

Anthropocentric and Ecocentric: An Application of Environmental Philosophy to Outdoor Recreation and Environmental Education

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Abstract

Sometimes environmental philosophers write only for other environmental philosophers, and their insights on the nature–human relationship do not reach environmental educators and adventure programmers. This article investigates one aspect of environmental philosophy and the differences between anthropocentric and ecocentric thinking, and applies it to the outdoor recreation and environmental education fields. Even some philosophers themselves believe that the anthropocentric/ecocentric debate is a theoretical discussion with few practical implications, but there are several reasons that outdoor recreation professionals and environmental educators might consider anthropocentric and ecocentric distinctions in their work. They include an appreciation of motivations behind environmental action and the practical value of discussing philosophical differences.

Keywords

anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, environmental philosophy, preservation, conservation, outdoor recreation, environmental education

When two environmental ethicists are introduced, one will soon ask the other: are you an anthropocentrist or a nonanthropocentrist?¹ If two environmental activists meet, and drift into “philosophical” conversation, one may ask: are you a conservationist or a preservationist? It is unlikely that the first pair will raise the second question, and even less likely that the second pair will ask the first question. (Norton, 1986, p. 195)

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In 2011, Schultz, Simpson, and Elfessi compared the environmental attitudes of students in two different university courses at a Midwestern university. One course was an outdoor recreation class required of all recreation management majors. The other was an introductory environmental studies course. The environmental studies course fulfilled a general education requirement, so the students were a representative sample of students across campus. Results of the study revealed that the only significant difference between students in the two courses was that recreation management majors were more anthropocentric than their environmental studies counterparts. In other words, the students who were going to graduate from college with a recreation degree (and likely go on to serve as intermediaries between natural areas and the general public) were more human-centered than the general student body.

A worthwhile question to ask about these results is “So what?”—or perhaps better stated, “Does it really matter?” Obviously, each person perceives his or her relationship to the natural world in a unique and personal way, but so long as individuals possess a serious sense of environmental responsibility, do distinctions in philosophical perspective have practical implications? The answer given in this article is yes. In fact, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate how a philosophical understanding of the distinction between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism is of practical importance because it contributes to a more thorough understanding of the way in which outdoor experience is meaningful.

This article is divided into five sections. The first section defines anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. The second section briefly asks the question of whether an anthropocentric/ecocentric debate has practical implications. The third section argues that environmental perspectives (i.e., anthropocentric, ecocentric) affect the outdoor experience. The discussion in this section relies on phenomenology and underscores the importance of people understanding their motives for spending time in the outdoors. The fourth section builds on the third section to suggest that outdoor leaders who concern themselves with anthropocentric and ecocentric thinking may use that knowledge to improve their programming. Finally, the last section concludes that discussions of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism do have practical value—and, as an extension of this case study, claims that environmental philosophy in general has contributions to make to the outdoor recreation and environmental education fields.

Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism Defined

The opening Norton quote suggests that the terms *anthropocentric* and *ecocentric* are not part of the usual jargon of most outdoor enthusiasts. It also observes, however, that their lack of use may be more a matter of semantics than a disinterest in the subject. To some extent, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are philosophical elaborations of the more commonly used terms *conservation* and *preservation*. Anthropocentrism is a perspective that human beings are the most significant species on the planet, and nature is “valuable only insofar it is valuable to human beings” (Casas & Burgess, 2012, p. 184). Donnelly and Bishop (2007) go on to define an anthropocentric action as “one in which the reason to act is the provision of a benefit to human beings”

(p. 90). Except for the fact that this definition of anthropocentrism does not explicitly make a reference to future generations, it seems very similar to the definition of conservation, which is the management and protection of nature for the benefit of present and future generations of humans.

Conversely, ecocentrism is a perspective that human beings are not the center of the planet's reason to be, and "the environment is intrinsically valuable" (Casas & Burgess, 2012, p. 184). Some, but not all, definitions of ecocentrism also add that humans are merely equal members of the large community of nature. Donnelly and Bishop (2007) define an ecocentric action as "one in which the reason to act is the provision of a benefit to the environment" (p. 90)—which sounds very much like preservation, which can be defined as the management and protection of nature for the benefit of creatures and ecosystems that have an innate right to exist and thrive (Clarke & McCool, 1985).

