generate psychic tension that must be dissipated. The second theme, an *anti-humanism*, demands an escape from human presence. To reject our humanness is to validate our animal-selves. In contrast to wildlife, humans are felt to be conflictual, narcissistic, and materialistic.

Rejuvenation. George Evans, writing in the Thoreauvian tradition, underlines the moral benefits of experiencing nature, depicting emotional rejuvenation from the wild:

Whenever the light of civilization falls upon you with blighting power . . . go to the wilderness. . . . Dull business routine, the fierce passions of the market place, the perils of envious cities become but a memory. . . . The wilderness will take hold of you. It will give you good red blood; it will turn you from a weakling into a man. . . . You will soon behold all with a peaceful soul (Nash 1967:141).

Evans is prescient in presenting wilderness as a tonic for “the disease of civilization.” Modern life is defined as imbued with stress, which nature dissipates through a “rite of simplification” (Bourjaily 1963:15). The image of nature as tonic has spread widely, evident in “wilderness therapy.” “Restorative” environments lead to the recovery of effective psychological functioning (Kaplan 1984:286-287).

Mushroomers experience the wild as psychologically beneficial, justifying their activities. A busy professional explained: “Like many people who are over-committed, I often need at least a psychological boost. This next couple of weeks, I’m going to be spending a lot of time in the woods” (personal interview). Said another: “After a week in the office as a dentist, the woods are a fresh and new world” (Rogers 1985:13). A third reflected:

When I think about being in the city I usually think of concrete and traffic lights, schedules, and limitations on time, being dressed up, and usually have something to do with work one way or another. When I’m out in nature, I think of being relaxed, and being dressed either to keep warm or to keep cool, instead of what it looks like, and being some place where I want to be where something is growing whether it’s in the meadow or in the woods or in the lake or something. Some place where nature hasn’t been wiped out for the sake of civilization (personal interview).

Anti-Humanism. Others blame not the structure of the social order, but those who engineer it. The problem is not society, but people. Humans lack the soul of nature. *The Toadstool Review*, the newsletter of the Minnesota Mycological Society, reprinted an essay from the Los Angeles Times (1986:4), labelled “The Naturalist a Sane Man,” claiming:

The naturalist is the sanest man in the world. He is the one man among us who gets the best out of life. He finds himself in a wonderful world and with only a small lifetime in which to explore that world. He has discovered that there is vastly more for his consideration than men and women. In fact he is apt to find that it is only men and women who are dull and uninteresting.

Many mushroomers accept the boundary between “good” nature and “rough” civilization. Boundaries must prevent the contamination of the former by the latter. Being in the woods is a magical time. When the mood is broken, a sharp malaise is evident. On one occasion, foraging in a deep woods, we stumbled across a clearing where houses were to be built. Our leader commented sarcastically, “I think we’re back in the real world” (field notes). The ideology of protection leads to the demand for policies that protect the environment from the encroachments of civilization.

An Organic Vision

An organic vision, the oldest and youngest perspective, erases the line dividing human and natural life. Categories are deliberately blurred (Zerubavel 1991:104-105). Post-moderns have embraced this element of many non-Western tribal ideologies. Humans are not outside nature, but are part of an organic whole (Devall and Sessions 1985:66). Many environmental writers have emphasized this fundamental image, even while also stressing — perhaps contradictorily — the authenticity of nature. Organicism often emphasizes a romantic, pastoral view of life: the mutual caring of each for each (“nature *green* in tooth and claw”), underlining the “Arcadian” (Worster 1985). In their distinctive ways, much of Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, and the Gaian philosophy enshrines this model, while disagreeing on what to blame for environmental degradation (anthropocentrism, androcentrism, population pressures).

Yet, if human beings truly are part of nature, humans should have no greater need to restrain their actions than should any creature. As Robert Nelson (1990:57) explained: "If the lion is not to be condemned morally for wanton acts of cruelty against other creatures, why should mankind be judged harshly for making practical use of the natural world?" Each operates from genetic and material capabilities and on instrumental goals. As the British scientist James Lovelock (1979), originator of the Gaian hypothesis, noted in suggesting that *earth* is a living entity, "our species with its technology is simply an inevitable part of the natural scene": we are mechanically advanced beavers (McKibben 1989:64). This perspective, then, could be used to erase the division between nature and culture, incorporating the latter into the former.

