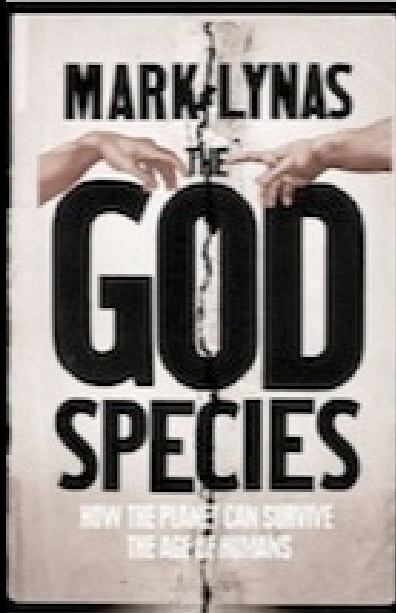


**Age of Man
Environmentalism
&
Respect for an Independent
Nature**

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College of Charleston
November 2014

“Age of Man Environmentalism” vs. traditional environmentalism



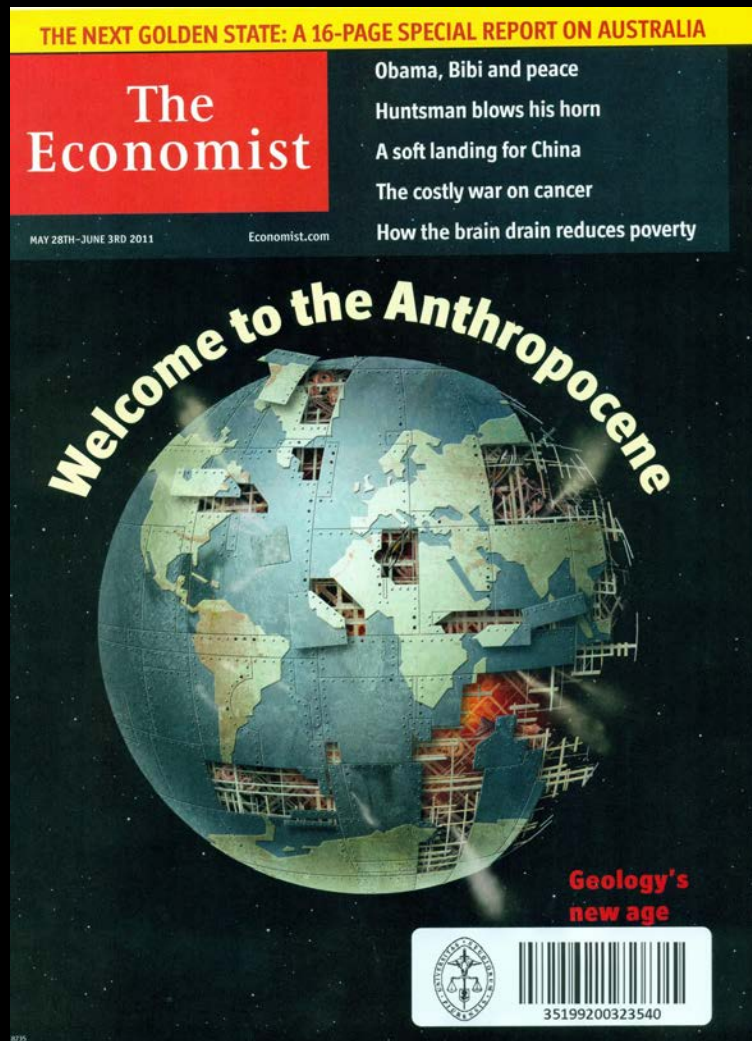
“Nature no longer runs the Earth. We do. It is our choice what happens from here.”
(Mark Lynas, 2011)

“Humans neither can nor ought to denature their planet . . . On larger planetary scales it is better to build our cultures in intelligent harmony with the way the world is already built, rather than take control and rebuild this promising planet by ourselves . . . We do not want a de-natured life on a de-natured planet.”