Kronlid and Öhman (2013), in an article that provides more extensive definitions of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism than are offered here, warn their readers to not fall into the false assumption that anthropocentrism is synonymous with a nonenvironment-friendly position and nonanthropocentrism is synonymous with an environment-friendly position. While it may be true that most environmentally destructive behavior is anthropocentric, it is not accurate to claim that anthropocentric attitude alone leads to destructive action.

Ecocentrists generally acknowledge the anthropocentric premise that nature has value because it serves human interests. Their objection to anthropocentrism is that anthropocentrism asserts that nature *only* has value to the extent that it serves human interests. From an ecocentric perspective, anthropocentrism fails to recognize that nature also has value independent of human needs. In other words, ecocentrists do not think anthropocentrists are entirely wrong; they think anthropocentrists got it only half right (Casas & Burgess, 2012; McShane, 2007).

Baird Callicott, a name familiar to outdoor recreation professionals and environmental educators through his extensive work on the writings of Aldo Leopold, elaborates on this distinction by defining instrumental and intrinsic values. Anthropocentrism acknowledges instrumental values but not intrinsic ones. According to Callicott (1996), "Something is valued instrumentally when it is valued for what it can do for the valuers—feed them, shelter them, please them, inspire them, transform them. Something is valued intrinsically when it is valued for its own sake" (p. 219). Callicott (1992) goes on to make a clear distinction between the terms *anthropocentric* and *anthropogenic*. Valuing, according to Callicott, is anthropogenic—meaning that the values are generated by human beings. That does not mean, however, that the values themselves are necessarily anthropocentric. For example, feeling love or respect for nature is a human act of valuing, but it is intrinsic in that the value is one that transcends selfish human interest. As Hargrove (2003) noted, an anthropogenic view can be "nonanthropocentric, rather than anthropocentric, because human valuers value things other than themselves, and it is intrinsic, because human valuers value these other things for their own sakes" (p. 182).

There are more extreme ecophilosophers who disagree with anthropogenic valuing and do not believe that values necessarily have to come from human sources. They

assert that nature has value totally independent of humanity and human values. The name most often associated with this perspective is Holmes Rolston. For Rolston (2008), intrinsic *literally* means intrinsic, and intrinsic value means value that is inherent in the living entity itself. In other words, value is not something that needs to be projected onto nature by a human mind; it exists whether or not humans convey it.

Norton (1984), and even Callicott (1992), find Rolston's perspective unnecessarily vague (i.e., how can human beings understand values if they exist without humanity necessarily being aware of them?). They question whether it is in humanity's best interest and, more importantly, in nature's best interest to debate values that no one can fully understand. It is, according to these more moderate philosophers, better to work with a definition of valuing that identifies values that people can easily comprehend, and this requires anthropogenic in which people bestow the values.

Norton takes this line of thinking even further by suggesting that the debate of intrinsic and instrumental values is, for practical purposes, a waste of time because instrumental values would be enough for a responsible environmental philosophy if instrumental values were defined broadly enough. In his own words, "Not nearly enough has been said about what counts as a human interest" (Norton, 1984, p. 134). Norton makes a clear distinction between what he calls strong anthropocentrism and weak anthropocentrism. Strong anthropocentrism is limited to consumptive use of natural resources, whereas weak anthropocentrism is more encompassing and includes less tangible nature-related human values. Such values would include spiritual growth, personal renewal, and even a sense of satisfaction with oneself for possessing a worldview that stresses a close relationship between humans and nature. The beauty of this thinking, according to Norton, is that weak anthropocentrism encompasses many of the same practical concerns as ecocentrism without getting into the philosophical quagmire of whether nature has intrinsic moral rights. If the real purpose of environmentalism is to act in the best interest of both humankind and nature, weak anthropocentrism combines the best elements of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism to create a substantial common ground (Norton, 1995).