Yet, the organic vision, as practiced, assumes that humans should accept a set of affirming, communal values — values often linked to feminist ideology. Ultimately, one wishes to experience through naturework a oneness with, not a separation from, the biosphere. The goal for many naturalists is, to some degree, to surmount alienation from natural systems: to be "at one" with nature, embracing the enchanted. David Arora (1979:12) exhorts in his fieldguide: "Mushroom hunting is not simply a matter of traipsing through the woods. . . . It is an art, a skill, a meditation, and a process." When mushroomers are asked to explain what it is about the environment that they treasure, they often emphasize their experience of the wild:

Early in the season, hunting in the cool, magnificent giant redwood forests . . . can produce both many choice edible mushrooms . . . and an exquisite sense of beauty, tranquility and exultation from the deep silence and sheer size of the trees. Right next to a thousand-year-old 300-foot-tall giant, you can find tiny, fragile, elegant *Lepiotas* . . . and *Mycenas*, which can set your sense of proportion and perspective atingle (Stickney 1983-4:27-28).

This awareness is an insistent lived reality: subjective, but not "merely subjective" (Kohak 1984:6). It represents deep subjectivity:

I can feel Nature. I feel warmth from the sun. Cold from the snow. I can move in nature and I like to jump on rocks and go mountain climbing in the summertime. It's physical oneness (personal interview).

Part of this emotional resonance is attached to places that generate emotional responses — places where one comes to feel that one belongs:

Every hunter and angler had his own favorite microcosm composed of woodlots, swamps, ponds, and other topographical features. . . . Whatever and wherever his "territory," it was part of the fiber of every sportsman's existence. While in its midst, he watched the change of seasons, shared the joys of friends, made discoveries about nature and himself, and experienced other sensations too mystical to put into words (Rieger 1986:35).

Mushroomers — like hunters or anglers — return to the same places, not only for instrumental reasons, but because the places generate emotional response. One mushroomer has a "Sacred Spring" where he meditates (personal interview): a green cathedral. It is to protect these experiences that we preserve the wild.

For many, seeing oneself as a naturalist gives weight to the self. Being a mushroomer, birdwatcher, kayaker, climber, or caver comes to define the self. From an organicist view to be at one with nature is to "know thyself," a process of self-actualization (Rolston 1988:16). The environmental persona forms a core of one's self identity, leading to the development of a Generalized Environmental Other (Weigert 1991): incorporating the environment into the self (Robbins 1987:593). Identity work is bolstered by a sense of accomplishment and competence that simultaneously provides satisfaction and establishes an identity (Hewitt 1984). Nature can become, for some, a back-country home that provides for one's wants and needs (Catton 1969). One mushroomer asserts:

One progresses at his own pace, rewarded constantly by correct identifications, and the ever-changing panorama of the seasonal fruitings. It is probably for some of these reasons that Gary Lincoff says, "Mushroom hunting gets in your blood"; . . . if one dares to eat the mushrooms he finds, his identification is tested in this very personal cauldron. Mistakes are quick to appear. What remains soon accumulates into a personal kind of confidence, arrogance, or authority (Bakaitis 1983-1984:1).

When nature is linked to a social institution, that institution frequently is religion; the emotions involved are deep and mystical. This perspective can either be defined as deism or as a generic pantheism or paganism. The underlying metaphor is that the individual is incorporated into a larger, organic vision, Gaia in principle:

[Being in nature] humbles me a little bit. If I wasn't standing in the woods, [plants and animals] wouldn't know the difference. When you're alone, you're more quiet because you are not with anybody, and you can just stand there and watch one bird for a while. I watched a deer and it didn't even know I was there. . . . You do feel like a nobody out there in the big world (personal interview).

To connect oneself to the world "out there" justifies one's place in the cosmos; preserving the wild is, thus, an act of faith.