(Holmes Rolston,
2012)



Geologists: End of Holocene? Beginning of Anthropocene?



*"There will never be an
Anthropocene."*

Gary Snyder, 2014



Age of Man Env.

Vs.

Respect Independent Nature

- Env philosophy of Anthropocene →
 - Massive human impacts & demise of pristine nature dooms preservation, restoration, & rewilding →
 - Nature human created →
 - Humans as gods, parents
 - Nature as a garden, novel ecosystems
 - Right/responsibility to manage the planet →
 - Humans fully natural →
 - Value of non-humanized rejected or marginalized →
- Traditional environmental philosophy
 - Massive human impacts necessitates preservation, restoration, & rewilding
 - Ongoing agency of nature
 - Humans as earthlings using a gifted nature
 - Nature: Context of flourishing
 - Responsibility to reduce impact, live in harmony
 - Humans importantly separate from nature
 - Naturalness rarer, more important, can recover

Human impacts massive, global

- $\frac{3}{4}$ of earth's suitable land actively used



- Overfishing and acidification devastating sea life



- Dam most rivers and consume $\frac{1}{2}$ of surface fresh water



- Our exotics homogenize ecosystems



- Causing species extinction at 100 to 1000 times background rate



- Raise planet's temperature 2-5 degrees Celsius -- affecting local climates and thus virtually all organisms

"Human activities are . . . affecting the structure and functioning of the Earth system as a whole."

(Steffen, Crutzen, McNeill 2007)

Response to this impact

or

Bemoan this impact?

- An arrogant & foolish assault on nature
- Redouble our efforts to restrain ourselves
- Live more sustainably and justly?

“The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint . . .”

(Terry Tempest Williams 1992)

Celebrate the “age of man?”

- *“We . . . are changing the way the entire planet functions. This is an amazing opportunity – humanity has now made the leap to an entirely new level of planetary importance.”*

(Geographer
Erle Ellis 2011)



Ellis: Humans Creating Nature



Humans creating Earth

“The age of man” is a designation “well-deserved, given humanity’s enormous alteration of earth . . . This is the earth we have created.” (“Hope in the Age of Man” *NY Times* 2011: Emma Marris, Peter Kareiva, Joe Mascaro, and Ellis)

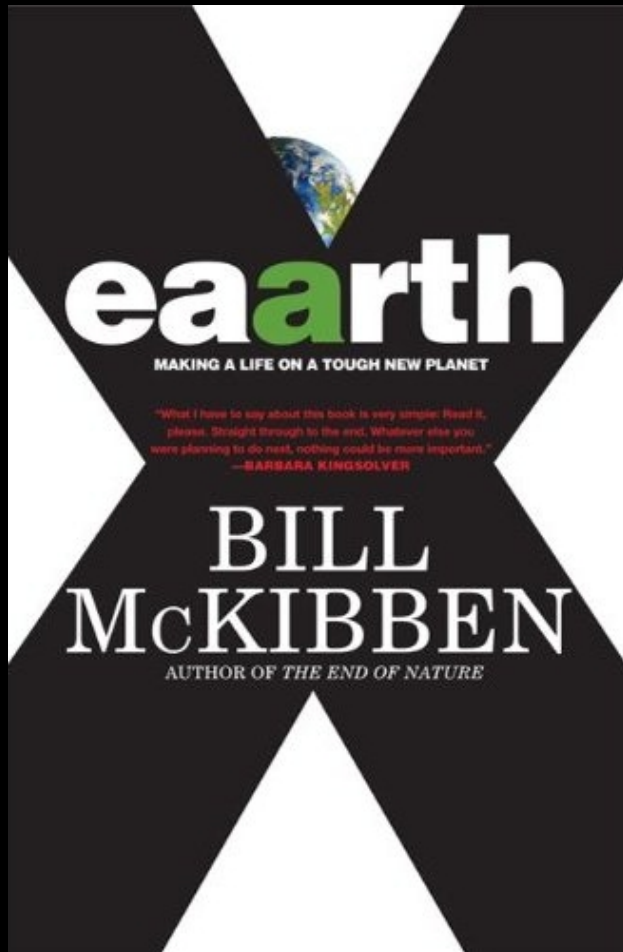


“One clear reality is that for a long time to come, Earth is what we choose to make of it, for better or worse.”

