

Ecological Policy: The Inevitability of Politics

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The papers in this volume were initially prepared for a colloquium in September 1996 at Oregon State University entitled "Emerging Ecological Policy: Winners and Losers" for which I served as moderator. I came to the topic then (as now) rather innocently—or at least knowing far less than the presenters, who have impressive credentials to speak to ecological policy. Nonetheless, it seemed fairly clear that while some comments were indeed directed toward who wins and who loses, most of the presentations and discussion addressed two rather more basic questions; first, what is "ecological policy" (or perhaps, what should it be) and second, how should it be used, if at all? To borrow a phrase, the ecological policy debate has encouraged a thousand flowers to bloom and a thousand voices to contend, but the result has been the equivalent of a kaleidoscope and a cacophony.

Because the participants in the colloquium are sophisticated, they focused on trying to identify what is wrong—in our current understanding of ecological policy, and suggested improvements in our use of it.

On the first score, they had some success, at least in agreeing that whatever ecological policy is—or ought to be—we are not very happy about the definition thus far. To paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart, everyone agreed that they would know ecological policy when they saw it, but (unlike Justice Stewart's subject, pornography) they hadn't seen it yet. That is, despite their differences, the participants seemed to agree that the current definition of ecological policy is inadequate. But when the discussion moved either to defining what it should be, or to the second question—what to do?—there was precious little agreement. Like the parable of the elephant and the blind men, each of the presenters has a different, if plausible, definition (and approach to evidence) in mind. Of course, if a clear definition were to be adopted, policies would naturally follow.

Carolyn Merchant, a philosopher, proposed the broadest and, in a sense, most demanding definition, thinking of ecological policy ("Ecosystem Management," in her title) in ethical terms that are very broad, reaching back in time almost two hundred years and across the globe—or at least across the Pacific—to capture the fish that are her specific focus. She concludes by briefly making the case for "Partnership Ethics" that "questions the notion of the unregulated market, eliminating the idea of the egocentric ethic, and instead proposes a part-

nership between nonhuman nature and the human community...." Such a definition, if used to guide policy, would require major changes and much more government intervention in the economy on behalf of flora and fauna.

Karl Hess, a libertarian, would also alter the policy status quo dramatically, but in the opposite direction. Where Merchant sees a history of "egocentric ethics" that almost drove salmon to extinction, Hess sees government monopolistic practices in the Great Basin that led to exploitation of rangelands and ecological failure of "catastrophic proportions." Instead, he recommends a policy of "marketable rights on public grazing lands" in the context of "local, self-governing commons." Where Merchant's ethics would necessarily expand the role of the central government, Hess would shrink it.

Robert Lee, a sociologist, and Robert Randall, an economist, are equally dissatisfied with the policy status quo. Their prescriptions come down between Merchant and Hess, but closer to Merchant in requiring government action than to Hess's preference for the market. Robert Keiter, a lawyer, offers no prescriptions, but reminds us that judicial interpretations of our highly ambiguous laws concerning natural resources and the environment are now, as always, in transition. I would add that the direction of recent judicial decisions is one which Hess probably views with greater approval than the others, but as Keiter reminds us, the courts function within limits established by the larger political system in which the judiciary is "the third branch."

Hearing (and now reading) these perspectives, my training as a political scientist causes me to emphasize that when ecological policy is defined or used, political choices are being made. Like Keiter, I focus on the political system in which decisions will be made—or not, which is also a form of decision—moving either in the direction of greater collective control on behalf of the environment, as recommended by Merchant, Lee, and Randall, or the other way, suggested by Hess. Either way, public policy always reflects the political, social, economic, and ecological values of those who influence the choices. If any readers doubt that politics will play the central role determining which of the definitions of ecological policy outlined in these pages will be adopted, I suggest that they imagine themselves in say, 2002—in one case, after Al Gore has been elected president, and in the other after the "bully pulpit" has been seized by Newt Gingrich.