A Humanist Vision

The common, "pre-environmentalist" view of the relationship between humanity and nature postulates what Donald Worster (1985) has termed the "Imperial" vision, and what I call, less pejoratively, a humanistic vision (see Rolston 1988:23), privileging the choices of *Homo sapiens*. Like the protectionist vision, this perspective sharply differentiates culture and nature, suggesting that nature is to be used for human purposes. In the traditional Judeo-Christian ethic, God created nature to be used for man's convenience; the distinction between Christians and "heathens" (i.e., people of the heath) may also touch on this mistrust of nature (Robert Perinbanayagam, personal communication 1996; see White 1967). Man is the measure of all things. This anthropocentric view once felt right, and still does in most societies that cannot afford the luxury of scorning desire.

A humanistic vision awards no special moral weight to nature, except, in some versions, seeing nature as a force to be "tamed": wilderness as a "dark and sinister symbol . . . a cursed and chaotic wasteland" (Nash 1967:24). Nature is a dangerous realm: volcanos, radon, rabid raccoons, the Ebola virus. When society and nature battle, humans have primacy. Humans should not embrace an ethic of scarcity, nor curtail liberty (Ross 1994:12-13).

Nature is morally neutral, a view echoed by William James:

Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference, — a moral multiverse . . . and not a moral universe. To such a harlot we owe no allegiance; with her as a whole we can establish no moral communion; and we are free in our dealing with her several parts to obey or to destroy, and to follow no law but that of prudence in coming to terms with such of her particular features as will help us to our private ends (quoted in Rolston 1988:33).

Many early supporters of nature preserves were business leaders who saw no contradiction between their capitalist ventures, often dependent on the extraction of natural resources, and their support of environmental preserves. Nature was to be used for pleasure and profit by human actors. To the extent that this humanistic model is linked to environmentalism — for instance, in the industry-supported "Wise Use Movement" (Arnold 1993) — it depends on an ethic of "conservation."

The ideology of conservation suggests that environmental policy stems from our own interests that are "vested" in nature (e.g., agriculture, hunting, fishing, mining, recreation,

aesthetic appreciation). We protect what benefits us (Livingston 1981:17). We have the obligation of using our natural resources prudently to insure that these potentially exhaustible resources are available for future generations (Kevles 1994:35). Our goal, then, may not be to maximize our immediate interests, but satisfice them. Whereas other views put nature first, deprivileging humans through an anti-humanist stance (Wolfe 1993:82), humanism enshrines the pragmatics of use.

Most naturalists, however committed they are, make allowance for the realities of human desire. Even Rachel Carson did not oppose the use of all pesticides, recognizing their economic significance (Kevles 1994:39); even animal rights advocate Tom Regan (1983) believes that on occasion causing harm to animals may be justified. The satisfactions and necessities of human life matter.

Given their self-conscious environmentalism, most mushroomers object to the charge that they are engaged in an extractive activity. To be sure, they are a sufficiently small band that this extraction has relatively little consequence in comparison to changes in global temperature, acid rain, construction, and industrial pollution. Still, they affect the microecology of forests and fields. Mushroomers borrow a term from agricultural cultivation when speaking of “harvesting mushrooms.” Mushroomers are hunters, pickers, and collectors, and not “fungus watchers.” The tension between picking mushrooms and preserving the environment is real:

Andy describes how he found several Hen of the Woods in a local nature reserve. Molly notes that it is illegal to pick there, commenting “If they catch you, you’ll be one sorry person.” Andy responds: “I told them [the rangers] that there were kids picking flowers and when they went down there, I picked the mushrooms.” [Loud laughter]. Someone jokes: “You’re evil.” Molly adds: “That’s the height of ingenuity” (field notes).

One mushroomer emphasizes the similarity among all who enjoy nature activities — they construct nature for human ends:

I’m not sure I’m all that happy with the concept of a nature lover. I’m not so sure that there are such things in America. . . . That is, after you have already denuded nature of all of the tooth and claw, you then go into a denatured nature, and you can sit there watching birds, and everything that could possibly harm you has already been taken out of the environment. . . . So I’m not sure that there’s a difference between a bird watcher and a mushroom hunter. A mushroom hunter is clearly out there picking things, and deer hunters are clearly out there shooting deer, and you can hear all kinds of stories from deer hunters why what they’re doing is morally good (personal interview).