Andrew Revkin (author of *Earth is Us*)



Even McKibben thinks we need a new name for the planet



“We’ve changed the planet . . . we need to understand the world we’ve created . . . insofar as our goal was to preserve the world we were born into. That’s not the world we live on any longer, and there’s no use pretending otherwise.” (2010)

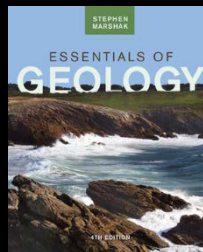
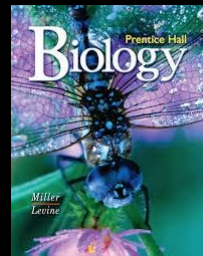
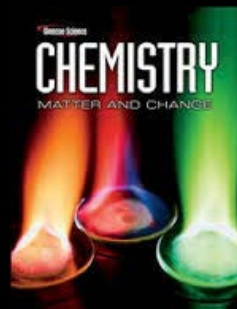
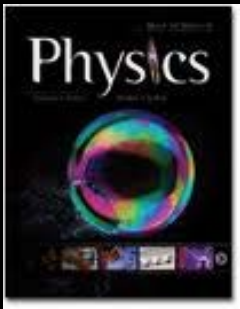


Nature's ongoing agency

- AME's creation claims are pernicious exaggerations
- Nonhuman forces continue to pervade and govern the planet
- Nature—not humans—is responsible for the existence of sunlight, water, gravity, chemical bonds, evolution, photosynthesis, predation, and planet's diversity of life and geology
- Nature inside us: We're still animals!

- Breathing, digestion, metabolism, growth, decay, birth, death
- Our ability to think, love, imagine

- Our causal influence does not approach the combined causal contributions of the nonhuman physical, chemical, biological & geological forces of the planet



- Humans as dominant species does not mean we dominate nature

Treating human influence as causal creation is anthropocentric narcissism

- Causation is perspectival
- AME's perspective: Nature's agency is mere background on stage of human action
- What humans do is important, what nature does is not

– “Human influence is arguably the most important factor affecting life of all kinds in today’s world.”

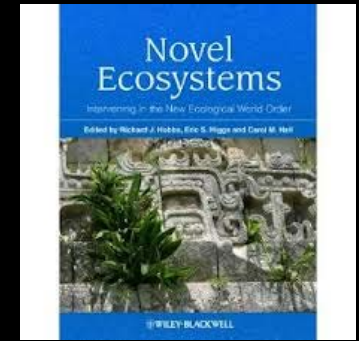
(Sanderson et al. 2002)

“There really is no such thing as nature untainted by people. Instead, ours is a world of nature domesticated, albeit to varying degrees, from national parks to high-rise megalopolises.” (Kareiva 2007)

- AME's infatuation with human causal influence sees earth as artifact



Novel ecosystems: A “propaganda tool”



- Novel ecosystem are human-altered (hence “created”) systems with new combinations of species or functions that are hard to undo

“Novel ecosystems are going to be driving most of natural processes on Earth and represent the future of our planet, like it or not.” (Marris 2011)

- Concept is ill-defined
 - What degree of alteration makes the ecosystem novel?

