

Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature and Environmentalism

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1. Introduction

There can be no doubt that aesthetic appreciation of nature has frequently been a major factor in how we regard and treat the natural environment. In his historical study of American environmental attitudes, environmental philosopher Eugene Hargrove documents the ways in which aesthetic value was extremely influential concerning the preservation of some of North America's most magnificent natural environments.¹ Other environmental philosophers agree. J. Baird Callicott claims that historically 'aesthetic evaluation... has made a terrific difference to American conservation policy and management', pointing out that one of 'the main reasons that we have set aside certain natural areas as national, state, and county parks is because they are considered beautiful', and arguing that many 'more of our conservation and management decisions have been motivated by aesthetic rather than ethical values'.² Likewise environmental philosopher Ned Hettinger concludes his investigation of the significance of aesthetic appreciation for the 'protection of the environment' by affirming that 'environmental ethics would benefit from taking environmental aesthetics more seriously'.³ Callicott sums up the situation as follows: 'What kinds of country we consider to be exceptionally beautiful makes a huge difference when we come to decide which places to save, which to restore or enhance, and which to allocate to other uses' concluding that 'a sound natural

¹ Eugene C. Hargrove, 'The Historical Foundations of American Environmental Attitudes', *Environmental Ethics* 1 (1979), 209–240; reprinted in A. Carlson and S. Lintott, eds., *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

² J. Baird Callicott, 'Leopold's Land Aesthetic', in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*, 106.

³ Ned Hettinger, 'Allen Carlson's Environmental Aesthetics and the Protection of the Environment', *Environmental Ethics* 27 (2005), 57–76, 76.

aesthetics is crucial to sound conservation policy and land management'.⁴

Callicott's claim is certainly true. However, it leaves open the question of the nature of 'a sound natural aesthetics'. What is a sound natural aesthetics? And what is the proper relationship between such an aesthetics and environmental thought and action? Does environmentalism itself require certain features for a natural aesthetics to be sound? If so, what are these requirements of environmentalism? In this essay I address these questions as follows: I first review two historically significant positions concerning aesthetic experience of nature, the picturesque landscape tradition and the formalist theory of art. I note that some environmentalists have found fault with the modes of aesthetic appreciation of nature that are associated with these two views, charging that they are anthropocentric, scenery-obsessed, superficial, subjective, and/or morally vacuous. On the basis of these apparent failings of traditional aesthetic approaches to nature, I suggest five requirements of environmentalism: that aesthetic appreciation of nature should be acentric, environment-focused, serious, objective, and morally engaged. I then examine two contemporary positions concerning the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature, the aesthetics of engagement and scientific cognitivism, assessing each with respect to the five requirements of environmentalism.

2. Traditional Aesthetics of Nature: The Picturesque and Formalism

The picturesque landscape tradition has its roots in the eighteenth century, with the acceptance of nature as an ideal object of aesthetic experience and the separation of its appreciation into three distinct modes: the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque. Historian John Conron summarises the differences: the beautiful tends to be small and smooth, but subtly varied, delicate, and fair in colour, while the sublime, by contrast, is powerful, vast, intense, and terrifying. The picturesque is in the middle ground between the sublime and the beautiful, being 'complex and eccentric, varied and irregular, rich and forceful, vibrant with energy'.⁵ Of these three, the

⁴ Op. cit., note 2, 106.

⁵ John Conron, *American Picturesque* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 17–18. A classic discussion is W. J. Hipple, Jr., *The Beautiful, the Sublime and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century*

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picturesque achieved pre-eminence as a model for nature appreciation, in part because it covers the extensive middle ground of the complex, eccentric, varied, irregular, rich, forceful, and vibrant, all of which seem well-suited to nature. Moreover, the idea had grounding in the theories of some earlier aestheticians, who thought that the 'works of nature' were more appealing when they resembled works of art.⁶ Indeed, the term 'picturesque' literally means 'picture-like' and thus the idea of the picturesque gave rise to a mode of aesthetic appreciation in which nature is experienced as if divided into scenes – into blocks of scenery. Such scenes aim in subject matter and composition at ideals dictated by the arts, especially landscape painting. Picturesque-influenced appreciation was popularised by William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Richard Payne Knight.⁷ Under their guidance, the picturesque provided the reigning aesthetic ideal for English tourists, who pursued picturesque scenery in the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands. The picturesque continued throughout the nineteenth century to have a great impact on nature appreciation. In North America, it inspired nature writing and was exemplified in landscape painting. And in the twentieth century, it remains the mode of aesthetic appreciation commonly associated with tourism – that which appreciates the natural world in light of the scenic images of travel brochures and picture postcards.

British Aesthetic Theory (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957).

⁶ Perhaps another reason for the pre-eminence of the picturesque as a model for nature appreciation is that, in spite of Conron's way of putting the three fold distinction, the beautiful and the sublime, at least initially, were seemingly intended to characterize states of the appreciator, while the picturesque appears even from the outset to be more a characterization of the object of appreciation. I thank Alex Neill for making clear the importance of this point.