The speaker suggests that we alter the environment out of self-interest, and persuade ourselves that we are respectful.

Mushroomers tell each other repeatedly and with emphasis that they should treat the woods with respect. They are devoted to this image. Any suggestion by a naive sociologist that this is not so is met with indignation. But equally they are devoted to obtaining treasures. Their humor reflects this unease, as when we are foraging for morel mushrooms in a nature area where we should only be picking for study, one mushroomer jokes: “We might study them as they’re cooking in the pan. We have to have a certain amount of respect for things” (field notes). Yet, not so much that these prime edibles are ignored.

How do mushroomers experience their actions that seem contrary to environmentalism, and to which they feel ambivalent? A set of justifications legitimates their use of the wild. First, they *minimize* the extent of the harm, and second they *differentiate* themselves from (and stigmatize) those who do too much damage.

Minimization. One means of justifying damage is to minimize it. Mushroomers are gathering food, which is no different than the activities of animals — mushroomers incorporate

fungi into the human food chain. Mushroomers note that there are sufficiently few of them that any damage will be limited. Like hunters who do not shoot all the birds in a covey (Marks 1991:176), or bass tournaments in which all fish must be released (Hummel and Foster 1986:48), many claim that they avoid picking all the mushrooms in a locale, leaving some for the following years:

Many members of our club follow the practice of leaving a few mushrooms behind, when they are harvesting in the wild. It's nice for others who come later, it ensures some spores are released, and it augers well for a mycological future (*Mycophile* 1984:7).

Beyond this, some mushroomers claim that picking a mushroom does not cause ecological damage. A mushroom, growing in the forest duff, appears to be a plant, rooted in the soil. In fact, biologically a mushroom is a fruiting body of a "plant." The plant body consists of a mass of threadlike, microscopic filaments. The mycelium is found in soil, wood, and even in animal dung. Mushroomers say with some justice that they are picking fruit, and if they do this with care, all will be well. They deny that they are part of the environmental problem. This provides comfort for them to do what they would likely do otherwise:

Since the mushroom we eat is only the fruiting body of the hidden plant, I have no more qualms about my harvest interrupting a valuable natural process than I do when I pick a few. Anybody who likes oysters (and many who do not) will like oyster mushrooms. So will anyone who likes to contemplate the recycling of nutrients in a forest. When I began eating oyster mushrooms from wasted logs, I became a part of that useful cycle (Kaufman 1983:8-9).

From a purist perspective, such claims are problematic. The "fruit" contains the "seeds" (spores) for future plants. By picking mushrooms (or apples) one decreases the likelihood that new plants will form. As one mushroomer remarks:

There is a general feeling that you're just picking apples off the tree, but I wonder if it may be like pulling the branches off the tree, because this is the reproductive organ of a plant, and if anyone goes along harvesting out the reproductive organ of the plant, obviously the plant is not going to be reproducing (personal interview).

Differentiation. A second technique to justify use is to differentiate oneself from others, who, as a consequence, are stigmatized. Good mushroomers are moderate, an argument also made by those in the Wise Use movement who wish to justify industrial development. A stigmatized extreme justifies one's own moderation (Elsbach and Sutton 1992).

Typically mushroomers condemn those who appear to be "greedy," surpassing community expectations:

[In *Boletus edulis* season] enthusiastic gatherers destroy every fruiting body to be found. Bushes are leveled, branches torn away, duff scattered. . . . Joan Plumb was collecting in the state of Washington and found hunted areas torn up as if furrowed by wild pigs. She was not surprised when the perpetrators asked her to direct them to other places where edible mushrooms were to be found (Freedman and Freedman 1983:21).

Joyce tells me that she is angered by how some people pick all the mushrooms they can, and then drop the ones that are inedible by the side of the road (field notes).