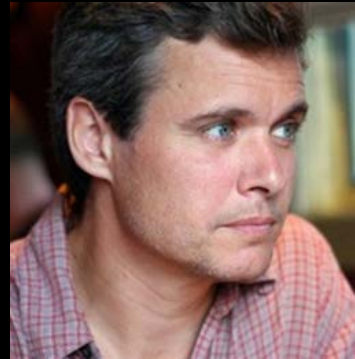
“The Whole Earth is a novel ecosystem: a creation of anthropogenic change under varying levels of day-to-day-management.” (Marris, Mascaro, Ellis 2013)

- Concept serves to polish the image of human-impacted nature, downplay importance of wild nature, and promote the humans-create-nature idea

Humans as Earth's Managers?

- *“Whether we accept it or not, human beings now shoulder the responsibility of planetary management.”*

(Allen Thompson
2009)



- Why? Perhaps because:

- *“There is no corner of the globe, no feature of our biosphere, which escapes the influence of human activity.”* (Thompson 2009)

- *“Humans have altered everything, and there is no going back.”*

(Marris, Mascaro, Ellis 2013)

- But that there is no virgin nature left gives us neither the right nor the responsibility to manage the planet--even if we had altered everything



We already managing Earth, so lets do it mindfully?

“We are already running the whole Earth, whether we admit it or not. To run it consciously and effectively we must admit that role and even embrace it.”

(Marris 2011)



- Not true we are “powerful planetary engineers”

(Steffen, Crutzen, McNeill 2007)

- For our planetary effects are not planned or designed
 - Unintentional

- Our mindless, massive impacts don't justify trying to intentionally engineer massive impacts
 - Rather than seeking to lessen those impacts

Must we manage nature for nature's sake or perhaps our own?

- Nature does not need humans in order to thrive!
- While some species and ecosystems need our assistance to recover
- What most need is for us to stop our assault on them, not to manage them
- Humans too need the end of our assault on nature
- Rather than managing nature, human flourishing requires that we give up this grandiose idea of humans as earth's overlords



Prometheus

AME's models for human/nature relation

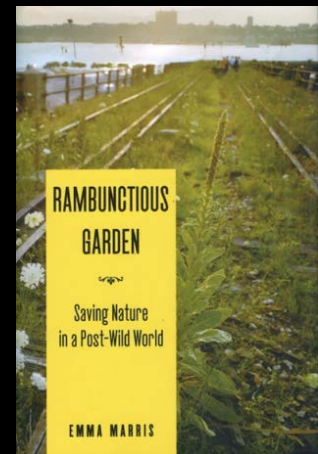
Humans as boss?

- A geo-engineered and regulated earth under human control

“We have to ask ourselves, ‘Do we want this species in this place right now?’ To answer, we have to know what we want; we have to have a vision for the future of every piece of land.” (Marris 2011)

Earth as garden?

- Earth as a giant cultivated sphere shaped according to our ideals and values



Humans as nature's parents?

“Once the planet was larger than us, but it no longer is.” Like “adoptive parents” . . . humanity has “the responsibility of enabling . . . the flourishing of life on Earth.” (Thompson, 2009)

Better model for human/nature relation & human flourishing

- Humans as admiring & thankful users of a given nature who magnify its gifts and share them fairly with humans & nonhumans
- Altering nature with technology has been key to human progress
 - But now the returns are diminishing and negative
- It would be a mistake to try to engineering Earth or human nature
 - Unlimited freedom & control over nature would not be good for us
- Humans flourishing requires
 - Presence of other, the given, the gifted world
 - Using our capacities for “gratitude, wonder, respect and restraint”
(Rolston 2012)

AME: Humans are fully natural

But humans both natural and unnatural

- *“Taking full ownership of the Anthropocene” means we should accept “our place on the planet, with all of our synthetic trappings, and our faults, as fundamentally natural”* (Revkin 2011)
- *“It is time to articulate goals and objectives for parks and wilderness that are founded in a perspective that views humans as a part of, rather than apart from, nature.”* (Aplet and Cole, Beyond Naturalness, 2010)
- We are both part of and separate from nature
 - Biological creatures, evolved from and dependent on earth processes
 - Also moral, social, psychological, technical, economic, and political beings
 - Understanding humans requires both social and natural sciences
 - To deny humans are importantly separate from nature is tantamount to reducing social to natural sciences