⁷ The key works include William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, and On Sketching Landscape; to which Is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting* (London: R. Blamire, 1792); Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; and on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape* (London: J. Robson, 1794); Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape: A Didactic Poem* (London: Printed by W. Bulmer and Co. for G. Nicol, 1794), and *Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste* (London: Printed by L. Hansard and Sons for T. Payne and J. White, 1805). A standard treatment is Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London: G. Putnam's Sons, 1927).

Even as aesthetic appreciation of nature influenced by the idea of the picturesque continued to be extremely popular in the early part of the twentieth century, a related but somewhat distinct approach to nature appreciation was spawned by that period's most influential theory of art: the formalist theory. As developed by British art critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry, formalism is basically a theory about the nature of art, which holds that what makes an object a work of art is an aesthetically moving combination of lines, shapes, and colours. Bell called this 'significant form' and argued that aesthetic appreciation of art is restricted to it, notoriously stating that to 'appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour'.⁸ However, even Bell, whose aesthetic interest was almost exclusively devoted to art, could find aesthetic value in nature when it is experienced, in his words, 'with the eye of an artist' by which an appreciator, 'instead of seeing it as fields and cottages... has contrived to see it as a pure formal combination of lines and colours'.⁹ Like the tradition of the picturesque, Bell had in mind seeing nature as it might look in landscape paintings, but not exactly the same kind of paintings as those favoured by the picturesque. Understandably, Bell's view was more closely allied with the work of artists of his own time, such as Paul Cézanne. For example, Cézanne's landscape paintings are classics of one kind of formal treatment of the landscape, in which nature is represented as patterns of lines, shapes, and colours. Throughout the first part of the twentieth century, various artists and schools of painters developed this kind of formal approach to landscape appreciation and thus it came to dictate a popular way of aesthetically experiencing nature.

Although formalism and the tradition of the picturesque have somewhat different emphases and take different kinds of art as their models, they are yet similar enough in their overall approach to the aesthetic appreciation of nature to come together in what might be called traditional aesthetics of nature. The overall approach combines features favoured in picturesque appreciation, such as being, to return to Conron's words, 'varied and irregular', 'rich and forceful', and 'vibrant with energy', with the prominence of the bold lines, shapes, and colours privileged by formalists. In this sense, traditional aesthetics of nature is the legacy of both the picturesque tradition and formalism.¹⁰ In popular aesthetic appreciation, this legacy has given

⁸ Clive Bell, *Art* [1913] (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1958), 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰ Although I relate what I call traditional aesthetics of nature to the historical developments of the idea of the picturesque and the formalist theory

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rise to an emphasis on striking and dramatic landscapes with scenic prospects, such as found in the Rocky Mountains of North America, where rugged mountains and clear water come together to contrast and complement one another.

The role of traditional aesthetics of nature in the development of popular appreciation of nature as well as in the growth of environmental thought and action is difficult to over-estimate. As I noted at the outset of this essay, aesthetic appreciation of nature has played a major role in North American environmentalism. And throughout environmentalism's development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such aesthetic appreciation was shaped largely by the picturesque landscape tradition and later supplemented by formalism. North America's rich heritage of parks and preserves is in large part the result of the fact that these areas were found to be aesthetically appealing in light of the appreciative approach of traditional aesthetics of nature. The same is true of many other parts of the world.

3. The Failings of Traditional Aesthetics of Nature and the Requirements of Environmentalism

However, more recently the relationship between aesthetic appreciation of nature and environmentalism has become a focus of concern. Increasingly individuals interested in the preservation of natural environments have started to doubt that traditional aesthetics of nature has the resources necessary to fully carry out an

of art, certain aspects of this kind of view are defended in some recent work on the aesthetics of nature; for example, see Robert Stecker, 'The Correct and the Appropriate in the Appreciation of Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics* **37** (1997), 393–402; Donald W. Crawford, 'Scenery and the Aesthetics of Nature', in A. Carlson and A. Berleant, eds., *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2004); and Thomas Leddy, 'A Defense of Arts-Based Appreciation of Nature', *Environmental Ethics* **27** (2005), 299–315. Formal aesthetic appreciation of nature is defended in Nick Zangwill, 'Formal Natural Beauty', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **101** (2001), 209–224; for follow-up concerning formalism, see Glenn Parsons, 'Natural Functions and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Inorganic Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics* **44** (2004), 44–56, and Nick Zangwill, 'In Defence of Extreme Formalism about Inorganic Nature: Reply to Parsons', *British Journal of Aesthetics* **45** (2005), 185–191.