Implicit beliefs define what constitutes proper use. Some deviants violate justice norms, which are linked to assumptions about the carrying capacity of the natural environment. These assumptions are tied to claims that nature is being conserved for future use. However, these examples underline an aesthetic violation as well: the pure woods are defiled by human remains. To level bushes and discard broken mushrooms offends environmental sensibility; symbolizing, not hiding, human egocentrism.

The "Problem" of Overpick

In order to understand how the ideological templates of the proper relationship between culture and nature are employed as guides to understand potential social problems, I examine an on-going debate among mushroomers about the commercial harvesting of wild mushrooms. As noted above, the large majority of mushroomers define the harvesting of mushrooms for one's personal use as morally acceptable, although often with lingering ambivalence. In some measure their own personal self-interest flies in the face of their desires to protect the wild from being despoiled.

As the public has become aware of the culinary delights of wild mushrooms, some individuals now collect them for sale. The growth of this market challenges the moral legitimacy of harvesting, emphasizing that mushrooming is extractive. The presence of entrepreneurs attempting to satisfy this growing market metaphorically transforms the wild into a factory producing "luxury goods." Mushroomers wonder whether a point will be reached at which such a large proportion of mushrooms will be picked that fewer mushrooms will appear in subsequent years. Will "overpick" affect the mycelium (the thread-like root system) of mushrooms? Will these individual decisions combine to destroy the activity for everyone?

As a consequence of this concern, "commercial picking" and "overpick" have become a social problem in the past decade — at least within the bounded subcultural world of mushroomers.⁶ It remains scientifically uncertain whether any significant, lasting damage is being done, given current levels of collection, but through the construction of this "natural" problem, considerable heat has been generated. Some believe that commercial collectors are "traitors," while others have entered and embraced this market. Despite the absence of systematic evidence, the claims that the ecosystem is harmed easily fit a "cultural logic" based on the need for ecological balance and the danger of human intrusion. As wild mushroom sales rise, the debate has become more intense, particularly on the West Coast, where arguments for governmental restrictions on hunting and fishing (Schmitt 1969:9-10; Rieger 1986:71-72; Taylor 1993:10) are generalized to mushrooming. Some state parks and national forests are now closed to the collection of all fungi, regulations that are, in practice, enforced only sporadically. Restrictions on the activity of mushroomers seem to be growing, as the danger of "overpick" increasingly seems plausible, even in the absence of definitive evidence.

As a result, within the mushroom community a well-founded fear exists that regulations might apply to all amateurs (Richardson and Richardson 1994:37). If nature is to be preserved because the environment might be disturbed — the heart of the critics' arguments — should not this stance be generalized to *all* those who collect mushrooms? How does one protect nature only from the "bad guys?" One mushroomer joked: "the way I think about it, is to prohibit everybody collecting mushrooms except me" (*Mushroom* 1985-1986:6).

This debate represents a classic instance of the construction of social problems, set within a community of self-proclaimed naturalists. The problem is not constituted objectively, but established subjectively, through moral claims about socially constituted objects. Debate merges self-interest with ideological beliefs, using salient images to persuade (Fine and Sandstrom 1993). The issue is more than about which mushroomers will benefit, but involves the proper linkage of humans, woods, and markets.

6. This issue has been complicated by concerns involving economic nationalism, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. Many mushrooms — notable chanterelles and matsutakes — are shipped (dried or canned) to Japan and Europe. Thus, foreigners are depleting "our" forests (Fine and Christophorides 1991). Coupled with this, many of these commercial pickers are immigrants from Southeast Asia, adding another racial dimension. During the spring and summer of 1993, the "problem" of violence in the woods became widely publicized in Oregon (personal communication, Richard Mitchell 1996). A Cambodian mushroom picker was murdered (probably in a robbery attempt) and reports spread of gunfire in the woods. Apparently much of this gunfire was designed to prevent fellow pickers from getting lost, but some may have involved warning shots, protecting pickers' personal spots. After the "panic" of 1993, exemplified by a string of articles in the *Portland Oregonian* in 1993 and early 1994, interest in activity in the woods subsided. Some speculated that the gunshots involved racial hostility, but this claim was never proven.

Ideologies and experiences provide schemas for proposing solutions to environmental management. The debate about commercial harvesting of wild mushrooms can be understood in light of the three alternative visions of how human actors should treat the wild: protecting, embracing, or using it.