McShane's (2007) counter to Norton is that even when Norton includes rejuvenation and spiritual growth as anthropocentric values, he still ignores feelings of respect, awe, and love toward the natural world. According to McShane, respect, awe, and love are exclusively ecocentric feelings no matter how broadly anthropocentrism is defined. Respect connotes an equal relationship between humans and the nonhuman world, and awe signifies a greatness that goes beyond humanity. And as to the emotion of love, McShane (2007) writes,

I might be able to act as though I love you if I judge it in my self-interest to do so, but . . . really loving you requires me to see you as having value that is independent of me. (p. 176)

If environmental philosophy served no purpose other than to craft policy, an anthropocentric perspective might actually be enough—but environmental philosophy encompasses much more, not the least of which is the emotion people feel in the presence of nature.

Outdoor recreation professionals and environmental educators might easily conclude that environmental philosophers take anthropocentric/ecocentric discussions to unnecessarily esoteric levels, but from these philosophical debates come manageable definitions that are of use to the outdoor professions. In summary,

- Strong anthropocentrism is a perspective wherein the nonhuman environment is typically taken to be a commodity (e.g., drinking water, lumber, recreational setting) and is often considered a mere object of use. Here, nature does not appear to have intrinsic value, and its extrinsic value is limited to its obvious contributions to humankind.
- Weak anthropocentrism is a perspective whereby the natural environment is still measured by its value to human beings, but the value is significantly expanded beyond the commodities associated with strong anthropocentrism. Nature allows humans to grow in character and to feel good about themselves by interacting and caring for something outside themselves.
- Ecocentrism or nonanthropocentrism is a perspective whereby nature has intrinsic value independent of its direct value to human beings. This might be a Callicott-type ecocentrism in that humans bestow intrinsic values on nature. It might be a Rolston style of ecocentrism in which the intrinsic values exist independent of humanity's acknowledgment.

So Does It Matter?

The stated purpose of this article is to determine whether environmental philosophy's insights into anthropocentrism and ecocentrism have anything to contribute to outdoor recreation/environmental education practice beyond what most outdoor leaders and environmental educators already understand when they think in terms of conservation and preservation. In comparison with anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, *conservation* and *preservation* are clear and concise terms. They also are simple terms, but perhaps too simple to capture all worthwhile nuances. Anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, in comparison, are complex. There are distinctions between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism that do not appear in the popular literature about conservation and preservation, but it is not always obvious that this newfound information has practical application.

As already mentioned, one reason for *not* worrying about distinctions between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism is that the practical results often come out the same regardless of the environmental perspective (Norton, 1984). For example, wilderness is valued for both intrinsic and instrumental reasons, so in the United States, there would be designated wilderness areas whether anthropocentrists or ecocentrists were calling the shots. The same could be said of adventure programs, environmental education centers, and a myriad of other programs and services designed to encourage quality nature-human interactions. All these entities that contribute to nature-based experiential education likely would exist whether the organizers were anthropocentrists or ecocentrists.

This does not mean, however, that the experiences in these various programs and settings would necessarily be the same. Does an anthropocentric hiker have a different experience than an ecocentric one? Do strong anthropocentric leaders provide slightly different programs for their students than weak anthropocentric leaders, and do both provide different programs than ecocentric leaders? In other words, do differing environmental perspectives evoke different experiences in the natural world? The next two sections of the article, “A Question of Motivation” and “The Value of Discussion,” address these issues through a discussion of why and how conceptual beliefs motivate different experiences of the natural environment, and why an awareness of this is crucial for those leading outdoor programs.

A Question of Motivation

The primary argument that environmental philosophers make for the practical implications of anthropocentric/ecocentric distinctions is that focusing solely on results (e.g., the designations of wilderness areas and the construction of nature centers) fails to consider what it is that motivates the results. Even if anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives lead to the same actions—and this is not saying that they always do—the motives differ and motivation matters. As Goralnik and Nelson (2011) put it, “The integral piece . . . is the why, not the what” (p. 183).