environmentalist agenda. The beginnings of these doubts can be found in the middle of the last century in the writings of Aldo Leopold. In *A Sand County Almanac* published in 1949 and *Round River* in 1952, Leopold presented a vision of the relationship between aesthetic experience of nature and the natural environment that continues to shape contemporary understanding of the relevance of aesthetic appreciation to environmentalism. Nonetheless, although recognizing the historical importance of traditional aesthetics of nature, he yet expressed some concern about its role in shaping what he called the ‘taste for country’, which he noted ‘displays the same diversity in aesthetic competence among individuals as the taste for opera, or oils’. Thus, many appreciators of nature ‘are willing to be herded in droves through “scenic” places’ and ‘find mountains grand if they be proper mountains with waterfalls, cliffs, and lakes’ but yet find ‘the Kansas plains...tedious’.¹¹

What Leopold came to see was that the ‘taste for country’ of the majority of nature appreciators, which was largely the result of traditional aesthetics of nature, had certain limitations and perhaps did not fully accord with the environmental values that were becoming clear to him as he worked out the details of his ‘land ethic’. Recent environmental thinkers, following in Leopold’s footsteps, have become increasingly concerned that the aesthetic values embodied in traditional aesthetics of nature have failed in a number of ways to accord with the values of environmentalism.¹² In fact, in the opinion of some contemporary environmentalists, there are at least five major failings of traditional aesthetics of nature. To put it succinctly, traditional aesthetics of nature is criticized for endorsing aesthetic appreciation of nature that is: 1. anthropocentric, 2. scenery-obsessed, 3. superficial and trivial, 4. subjective, and 5. morally vacuous.¹³ In light of these failings, it is possible to indicate

¹¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* [1949, 1952] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 179–180; relevant selections are reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*.

¹² It is important to note that not all environmental thinkers agree with this assessment of traditional aesthetics of nature. Some offer a reinterpretation of the picturesque that is more in accord with environmentalism; see, for example, Isis Brook, ‘Wildness in the English Garden Tradition: A Reassessment of the Picturesque from Environmental Philosophy’, *Ethics and the Environment* 13 (2008), 105–119.

¹³ Some of these criticisms, especially that traditional aesthetics of nature tends to be superficial and scenery-obsessed, have been noted since the beginnings of the renewed interest in the aesthetics of nature; see, for

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Requirements of Environmentalism for appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature by contrasting the failings with solutions or, perhaps better, antidotes. Thus, environmentalism seemingly requires appreciation that is: 1. acentric, 2. environment-focused, 3. serious, 4. objective, and 5. morally engaged.¹⁴ I discuss each of the failings and the corresponding antidote in turn.

1. *Acentric rather than anthropocentric appreciation*: The charge that traditional aesthetics of nature is anthropocentric or human-centred is directed at both the picturesque tradition and formalism. There is a sense, of course, in which all aesthetic appreciation is, and must be, from the point of view of a particular human appreciator, but the criticism concerns the specific conception of nature and our relationship to it that seems implicit in traditional aesthetics of nature. Part of this conception involves the anthropocentric thought that nature exists exclusively for us and for our pleasure. For example, environmental aesthetician Yuriko Saito argues that the 'exclusive emphasis on visual design' of the 'picturesque/formalist view' encourages us to appreciate only that which is 'amusing, enjoyable, or pleasing'.¹⁵ Landscape geographer Ronald Rees agrees, contending that 'the picturesque... simply confirmed our anthropocentrism by suggesting that nature exists to please as well as to serve us'.¹⁶ Likewise, Canadian environmental philosopher Stan Godlovitch argues that to 'justify protecting nature as it is and not merely as it is for us... a natural aesthetic must forswear the anthropocentric limits that... define and dominate our aesthetic response'.¹⁷ Godlovitch's antidote for anthropocentrism and thus a requirement

example, Mark Sagoff, 'On Preserving the Natural Environment', *Yale Law Journal* **84** (1974), 205–267, and Allen Carlson, 'On the Possibility of Quantifying Scenic Beauty', *Landscape Planning* **4** (1977), 131–172.

¹⁴ I consider at least seriousness and objectivity to be general adequacy requirements for an aesthetics of nature; see Allen Carlson, 'The Requirements for an Adequate Aesthetics of Nature', *Environmental Philosophy* **4** (2007), 1–12.

¹⁵ Yuriko Saito, 'Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms', *Environmental Ethics* **20** (1998), 135–149, 138; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*.

¹⁶ Ronald Rees, 'The Taste for Mountain Scenery', *History Today* **25** (1975), 305–312, 312.

¹⁷ Stan Godlovitch, 'Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* **11** (1994), 15–30, 16; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*.

of environmentalism is to attempt to achieve what he calls an acentric approach to appreciating the natural world. The idea is that an appreciator must strive for an experience that is not from any particular point of view, human or otherwise, what is sometimes called a 'view from nowhere'. It is far from clear exactly how a human appreciator can adopt such a fully non-anthropocentric viewpoint. Nonetheless, after affirming that in 'acentric positions, the value expressed... cannot reflect the point of view of the recipient', Godlovitch proposes that since 'only acentric environmentalism takes into account nature as a whole...we require a corresponding acentric natural aesthetic to ground it'.¹⁸