Protecting the Wild

Those who object to the commercial collection of mushrooms argue that mushrooms must be “protected” from commercial picking: both mushroom species and the woods themselves (through the interrelation of species) are harmed by massive collecting. One Sierra Club member proclaimed that to permit *any* collecting amounts to “opening a Pandora’s box,” asserting that “the environment . . . is nobody’s to touch” (Goff 1993:33).

Nature in this view is delicate, rather than robust, and vulnerable to ecological change, legitimating a need for protection. Of course, the community disputes how much change constitutes *change*, and what kinds of changes are desired. Some mushroomers feel strongly about the “destruction” of the woods:

“It’s a crime!” I hear an angry voice behind me. A timid-looking woman from Seattle who has been quiet for most of the evening is engaged in heated debate with a group of people gathered around her. “They’re depleting the forests. They’re raping the land. Do you know that a single company last season collected over 210 tons of chanterelles? A single company!” “Overpicking causes fruiting failure,” somebody else adds, “In Europe they’ve had to regulate the days, hours, and numbers of people who pick mushrooms. And that can happen here if we’re not careful.” Others add their voices: “Mushrooms nourish trees. Without them, there is ecological holocaust” (Friedman 1986:173).

Rape! Holocaust! These critics are exercised about powerful dangers. The label *overpick* — like drug *abuse* — presents a symbolic representation of the problem in which danger is objectively real:

When the role of the “lowly” fungus is properly understood, it is clear that their existence, no matter which species, is absolutely necessary for maintaining the health of the forest. Pickers picking for the “fast-buck” do not always take proper care for the habitat of the mushroom (or its edibility). . . . What many do not realize is the delicate balance of the forest eco-system (Painter 1985:1).

This rhetoric involves claims of extinction and habitat protection, as when a mushroomer defines his area as “one of the last ecological niches for the wild chanterelle in the northern hemisphere,” and arises from the experience of the speaker seeing “my own chanterelle patches devastated” (Menser 1984-1985:11). That ecological destruction often is not recognized until *after* the damage has been done makes the claim more compelling. As Karel Deller recounts: “In this country, fishing, hunting game and logging are all controlled, but sometimes only after major environmental damage has occurred. Remember the American Bison, the sardines of Monterey, [and] the Passenger Pigeon” (Friedman and Williams 1983:3). The image of habitat loss makes a powerful argument for protection.

Embracing the Wild

To embrace nature is to appreciate the purity of the other and not to desecrate it. One belongs to a community, and does not exploit that community. This second argument suggests that values that are brought into the collecting enterprise have the potential to contaminate the romantic oneness of the world. The danger of commercial mushrooming occurs when collecting is grounded in greed — when collectors do not see themselves at one with the ecosystem. The amateur — the lover of nature — is humanity’s pure representative.

These arguments enshrine the amateur collector and his/her “sacred” relationship to the forest as central to forest management (Stebbins 1992). The image of “overpick” depicts the excesses of those who are said to care little about the moral effects of their actions.

Seeing commercial collecting as a problem from this perspective suggests a lack of *moral balance*. Nature is not treated with respect. The mushroomer, a member of the community of nature, belongs to the ecological system. Mushroomers object to those “who wish to take advantage of a delightful hobby for personal greed and gain” (*The Mycophile* 1985:5).

The moral doing of amateur mushrooming involves the belief that one is at one with nature. The commercial harvesting of chanterelles and matsutakes dispels the illusion, drawing an unacceptable dividing line:

We enjoy mushrooming because it is a way . . . to enjoy nature in an unexploitable way. Somehow the idea of commercializing this pastime is unacceptable (Burrell 1983:19).

You don't want your activity to turn into a big commercial venture, and there are people who . . . are very sensitive about it, and they want to see mushrooms kept out of the arena of money. Mushrooming is a pure activity. It has nothing whatever to do with making a buck. They don't want to see people turn into buck makers, 'cause that will degrade mushrooms for everyone (personal interview).