Implications of treating humans as fully natural

- Devaluing of native species
 - Marris suggests we can “Learn to love exotic species” if we “fold humanity back into nature and consider us just another way species move around.” (Marris, 2011)
- Ocean health declines when humans extract fewer fish
 - Ocean Health Index “embraces the idea that people are part of nature . . .” defines “ocean health by benefits to people” and when a country is “under-harvesting fish stocks” its ocean health score is “penalized.” (Ben Halpern, Scientific American 2012)
- Humans making nature
 - “The unthinkable, exciting and energizing thought occurs: we can make more nature.” (Marris 2011)
- No valence difference for unhumanized events
 - Niagara Falls no less wonderful when learn we “could turn the falls off completely with a flick of a switch.” (Marris 2011)



Naturalness, nature's autonomy, and nature

- 'Naturalness': The degree to which an entity is not influenced by humans
- 'Nature's autonomy': Nature's ability to carry on its own activities unimpeded by humans
- Both come in degrees but nature's autonomy need not be lessened by some human influence
- 'Nature':
 - That which is outside of human domination and retains significant autonomy from humanity
 - The given, unbidden, gifted aspects of the world
- Nature is not just that which is pristine, virgin and “untouched by man”



Naturalness is value adding

- What is not (or less) influenced or controlled by humans is valuable in virtue of that fact
- Need not be overriding or ever-present value
- But often present and frequently critical
- Present when admire athlete's gift (rather than effort)
- Counts against genetic engineering human nature or ending suffering in the wild
- Explains why Old Faithful loses its magic when the Park regulates it with soap

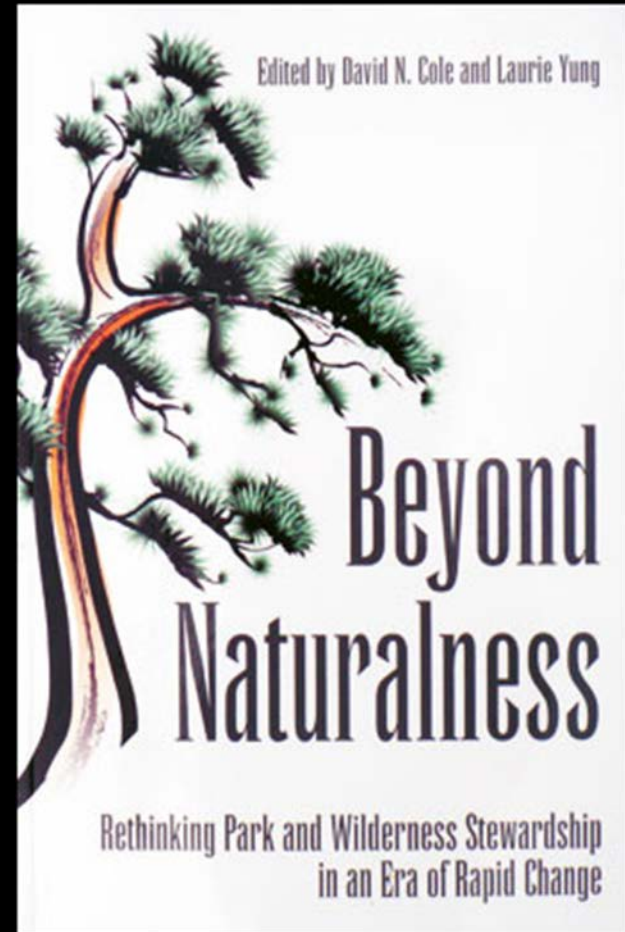


AME rejects or minimizes the value of naturalness

- *“In the Anthropocene, the anthropogenic biosphere is permanent... making the call to avoid human interference with the biosphere irrelevant.”*

(Ellis 2011)

- *“Environmentalism in the future . . . will hold a significantly diminished place for valuing the good of the autonomy in nature.”* (Thompson 2010).