2. *Environment-focused rather than scenery-obsessed appreciation:* Although there can be no doubt that traditional aesthetics of nature, and the picturesque tradition in particular, is focused on scenery, the second criticism is that traditional aesthetics of nature goes far beyond this focus to the point of obsession. And although it may be granted that there is much of aesthetic value in the scenery favoured by traditional aesthetics of nature, when the point of view becomes an obsession, the upshot is that other less conventionally scenic environments are excluded from appreciation. The problem is especially acute concerning environments that may be ecologically valuable, but do not fit the traditional conception of scenic landscapes, such as prairies, badlands, and wetlands.¹⁹ In 'The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature', Yuriko Saito argues that the 'picturesque... has... encouraged us to look for and appreciate primarily the *scenically* interesting and beautiful parts of our environment' with the result that 'those environments devoid of effective pictorial composition, excitement, or amusement (that is, those not worthy of being represented in a picture) are considered lacking in aesthetic values'.²⁰ Here, however, the antidote is somewhat less radical than accepting a theoretical complex notion such as Godlovitch's acentrism. Rather, it involves only acknowledging any of several rather

¹⁸ Ibid. Godlovitch's acentrism reflects some of the ideas in Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁹ On wetlands in particular, see Allen Carlson, 'Admiring Mirelands: The Difficult Beauty of Wetlands', in Heikkilä-Palo, ed., *Suo on Kaunis*, (Helsinki: Maahenki Oy, 1999); Holmes Rolston, III, 'Aesthetics in the Swamps', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 43 (2000), 584–597; and J. Baird Callicott, 'Wetland Gloom and Wetland Glory', *Philosophy and Geography* 6 (2003), 33–45.

²⁰ Yuriko Saito, 'The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998), 101–111, 101; reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*.

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obvious dimensions of the experience of natural environments, such as emotional arousal or intellectual curiosity, that quite naturally draw appreciators away from a focus simply on scenery or on lines, shapes, and colours. For example, according to environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III, the requirement of environmentalism in this case involves the recognition that appreciation of nature typically 'requires embodied participation, immersion, and struggle' and that it is a mistake to think of forests, for example, 'as scenery to be looked upon' for a 'forest is entered, not viewed' and you 'do not really engage a forest until you are well within it' and once within the 'forest itself, there is no scenery'.²¹

3. *Serious rather than superficial and trivial appreciation*: The third criticism, that the appreciation endorsed by traditional aesthetics of nature is superficial and trivial, is perhaps the most grave of the five charges. After observing that 'we continue to admire and preserve primarily "landscapes", "scenery", and "views" according to essentially eighteenth century standards of taste inherited from Gilpin, Price, and their contemporaries', Callicott claims that our 'tastes in natural beauty... remain fixed on visual and formal properties' and is 'derivative from art'. The upshot is that the 'prevailing natural aesthetic, therefore, is not autonomous: it does not flow naturally from nature itself; it is not directly oriented to nature on nature's own terms... It is superficial and... trivial'.²² As Callicott makes clear, the heart of this criticism lies in the fact that traditional aesthetics of nature is dependent on artistic models and does not treat nature as nature. Thus, the requirement that appreciation be serious rather than superficial and trivial is satisfied when it is 'true to nature' in the sense of being directed fully and deeply toward what nature is and the qualities it has. In his groundbreaking essay, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', Ronald Hepburn suggested this requirement of environmentalism. He contrasts appreciating a cumulo-nimbus cloud as resembling a basket of washing and amusing ourselves by dwelling upon this resemblance with appreciating it by realizing 'the inner turbulence of the cloud, the winds sweeping up within and around it, determining its structure and visible form'. Hepburn suggests that the latter experience is 'less superficial...', truer to nature, and for that reason more worth having', noting that since 'there can be a passage, in art, from easy

²¹ Holmes Rolston, III, 'Aesthetic Experience in Forests', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998), 157–166, 162; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*.

²² Op. cit., note 2, 108–109.

beauty to difficult and more serious beauty, there can also be such passage in aesthetic contemplation of nature'.²³

4. *Objective rather than subjective appreciation*: The criticism that appreciation grounded in traditional aesthetics of nature is subjective has been directed against both the picturesque tradition and formalism. In the case of the former, the subjectivity stems from the fact that aesthetic judgements are seemingly more a reflection of the pleasurable experiences of appreciators than of the objective features of objects of appreciation, while concerning the latter subjectivity is often related to the fact that formalist such as Bell seem to provide no grounds for making such judgements other than personal experience. However, subjectivity is perhaps more of a problem for the picturesque tradition than it is for formalism.²⁴ Be that as it may, the problem is acute in that if traditional aesthetics of nature yields only subjective judgements about nature's aesthetic value, then individuals making environmental decisions may be reluctant to acknowledge its importance, regarding it simply as based on personal whims or on relativistic, transient, soft-headed artistic ideals. As Ned Hettinger remarks: 'If judgments of environmental beauty lack objective grounding, they seemingly provide a poor basis for justifying environmental protection'.²⁵ Environmental philosopher Janna Thompson concurs: 'A judgement of value that is merely personal and subjective gives us no way of arguing that everyone ought to learn to appreciate something, or at least to regard it as worthy of preservation'.²⁶ Thus, the objectivity requirement is a particularly important requirement of environmentalism. As Thompson further observes, the 'link... between aesthetic judgment and ethical obligation fails unless there are objective grounds – grounds that rational, sensitive people can accept – for thinking that something has value'.²⁷ The importance of the requirement is

²³ Ronald Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', in B. Williams and A. Montefiore, eds., *British Analytical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1966), 305; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*.

