

The Threat to the Endangered Species Act from Cyberspace

Last week the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill aimed at transforming the Endangered Species Act to favor the rights of property owners. To accomplish this, the bill eliminates the “critical habitat provision”. Environmentalists responded that habitat destruction is the main cause of species extinction, and the bill makes it much harder to protect critical habitat.

The passage of this bill caused me to wonder about a related issue. Are children developing the capacity to recognize habitat preservation as an ethical ideal? Ethical ideals need to be related in some way to personal experience to make them real and to motivate us to action. The concern here is that the millions of children who will someday become voting citizens are not having experiences that will help them recognize habitat preservation as a moral obligation. So even if the Endangered Species Act is rescued in the Senate, its long-term future may be dim.

A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation discovered that “the media content young people are exposed to each day has increased by more than an hour over the last five years (from 7:29 to 8:33), with most of this increase coming from video games and computers.” The study found that children spend a mere 1:25 a day in physical activities. Most of this time is no doubt involved in regulated team sports, and not wandering in the fields and woods. This is a far cry from Henry David Thoreau’s recommendation of at least four hours a day “sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields,” which he felt was needed for physical and mental health.

If one looks at the writings of thinkers like Thoreau, John Muir, Rachael Carson, Aldo Leopold, Gary Snyder, to name some of the sources of modern environmental ethics, one finds rich narratives describing their adventures outdoors. These adventures provide a storehouse of experiences that enlivens and motivates their ethics. Moreover, since many of us share related experiences we can understand and be motivated by their ethical writings. However, many children are not developing a storehouse of such experiences because of their media-saturated environments.

Let me illustrate my point with a brief account of a personal experience. When I was about thirteen, we moved from Arizona to Riverside County in Southern California. Next to where we lived were vast tracts of undeveloped land—wilderness. There were several other boys around my age in the neighborhood and we spent all our free time playing in these fields. One day we were out in the fields with shovels—building a jump for our bikes or digging a hole for a fort, I don’t recall. All of the sudden we saw something—we weren’t sure what—take wing out of a hole. Being adolescent boys we were all action and no thought and found ourselves digging at the hole, which turned out to be the nest of a burrowing owl. The hole smelled of carrion, and we discovered pellets of mice bones and fur. Finally we came upon several owlets. Again, being all action and no thought, we each took an owlet home. In a day or two all but one ended up in a shoebox covered with dirt. However, the little owl I brought home made its nest underneath the woodpile in the backyard. There I fed it bits of raw meat with a toothpick. At first I thought I could treat

it like a pet, until it bit me several times. So I changed my expectations and came to find its wildness mysterious and fascinating. After a few weeks the owl took flight and glided out of sight over the curvature of the hill behind the house.

Years later I visited some friends who lived in the area where we dug up the owlets—nothing was recognizable. Enormous mechanical shovels had moved tons of dirt along with the nests of the burrowing owls. The area had been consumed by the greater Los Angeles sprawl. This would not trouble me so much if the sprawl did not seem insatiable. The greater Los Angeles sprawl consists of five counties and over 100 cities; nearly 18 million people live there, and it occupies over 34,000 square miles. The burrowing owls that were once abundant in these coastal grasslands are gone. In the state of California as a whole, they are now officially listed as an imperiled species due to the disappearance and fragmentation of habitat.

To close, the experiences just described allow me to make real the idea of habitat preservation as a moral obligation. I now have a powerful sense that what we did was wrong. I have reinterpreted events in my childhood in light of things I have learned as an adult. It is important that this was a childhood experience. The things we experience as children are powerful just because they happen in childhood. They are formative. The worry here for environmental ethics and its tools like the Endangered Species Act is that many children are spending too much time of their formative years in cyberspace and too little time in open spaces.

KUFM Radio Commentary

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October 19, 2005