A useful way to approach the question of motivation in outdoor programming is through the use of the philosophical discipline of phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of the structures of experience, placing special attention on the way in which a person creates a meaningful world (Brown, 2003). Phenomenologists observe that a person’s intellectual and emotional states during an experience vary depending on that person’s core beliefs and past experiences. One component of what is called “phenomenological reduction” involves engaging in a genealogical analysis that traces, in a historical manner, how a particular person or group of individuals comes to view something (in this case, nature) in a way that is meaningful to them. The term *meaningful* as used here is important. That which is meaningful to an individual serves to motivate particular kinds of experiences. To some extent, this mirrors Dewey’s notion of continuity and interaction (Nicol, 2014). Continuity is the recognition that past experiences influence current experience, and interaction is recognizing that any experience has not only objective factors that everyone interprets similarly but also subjective (or internal) components that are unique to the individual (Dewey, 1938).

Consider, for example, the experiences of awe, respect, and love mentioned earlier. If McShane is correct that these emotions require an ecocentric perspective, then individuals who do not have that perspective may not be able to experience those feelings toward nature. Sometimes seasoned outdoor leaders are with a group when they experience what the leader knows to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It might be sighting a wolf or witnessing a fire-in-the-sky sunset, yet some of the participants in the group are not moved by the event. Of course, one reason is that the lack of experience in the outdoors means some participants will not appreciate the significance of the moment, but some of it may be the various perspectives that people have toward nature. Some people will be in awe, and others will not.

It is too rudimentary, however, to suggest that people's reaction to nature can be predicted based solely on their environmental perspective. The only assertion to be made is that anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives affect experience. For example, philosopher Chris Diehm (2008) nicely tied this philosophical concept to anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in an *Environmental Philosophy* article titled "Staying True to Trees."

In it, Diehm reflects on taking to the woods with a tree identification book in hand. He went to the woods to relax and to see the beauty of nature but then presents a convincing argument that learning the names of trees not only helped him appreciate the economic value of a particular species (anthropocentrism) but also taught him the ecological niche of the species, bringing him to appreciate the tree as a friend (ecocentrism).

The most interesting section of Diehm's article was his realization that learning the names of each tree also taught him that the characteristics of a species most valued by humans (e.g., the heavy sugar content in the sap of maples and birches, the unique properties of various woods) were also adaptations that enhanced that species' chances of survival. He concluded that

trees, we will want to say, matter, not solely for what they can be made into or otherwise do for us, but for what they themselves are: each tree, we will want to assert, is a wonder, a real-life marvel making a way through the world, fully deserving of admiration and respect on its own terms. (p. 13)

Diehm shows us that how we perceive the natural world is not tied to just one view or the other (anthropocentrism or ecocentrism) but often involves the interplay of different modes of understanding. Different conceptual motivations lead to different experiences and outlooks.

A related example comes from Kenneth Maly's (2004) unique interpretation of *A Sand County Almanac*. He asked environmental philosophers to give up on the not particularly useful debate of whether *Sand County* is philosophy at all and to simply analyze Leopold's work using philosophical methodology to see what the book actually offers. He believed that Leopold was distinctively valuable because *A Sand County Almanac* does not have the misanthropic tone of other nature writers (e.g., John Muir) and instead presents very well the ongoing and real tension that exists in a person who has both anthropocentric and ecocentric tendencies. Maly goes so far as to say that philosophers can read *A Sand County Almanac* as one man's transition from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. He concludes that because Aldo Leopold was not a trained philosopher, he was not bound by philosophy's disciplinary boundaries in expressing his ideas—yet because he was not a trained philosopher, he never appreciated the potential of his insights into traditional ethics. The realization of that potential, according to Maly, is the philosophers' job.

The Value of Discussion

If some people come into outdoor programs with an anthropocentric perspective and others bring ecocentric tendencies, educators can analyze and consciously redesign

their programs to appeal to both perspectives. One of the basic tenets of experiential education is to build on students' current understanding of subject matter, and part of that understanding will be steeped in a range of environmental attitudes. Furthermore, educators who are aware of their own environmental perspective may be able to see how that perspective affects their leadership and programming—taking advantage of that perspective when it might enhance programming and perhaps intentionally downplaying it when it unnecessarily biases programming in a particular direction.