²⁴ It can be argued that formalism underwrites a degree of objectivity of aesthetic value; see Glenn Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature* (London: Continuum, 2008), 41–43.

²⁵ Ned Hettinger, 'Objectivity in Environmental Aesthetics and Environmental Protection', in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*, 414.

²⁶ Janna Thompson, 'Aesthetics and the Value of Nature', *Environmental Ethics* 17 (1995), 291–305, 292; reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*.

²⁷ Ibid.

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put in even stronger terms by aesthetician Noël Carroll, who contends that 'any... picture of nature appreciation, if it is to be taken seriously, must have... means... for solving the problem of... objectivity of nature appreciation'.²⁸

5. *Morally engaged rather than morally vacuous appreciation*: The last charge against traditional aesthetics of nature is again especially important regarding environmental thought and action, for environmentalists wish to bring aesthetic appreciation in line with ethical obligations to preserve and maintain ecologically healthy environments. But if traditional aesthetics of nature is morally vacuous, then ultimately there is no significant way of linking, as some environmental philosophers put it, beauty and duty. Ronald Rees contends that in traditional aesthetics of nature, there is 'an unfortunate lapse' in that our 'ethics... have lagged behind our aesthetics' allowing 'us to abuse our local environments and venerate the Alps and the Rockies'.²⁹ Landscape historian Malcolm Andrews confirms this, arguing that 'the trouble is that the picturesque enterprise in its later stage, with its almost exclusive emphasis on visual appreciation, entailed a suppression of the spectator's moral response'.³⁰ The problem is that the scenery of the picturesque tradition and the lines, shapes, and colours favoured by formalist seem to support either no moral judgements or else only the emptiest ones, such as the prescription to preserve that which pleases the eye. Thus, the key to satisfying the last requirement of environmentalism, that aesthetic appreciation of nature be morally engaged, lies at least partly in the differences between art-based appreciation of nature and nature appreciation that is, to return to Hepburn's phrase, 'truer to nature'. Philosopher Patricia Matthews points out that in the latter case our 'aesthetic assessments take into consideration not only formal elements such as color and design, but also the role that an object plays within a system'. This, she concludes, 'allows for a complex, deep, and meaningful aesthetic appreciation of nature' such that 'facts about... environmental impact... can affect our

²⁸ Noël Carroll, 'On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History', in S. Kemal and I. Gaskell, eds., *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 257; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*.

²⁹ Op. cit., note 16, 312.

³⁰ Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 59.

aesthetic appreciation' and thus 'our aesthetic and ethical assessments of what ought to be preserved in nature may be more harmonious'.³¹

In sum, the requirements of environmentalism for the aesthetics of nature are that it should support aesthetic appreciation of nature that is: 1. acentric rather than simply anthropocentric, 2. environment-focused rather than scenery-obsessed, 3. serious rather than superficial and trivial, 4. objective rather than subjective, and 5. morally engaged rather than morally vacuous. The question now is whether the new approaches to the aesthetics of nature that has been developed within contemporary work in environmental aesthetics can meet these requirements and thus foster a stronger and more positive relationship with environmentalism than is possible with traditional aesthetics of nature.

4. Contemporary Aesthetics of Nature and the Requirements of Environmentalism

Contemporary approaches to the aesthetics of nature are frequently divided into two different camps, labelled in various ways, such as non-cognitive and cognitive or non-conceptual and conceptual. Positions of the first type stress emotional and feeling-related states and responses, which are taken to be the less cognitive dimensions of aesthetic experience. By contrast, positions of the second type contend that knowledge about objects of appreciation is a necessary component of their appropriate aesthetic appreciation. I first consider non-cognitive and then cognitive approaches, focusing on a

³¹ Patricia Matthews, 'Scientific Knowledge and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **60** (2002), 37–48, 38; reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*. Discussions concerning bringing aesthetic appreciation and moral obligation in line with one another include Jane Iverson Nassauer, 'Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics and Ecology', in J. I. Nassauer, ed., *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997); Marcia Eaton, 'The Beauty that Requires Health', in Nassauer, *Placing Nature*; and Sheila Lintott, 'Toward Eco-Friendly Aesthetics', *Environmental Ethics* **28** (2006), 57–76; all reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*. On this same topic, although more focused on human environments, is Yuriko Saito, 'The Role of Aesthetics in Civic Environmentalism', in A. Berleant and A. Carlson, eds., *The Aesthetics of Human Environments* (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2007).