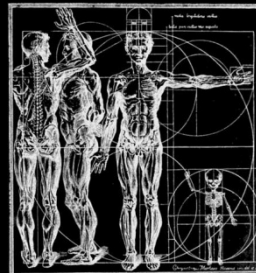


Nature's autonomy more, not less, valuable (including naturalness in impacted nature)

- Because there is less naturalness to value, protecting what remains becomes more important, as does working to regain it



- Not just wild areas that increase in value, but also the naturalness that persist in human-impacted nature



- Although urban parks significantly shaped by humans, they are valued in large part for their remaining naturalness
 - Trees not plastic, birds not engineered
- So too with the natural dimension of humans
 - Tragic loss of value if we manipulated & controlled our entire nature

Valuing diminished naturalness

“When I think of the times I myself have come closest to experiencing what I might call the sacred in nature, I often find myself remembering wild places much closer to home. I think, for instance, of a small pond near my house where water bubbles up from limestone springs to feed a series of pools that rarely freeze in winter and so play home to waterfowl that stay here for the protective warmth even on the coldest of winter days, gliding silently through streaming mists as the snow falls from gray February skies. I think of a November evening long ago when I found myself on a Wisconsin hilltop in rain and dense fog, only to have the setting sun break through the clouds to cast an otherworldly golden light on the misty farms and woodlands below, a scene so unexpected and joyous that I lingered past dusk so as not to miss any part of the gift that had come my way.”

William Cronon (Env. Historian)
“The Trouble with Wilderness” (1995)



AME's straw man attach on pristine wilderness

- AME claims traditional environmentalism clings to the illusory ideal of untouched nature
 - But long-ago human influence and recent global impacts undermine possibility of preserving or restoring a virgin nature
- AME falsely assumes only way to respect nature's independence is to return it to how it was before humans
- But naturalness can be enhanced by degrees
- Humanization washes out over time as nature reasserts itself
- Naturalness can be enhanced w/o return to nonhuman state or trajectory
 - Lessing of human influence sufficient
- Even if there is “no going back” only path forward need not be a thoroughly managed future

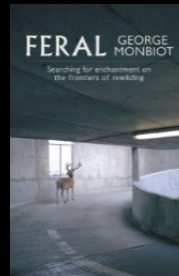


AME ignores rewilding

Must “philosophically accept that nature has become embedded within human systems” and thus accept “a permanent role for humans as stewards of the biosphere” (Perring and Ellis 2013)

- Rewilding: Turning nature loose to head off onto a trajectory we do not specify
- Unleashing nature
 - By removing dams, poisons, introduced invasives
 - Restoring natural processes by reintroducing eradicated key species
- Objection: This rewilding policy is just another way of humans deciding what nature will be like
 - In contrast to a hands-off policy or “spontaneous rewilding”

- Reply: The natural processes that take place in impacted nature are often human-damaged enterprises (e.g. processes in dead zones)
 - Restoration helps free them from ongoing human influence
 - One does not set a person (or nature) free by leaving on chains or failing to restore key abilities



- While rewilding is a “management decision,” it is completely different from outcome-oriented decisions about how to fashion nature

Conclusions

- The “Age of Man Environmentalism” is the latest embodiment of human hubris
 - Manifests a culpable failure to appreciate the profound role nonhuman nature continues to play on earth
 - Arrogantly overvalues human’s role and authority
 - Undervalues the importance of preservation, restoration and rewilding
 - Promotes ecosystem invention and geoengineering
- We should not get comfortable with--or reconcile ourselves to--massive human influence on Earth, but fight it
- Respect for an independent nature should continue to be a centrally guiding value for environmentalism