Even if the conclusion is that anthropocentric and ecocentric experiences in nature are equal, but different, there is value in actually teaching students and participants about these anthropocentric and ecocentric differences. Having such conversations expands people's understanding of what they are undergoing and sheds light on alternative experiential possibilities. Such knowledge is pertinent and something that people should know about it. For example, even if some outdoor professionals do not believe that ecosystems possess intrinsic value, it still may be a notion they would want their students to be aware of. To not intentionally expose students to both anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives may unconsciously promote one perspective over another. At the very least, including both perspectives adds a layer of complexity to the outdoor narrative.

Some environmental educators argue that the tendency to offer only a single point of view increases as environment education gradually shifts from nature-based programming toward education for sustainable development (ESD) (Bates, 2003; Kopnina, 2012). This has led Kopnina (2013) to complain that "diversity of approaches and plurality of conceptualization of EE/ESD mask 'the elephant in the room,' namely robust anthropocentric bias"² (p. 701).

On this last point, it may be obvious, but worth noting, that philosophers who most care about the anthropocentric/ecocentric debate tend to be ecocentric. Some of them fear that because Western tradition (both historically and philosophically) is so anthropocentric, without a conscious effort to consider ecocentric viewpoints, anthropocentrism would become the default way of thinking (Callicott, 1989). Bates worried that something she calls anthropocentric "mining" would come to dominate environmentalism even more than it already has. Mining, in this use of the word, does not refer to the literal digging of the earth but to a sense that something is "mine." It is the belief that nature can be owned or possessed. Mining, she admits, does have a pro-environmental component, such as when a sense of "our national parks" promotes an obligation to protect, but more often, it suggests a "problematic character of thought [which] risks making a number of otherwise sound environmental ways of thinking, unsound" (Bates, 2003, p. 183).

Kopnina (2013) wrote that anthropocentric environmentalism on its own lacks a vital element that is fundamental to environmental ethics. That element is the ability to recognize the "intrinsic values [of anything] outside their use to humans." McDonald (2004) concurred and went so far as to say that, although human benefit (even human survival) is part of environmental philosophy, there is no "ethic" in environmental ethics unless the intrinsic value of the nonhuman is recognized. McDonald's sentiment should not be new to outdoor professionals, as Aldo Leopold (1949) said the same thing in defining the Land Ethic.

In any case, Bates (2003) and Kopnina (2013) point out that any argument that claims results would be the same (if the anthropocentric/ecocentric debate did not exist) ignores the value of the discussion itself. By having individuals intellectually reflect on anthropocentric and ecocentric tendencies, they come to understand better their position in the spectrum of environmental philosophies. This enhanced understanding leads to better decision making. When anthropocentric environmentalists and ecocentric environmentalists agree on an action, the differing perspectives strengthen the rationale. The argument carries greater weight, and there is less chance the decision came out of environmental dogma. Conversely, when anthropocentrists and ecocentrists disagree on what is the appropriate action, both sides are forced to question their own values, which is healthy and again leads to better results (Casas & Burgess, 2012).

Yet, for this worthwhile discussion to occur, environmental philosophy needs closer ties to the natural environment itself. Clifford Knapp (2006), certainly one of the more philosophical minds in environmental education, claimed that “We need more philosophy that is dressed for outdoor adventures” (p. 46). Also, Robert Frodeman (2004) wrote, “In its best dress, philosophy wears hiking boots and carries a walking stick, wandering trails that lead into the heart of our wildernesses—both natural and cultural” (p. 149). Taken out of context, these two quotes seem to be saying the same thing, but in fact, they are suggesting complementary opposites. Knapp, the environmental educator, is asking environmental philosophers to alter their language so that those who work in the field can understand and use environmental philosophy. He challenges environmental philosophers to “think about rewriting their essays so that a local fourth grade teacher . . . could grasp their ideas and then put these thoughts into practice” (Knapp, 2006, p. 46). Conversely, Frodeman, the environmental philosopher, is claiming that the philosophy itself would actually improve if philosophers spent more time in nature. His suggestion is that philosophy developed solely from the philosopher’s garret, while valuable, may be incomplete. Needed is “an experiential complement to philosophy’s linguistic aspect” (Frodeman, 2004, p. 149).