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prominent example of each type and assessing it in light of the five requirements of environmentalism.

There are a number of different non-cognitive approaches to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. However, 'non-cognitive' here should not be taken in its older philosophical sense meaning primarily or only 'emotive'. Rather it indicates simply that these views argue that something other than a cognitive component is the central feature of aesthetic appreciation of nature. Thus, they are grouped together mainly by their lack of emphasis on cognitive considerations. Different positions focus on different kinds of states and responses, such as arousal, affection, reverence, engagement, and mystery. For example, the arousal model is championed by Noël Carroll. Carroll holds that we may appreciate nature simply by opening ourselves to it and being emotionally aroused by it, which he contends is a legitimate way of aesthetically appreciating nature without invoking any particular knowledge about it.³² Another alternative, sometimes called the mystery model of nature appreciation, is defended by Stan Godlovitch. He contends that neither knowledge nor emotional attachment yields appropriate appreciation of nature, for nature itself is ultimately alien, aloof, and unknowable, and thus the appropriate experience of it is a state of appreciative incomprehension involving a sense of mystery.³³

The most fully developed non-cognitive approach is the aesthetics of engagement. This position rejects much of traditional aesthetics of nature, such as the external, distanced appreciator favoured by the

³² See Carroll, *op. cit.*, note 28. Despite the centrality this model grants to emotional arousal, it is considered by some to be a cognitive rather than a non-cognitive approach, since Carroll accepts what is known as the cognitive theory of emotions, by which emotional responses can be judged appropriate or inappropriate. Likewise, although Emily Brady's work, which is noteworthy for its treatment of environmental issues, is typically classified as non-cognitive, its central component, that of imagination, is not clearly non-cognitive in any straightforward sense; see Emily Brady, 'Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998), 139–147; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*; and especially Emily Brady, 'Aesthetic Character and Aesthetic Integrity in Environmental Conservation', *Environmental Ethics* 24 (2002), 75–91; reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*; and Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

³³ See Godlovitch, *op. cit.*, note 17; see also Stan Godlovitch, 'Valuing Nature and the Autonomy of Natural Aesthetics', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998), 180–197; reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*.

picturesque tradition and formalism, arguing that these approaches involve a mistaken conception of the aesthetic and that this is most evident in aesthetic experience of nature. According to the engagement approach, the distancing and isolating gaze of traditional aesthetics of nature is out of place in nature appreciation, for it wrongly abstracts both natural objects and appreciators from the environments in which they properly belong and in which appropriate appreciation is achieved. Rather the approach recommends that traditional dichotomies, such as between the object and the subject of appreciation, be abandoned, contending that aesthetic experience involves a participatory engagement of the appreciator within the object of appreciation. Thus, it stresses the contextual dimensions of nature and our multi-sensory experience of it, taking aesthetic experience to involve a total 'sensory immersion' of the appreciator within the natural world.³⁴ The foremost proponent of this position, Arnold Berleant, claims that 'we cannot distance the natural world from ourselves' and that we must perceive nature from within 'looking not at it but being in it' in which case it 'is transformed into a realm in which we live as participants, not observers'. He concludes that the 'aesthetic mark of all such times is... total engagement, a sensory immersion in the natural world'.³⁵

Standing in contrast to the non-cognitive approaches are a number of positions classified as cognitive, since they are united by the idea that central to appropriate aesthetic appreciation is knowledge and information about the object of appreciation. In general, they hold that, in the words of Yuriko Saito, nature must be 'appreciated on its own terms'.³⁶ Thus, for example, Marcia Eaton holds that in aesthetic appreciation of nature, we must carefully distinguish between facts about nature and fictions, since while knowledge of the former is necessary for appropriate aesthetic appreciation, the latter can often lead us astray and pervert our appreciation.³⁷ Other cognitive

³⁴ See Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), especially Chapter 11, 'The Aesthetics of Art and Nature;' reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*; Arnold Berleant, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); and Arnold Berleant, *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

³⁵ Op. cit., note 34, *Aesthetics of Environment*, 169–170.

³⁶ Op. cit., note 15, 135–149.

³⁷ See Marcia Eaton, 'Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **56** (1998), 149–156; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*.

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approaches, including Saito's, emphasize other kinds of knowledge and information, claiming that appreciating nature 'on its own terms' may involve experiencing it in light of various local, folk, or historical traditions. Thus, for appropriate aesthetic appreciation, regional narratives and even mythological stories about nature are endorsed as either complementary with or alternative to factual information.³⁸