This argument is distinct from the protectionist argument presented above in that it does not address how commercial mushrooming affects ecosystems, but how it affects the relationship of naturalists and the wild. For those who have the luxury of keeping their leisure non-commercial and unsullied, the woods should be temples, not markets.

Using the Wild

While those opposed to commercializing the woods attempt to connect the “problem of overpick” to the rhetorical division between altruistic “white hats” and greedy “black hats” (Fox 1981:103), harvesters and their supporters reject this imagery, denying the existence of a problem. They consider themselves to be naturalists, and have developed their own altruistic justifications. They claim that their action differs little, except in scale, from the actions of the purest amateurs who also use the forest for their own ends. If amateurs have rights to mushrooms, so do they. They provide a product to humans who would not otherwise have access: the elderly, the handicapped, and the busy. Commercial collectors *mediate* nature.

Commercial collectors embrace a conservation ethic:

Larry Stickney, the portly ex-president of the [Mycological Society of San Francisco], announces, “I can find no commandment that says” — he pauses — “thou shalt not pick and sell wild mushrooms.” “Once a mushroom drops its spores” — another voice joins in — “its only job is to be picked and eaten.” “Sounds to me more like a problem of etiquette,” suggests Gary Lincoff . . . president of the North American Mycological Association . . . “than a problem of ecology” (Friedman 1986:173).

One mushroom collector, noting the division between commercial distributors and amateurs, suggested, within limits, nature is for humans to use. He asserts:

[Mushrooming] is not a passive use of nature, but it's not something that nature can't handle. We have the right to use nature. . . . It's not the same as scouring. There are limits. . . . It's a public good. . . . You have a right to use [land to pick mushrooms], but you don't have the right to abuse it (field notes).

Commercial harvesting permits mushroomers to use their appreciation of the wild for personal benefit, aligning work with leisure. As one writer puts it: “It is a way to capitalize on our own mushroom lore, our knowledge of habitat, and our initiative to bring in a little extra bakshish [money]” (Burrell 1983:19) — good work when expert pickers claim to make up to

\$1000 for their expertise (Coombs 1993:13). One entrepreneur explained: "I want to make part of my living from collecting and selling mushrooms while respecting nature and earning the respect of my peers" (Hvid 1983).

These hunters also legitimate their actions with an explicitly humanistic rhetoric of social justice, providing goods for those without access: "sharing a wonderful, unique experience with a lot of people who would never find them" (personal interview). Rather than greedy, they are generous. As a commercial collector reminded his critics:

Four or five people get a chance to enjoy wild mushrooms for every pound I collect. Far more people in the U.S. have savored these wild fruits in the last five years through commercial collection than through mycological society-sponsored collection. I'd remind hobbyists that *all* the people in the U.S. who pay taxes are supporting the parks and public lands where wild mushrooms are found in astounding quantities. The general public has a right to taste wild mushrooms too, and the most available route is through the work of commercial collectors like me. I think too many of the critics of commercial collecting are motivated by selfish interest, i.e., keeping the goodies for themselves and their friends. They want their private preserve funded with public money (Hvid 1985:6-7).

Writes another, "One day when I can perhaps no longer go out and gather my own, I want to assure would be suppliers the freedom to engage in the business of providing them for me as some are now doing for others" (Stickney 1985:3). These collectors suggest that selling mushrooms is tied to a more equitable distribution of public resources. These mushroomers argue that the woods belong to everyone through the mediation of the commercial collector.

The "problem" of overpick is constituted through social actors drawing upon a set of schemas that align them with the environment, and through these schemas they organize the experience of nature. Protecting nature, embracing nature, and using nature are models for thinking about and constructing environmental problems — connecting one's experience to the wild. Which one (or several) is emphasized is a consequence of individual histories, social placement, and situated features of effective rhetoric. But in every case the response is mediated both through idealized images of the environment and one's personal desires.

The Natural Other

I return to the problem of naturework: the attempt to define the environment in light of cultural templates. *Nature* as a construct is fundamentally cultural. The empirical world, real in its particulars and consequences, is filtered through a forest of symbols.