Conclusion

This article explicitly asked two questions and implicitly asked a third. It started with wondering whether anyone should be concerned if undergraduate recreation management students might be a little more anthropocentric than undergraduate students in an introductory environmental studies course. This narrow question morphed into a more general question of whether environmental philosophy’s debate about anthropocentrism and ecocentrism should be of interest to outdoor professionals. And finally, this second question indirectly asked still a broader question of whether academic environmental philosophy provides something not available in outdoor recreation/environmental education’s philosophical roots.

We would like to conclude by briefly addressing all three questions one at a time. First of all, it makes sense that recreation management students might tend toward anthropocentrism. If anthropocentrism is an attitude that nature is measured by its

value to humankind, and recreation training instills (whether explicitly or implicitly) a perspective that the outdoors is a wonderful setting in which to provide quality recreation, it would seem inevitable that recreation students might shift slightly to an anthropocentric perspective. Nothing here suggests that anthropocentric recreation professionals care any less about nature than ecocentrists, but they might see protection of nature not primarily for its intrinsic value but as a way to maintain a healthy recreation resource for present and future generations.

As to the second question of whether the anthropocentric/ecocentric debate matters, it may come down to whether motivation matters. Although it may not make sense to agonize over whether unquestionably wonderful things such as biodiversity or love of nature are instrumental or intrinsic values, it does seem important to realize that people do see the value of biodiversity and love of nature differently, and these various perspectives all are valid and can be used to enhance students' appreciation of nature. The literature review for this article revealed that the experiences in nature have both anthropocentric and ecocentric lessons to teach. In fact, as far as recommendations for further research are concerned, it may be useful to look at specific outdoor activities and assess them for their anthropocentric and ecocentric content.

Finally, this article indirectly asks whether academic environmental philosophy in general has much to offer outdoor recreation and environmental education. Certainly, the literature suggests that environmental philosophy has practical value, but perhaps much of the current scholarship focuses on specific examples that cannot be so broadly generalized. This article, for example, compared the common terms of *conservation* and *preservation* with anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. From that limited approach, it was fairly easy to conclude that environmental philosophy does offer something fresh and new. The outdoor professions' philosophical foundation, however, runs much deeper than the definition of two terms. It takes in all the ideas of the great nature writers, and the real question is whether academic environmental philosophy contributes anything not readily available in the writings of Aldo Leopold, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and so on. The answer to the third question may require a two-way collaborative effort by environmental philosophers and outdoor professionals. Environmental philosophers could do a better job reaching out to (i.e., writing for) outdoor recreation and environmental education and, if Frodeman is correct, make more concerted efforts to get outdoors. Conversely, scholars of outdoor recreation/environmental education (i.e., the nature interpreters of the world) could apply their interpretative skills to interpreting environmental philosophy for their own professions.

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Notes

1. Various environmental philosophers use almost interchangeably the terms *anthropocentric* and *egocentric* to describe the attitude that nature is valued to the extent that it benefits humans. These same philosophers tend to do the same thing with the terms *ecocentric*, *nonanthropocentric*, and *biocentric* when referring to the attitude that nature has intrinsic value independent of human beings. Except for direct quotes, this article uses *anthropocentric* and *ecocentric* for the sake of consistency.
2. In a personal example, Steve Simpson (one of the authors of this article) attended an education for sustainable development (ESD) workshop and noted that traditional nature education is missing in ESD. One of the facilitators was from Sweden, and he replied that he sometimes hears this concern at his trainings, and it always comes from a tree hugger who is at least 50 years old and American. His implication is that tree hugging notions of environmental education are (a) somewhat dated and (b) popular with people from countries that still have enough resources and enough open space to be romantic.

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