The best-known cognitive approach is scientific cognitivism. Like most cognitive positions, which in general reject the idea that aesthetic experience of art provides satisfactory models for appreciation of nature, this view stresses that nature must be appreciated as nature and not as art. Nonetheless, it holds that aesthetic appreciation of nature is analogous to that of art in its character and structure and, therefore, that art appreciation can show some of what is required in adequate appreciation of nature. In appropriate aesthetic appreciation of art, it is essential for works to be experienced as what they are and in light of knowledge about them. For instance, appropriate appreciation of a work such as Jackson Pollock's *One: Number 31, 1950* requires experiencing it as a painting and moreover as an action painting within the school of mid-twentieth century American abstract expressionism. Therefore, it must be appreciated in light of knowledge of these artistic traditions and especially of action painting. In short, in the case of art, serious, appropriate aesthetic appreciation is informed by art history and art criticism. However, since nature must be appreciated as nature and not as art, scientific cognitivism contends that, although the knowledge given by art history and art criticism is relevant to art appreciation, in nature appreciation the relevant knowledge is that provided by natural history, by the natural sciences, especially geology, biology, and ecology.³⁹ Thus, to appropriately appreciate nature 'on its own

³⁸ For example, see Saito, op. cit., note 15; Yrjö Sepänmaa, *The Beauty of Environment: A General Model for Environmental Aesthetics* (Helsinki: Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, 1986; Second Edition, Denton, TX: Environmental Ethics Books, 1993); and Thomas Heyd, 'Aesthetic Appreciation and the Many Stories about Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics* **41** (2001), 125–137; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*.

³⁹ See Allen Carlson, 'Appreciation and the Natural Environment', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **37** (1979), 267–276; reprinted in Carlson and Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*; Allen Carlson, 'Aesthetic Appreciation of the Natural Environment', in R. G. Botzler and S. J. Armstrong, eds., *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, Second Edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998); reprinted in

terms' is to appreciate it as it is characterised by science. In this sense, scientific cognitivism is akin to the approach attributed to Aldo Leopold, which is sometimes labelled ecological aesthetics or the 'land aesthetic'. Like scientific cognitivism, this approach is committed to the centrality of scientific knowledge in aesthetic appreciation of nature. Callicott points out that 'the land aesthetic is sophisticated and cognitive,' delineating 'a refined taste in natural environments and a cultivated natural sensibility' the basis of which is 'natural history, and more especially evolutionary and ecological biology'.⁴⁰

How then do contemporary approaches to aesthetics of nature, as represented by the aesthetics of engagement and scientific cognitivism, fare on the requirements of environmentalism? First it seems obvious that both the aesthetics of engagement and scientific cognitivism are clearly superior to traditional aesthetics of nature in a number of ways. An appreciator who is totally sensory immersed in a natural environment and/or well informed by scientific knowledge about it contrasts dramatically with a distanced appreciator who focuses only on formalist, picturesque scenery.⁴¹ Thus, concerning the first of the requirements of environmentalism, the acentric requirement, the aesthetics of engagement's stress on sensory immersion seems to facilitate as acentric a point of view as is humanly possible, since it explicitly calls for abandoning traditional dichotomies, such as between the object of appreciation and the appreciator, and thus it would seem that the appreciator's own particular point of view must also be abandoned. Similarly, scientific cognitivism's reliance on scientific knowledge promotes an acentric point of view similar to that of science, which is an acentric way of knowing.⁴² Concerning the environment-focus requirement, the aesthetics of engagement's stress on an appreciator's engaged participation takes into consideration whole environments and explicitly not scenery or formal composition. Likewise, scientific cognitivism's emphasis on environmental sciences focuses appreciation on environments

Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*; and Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴⁰ Op. cit., note 2, 116.

⁴¹ For a classic illustration of this difference, see John Muir, 'A View of the High Sierra', in *The Mountains of California* (New York: Century Company, 1894); reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*.

⁴² Godlovitch explicitly challenges this claim in op. cit., note 17.

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rather than on scenery or formal features. There is no ecological science of scenery or of lines, shapes, and colours. Nor can one be immersed within scenery or within a combination of lines, shapes, and colours.

However, the success of contemporary approaches in meeting the remaining three requirements of environmentalism is more mixed. For example, although total sensory immersion may result in a high level of intensity, it does not seem to require seriousness in the sense of being 'true to nature'. It only allows for this kind of serious appreciation to whatever extent such appreciation is consistent with immersion. In addition, the aesthetics of engagement's dependence on immersion seems to weaken the position concerning objectivity, for abandoning the dichotomy between the object of appreciation and the subject of appreciation will seemingly make it difficult for an appreciator to be objective. Moreover, although the aesthetics of engagement would seem to support moral engagement concerning environmental issues, the position's subjectivity undercuts the possibility of a compelling moral stance, for without objectivity, ethical assessments, even if fuelled by intense engagement, can be dismissed as only expressions of personal feelings. By contrast, scientific cognitivism's reliance on scientific knowledge promotes appreciation that is serious in the sense of being 'true to nature' by means of attending fully to what nature is and the properties it has. Moreover, this promotes an objective viewpoint, since science is a paradigm of objectivity and, although aesthetic judgements based on scientific knowledge are not necessarily as objective as that knowledge itself, they nonetheless have an objective foundation.⁴³ Concerning the last requirement, scientific cognitivism is less clearly successful, for although its objectivity makes possible a compelling moral stance on environmental issues, it does not require it. Moreover, it is sometimes claimed that scientific knowledge is morally neutral and therefore promotes such neutrality. Yet, it can be argued that the factual character of scientific knowledge yields an environmentally informed response to nature and thus provides a firm basis for moral judgements.⁴⁴

⁴³ See Allen Carlson, 'Nature, Aesthetic Judgment, and Objectivity', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1981), 15–27. For follow up, see Glenn Parsons, 'Freedom and Objectivity in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006), 17–37.