How then do actors interpret the "otherness" of nature? I presented three ideological visions of nature, linked to interpretive strategies for natural experience. First, one may differentiate humans from nature, enshrining nature and justifying an orientation to nature that emphasizes the need to separate the two spheres. The experience of nature involves a recognition of the natural Other, that one is away from civilization. Tom Wolfe's clever label of *nostalgie de la boue* (love of [nostalgia for] the mud), expresses the cultural privileging of primitivism (e.g., Price 1989): the treasuring of the wild as a means of thinking about constraints on the civilized.

A second model embraces nature by postulating a fundamental similarity in all life. The world is an organic, inescapable whole. One strives to be at one with nature, seeing cultural constraints as overlaid on natural life. The similarity with the protectionist vision is evident in the linkage of each to contemporary environmental rhetoric. Yet, they differ in the respect to the *place* of humans as a *part* of or *apart* from nature. The tension in a view that sees humanity as at one with the organic whole of nature derives from the fact that it seems to provide no *additional* limits on human activity. In practice, the organic view often depends on protectionist thought to establish limits on human action.

The third template differentiates humans and nature, but privileges human action. Alan Wolfe (1993:109; see also Ross 1994:12-13), the most eloquent sociological defender of this humanistic vision, argues that "Humans are different from other species because they can attribute meaning to the events around them and therefore can direct their affairs to some purpose. . . . The scientific and moral lessons available from [those who put nature first] for the human species — a species that not only lives but lives for meaning — are minimal." Nature is for humans to use: social problems concern how the wild should be conserved for future *human* generations. What this prudence means in practice must be defined, and links the humanist orientation to the protectionist and organic visions. Being in nature is a meaningful and purposive experience, of which extraction may legitimately be one part.

Through the analysis of a subcultural social problem, I argue that attitudes towards environmental policy are tied to templates of nature and to images of the "good." If hunting mushrooms is legitimate, what justifications would be necessary to limit that activity, particularly in the absence of dramatic and compelling scientific evidence of long-term ecological harm? The images that we have of the proper relationship between humans and nature provide justification for our environmental arguments. Those who desire to protect the woods are particularly prone to argue for tight, restrictive limits on the collecting of mushrooms. Those who accept the legitimacy of the human domain over the environment are least bothered by commercial collecting. Those who see humans and nature as part of a Gaian whole distinguish between the attitudes with which individuals approach the woods: those whose picking is part of an organic participation in the ecosystem are more worthy than those who see naturework as an extension of commerce. Depictions of this social problem connect to images of the wild within particular social groups.

The problem of "overpick," while grounded within a particular, narrow subculture, stands for other social problems involving the environment. The question ultimately involves how public resources are to be used: whether resources should be consumed in the present or preserved for the future. Further, the "overpick" debate concerns our valuation of commerce and economic distribution. Is nature a communal social good or is it potentially private property, available for energetic entrepreneurs? One can see echoes of this discussion in other issues of land management, such as the regulation of "special forest products" (including moss, bark, herbs and berries) and the preservation of wilderness from the incursion of bikers, boaters, or drivers. How much impact is too much, who should have primary access, and who has the right to make those decisions?

This analysis suggests future directions for the development of a sociology of naturework: an interpretivist view of the environment, socially and historically grounded, linked to habitus and social class. Nature, like race and gender, only appears to be a given, but this givenness is culturally determined. Recognizing the social dimensions of nature, we must ask: What social forces impel actors to think about, experience, and talk about environmental topics in particular ways? What does it mean to be human in a world that is perceived as becoming less wild each day? On what grounds, biological and/or cultural, are we to be concerned about the extinction of species, the loss of habitats, and the chemical alterations of soil, air, and water? From the birth of the planet, change is endemic. So what does a return to nature and a respect for nature mean? Whose nature is to be privileged? Whose policies to protect that nature are to be endorsed?

Ultimately these are empirical questions, grounded in social relations, demanding personal and collective choice. Even the most natural problems are linked to social interpretations. Human decisions that affect the natural environment are consequential and inescapable, even while we recognize that the choices are grounded in human values, power relations, and interests. Naturework involves the sorting of these choices. Environmental ethics is, in this sense, a branch of cultural studies.

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