⁴⁴ See the discussion of *Bambi* in Eaton, op. cit., note 37.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest the following five points: First, if we must choose between non-cognitive approaches like the aesthetics of engagement and cognitive approaches such as scientific cognitivism, then, on balance, the latter scores somewhat better than the former on the requirements of environmentalism. Second and more important, however, we do not have to choose between them, since, although the two positions have different emphases, there need be no theoretical conflict between them.⁴⁵ This is because each position can be understood as defending only necessary conditions for appropriate aesthetic appreciation. Each of engagement and relevant scientific knowledge can be held to be necessary without either being claimed to be sufficient for such appreciation.⁴⁶ There is perhaps some practical tension between the two approaches, owing to the appreciative difficulty of being totally engaged within a natural environment and at the same time taking into account knowledge relevant to its appropriate appreciation. However, this kind of bringing together and balancing of feeling and knowing, of emotion and cognition, is the very heart of aesthetic experience. It is what we expect in aesthetic appreciation of art; there is no reason why we should expect less in aesthetic appreciation of nature.

The third concluding point, therefore, is that, concerning the requirements of environmentalism, since the aesthetics of engagement is especially strong regarding acentrism and environment-focus and scientific cognitivism is stronger regarding seriousness and objectivity, and perhaps moral engagement, the best alternative is to unite the two positions. This approach is endorsed by Holmes Rolston in his essay 'From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics'. Rolston asks 'Can aesthetics be an adequate foundation for an environmental ethic?' replying 'Yes, increasingly,

⁴⁵ Other philosophers also suggest that non-cognitive and cognitive approaches are not necessarily in conflict; for example, in presenting his arousal model, Noël Carroll remarks: 'In defending this alternative mode of nature appreciation, I am not offering it in place of Carlson's environmental model [aka scientific cognitivism]....I'm for coexistence'; see *op. cit.*, note 28, 246.

⁴⁶ Arnold Berleant seemingly would not accept this conclusion, for he apparently holds not only that a cognitive component is not necessary for appropriate aesthetic experience, but also that engagement is both necessary *and sufficient* for such experience. I point this out and argue that engagement is not sufficient in Allen Carlson, 'Critical Notice: Aesthetics and Environment', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006), 416–427.

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where aesthetics itself comes to find and to be founded on natural history, with humans emplacing themselves appropriately on such landscapes. Does environmental ethics need such aesthetics to be adequately founded? Yes, indeed'.⁴⁷ Given a unified position, which is, as Rolston puts it, both 'founded on natural history' and has appreciators 'emplacing themselves' within natural environments, the fourth point is that, concerning the requirements of environmentalism, contemporary environmental aesthetics, as represented by the conjunction of the aesthetics of engagement and scientific cognitivism, constitutes a substantial advance over traditional picturesque-influenced and formalist aesthetics of nature.⁴⁸ Hence, fifth, unlike traditional aesthetics of nature, contemporary approaches to nature appreciation help to bring aesthetic values and environmental values in line with one another. They encourage aesthetic appreciation of not simply scenic landscapes but also less conventionally scenic, but nonetheless aesthetically magnificent and ecologically valuable environments, like deserts, savannahs, prairies, and wetlands – indeed every kind of natural environment.⁴⁹

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⁴⁷ Holmes Rolston, III, 'From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics', in A. Berleant, ed., *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 141; reprinted in Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*. Rolston's acceptance of the importance of both scientific knowledge and engagement in appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature is especially evident in op. cit., note 21, in which he explicitly discusses both scientific appreciation of forests and aesthetic engagement in forests. For an overview of Rolston's aesthetics, see Allen Carlson, "'We see beauty now where we could not see it before": Rolston's Aesthetics of Nature', in C. Preston and W. Ouderkirk, eds., *Nature, Value, Duty: Life on Earth with Holmes Rolston, III* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

⁴⁸ In addition to Rolston's work, some other constructive attempts to combine elements of cognitive and non-cognitive approaches include Eaton, op. cit., note 31; Robert Fudge, 'Imagination and the Science-based Aesthetic Appreciation of Unscenic Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **59** (2001), 275–285; and especially Ronald Moore, *Natural Beauty: A Theory of Aesthetics Beyond the Arts* (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2008).

⁴⁹ Some of the points made in this essay are treated in more detail in the introduction to Carlson and Lintott, *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*. A longer version of the essay with the title 'Contemporary Environmental Aesthetics and the Requirements of Environmentalism' appears in *Environmental Values* **19** (2010), 289–314.