

BOOK REVIEW

Building a Culture of Nature

Paul M. Keeling

Thomas Heyd, *Encountering Nature: Toward an Environmental Culture*, Ashgate, 2007.

Thomas Heyd's *Encountering Nature: Toward a Culture of Nature* starts from the premise that the field of environmental ethics should do more than develop better theories; it should strive to comprehensively transform attitudes, practices, and habits. Heyd's hypothesis is that achieving an environmentally benign society (a "culture of nature") requires envisioning a more integrated human/nature relationship that respects nature's "autonomy" without merely resorting to the familiar "human/nature apartheid" that has dominated environmentalism historically. He leaves the ivory tower of environmental ethics and takes the reader on a series of field trips to explore tangible, *in situ* cases where harmonious human/nature interactions can be experienced, assimilated, and more broadly applied. How applicable these examples really are is an open question, but Heyd's principal strength is his interdisciplinary approach, which draws impressively from the underrepresented fields of aesthetics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and geography, as well as philosophy. The result is a compelling and unique contribution to a developing pragmatic trend in environmental philosophy that aims to discover what *positive* role humans can play in natural systems.

The book consists entirely of previously published articles. The collection is a colorful tapestry of theoretical analysis and argumentation, mixed with narrative and personal reflection. The diverse subject matter can make the conceptual sinew connecting the chapters seem rather thin, but Heyd states in the Preface that they can be read out of order as stand-alone essays. Heyd begins with a distinction between ethics as "reflection on morality" and "people's *actual* morality," arguing that "ecological conscience" requires the "willingness to act." [p. 21.] That willingness is better explained by how nature is actually experienced in one's everyday life, rather than by anthropocentric versus nonanthropocentric value theory. Heyd uses examples from indigenous and *campesino* communities in Latin America, whose traditional ways of life are so closely connected to the health of the land that environmental and social justice resistance movements are often coterminous. This model of "non-human nature and humans in community" is contrasted with the Western, industrial tendency to treat the workplace as an isolated world which is exempt from environmental responsibility.

Heyd goes on to demonstrate the multiplicity of ways in which "cultural goods" can draw attention to "natural goods," thereby generating much-needed respect for nature's "spontaneity and flourishing." Just as there can be culture around appreciating wine or music by proper attention and sensitivity to their specific, valuable qualities, so too there can be a "culturing of nature." Heyd argues that non-scientific stories and accounts of nature (e.g., the "Dreaming" of Australian Aboriginal culture) should be valued if they facilitate this kind

of aesthetic appreciation. He then takes the reader through detailed discussion of indigenous rock art and medicine wheels, botanic gardens (as a metaphor for nature-human “collaboration”) and site-specific art forms such as reclamation art (“immolated nature on view”), Japanese gardens, and earthworks, all of which serve Heyd’s central message that “culture” and “nature” need not be conceived as antipodes.

Things get trickier late in the book when Heyd writes, “a culture of nature is concerned with preserving natural things from becoming artificial things,” [p. 132] which requires explaining how beneficent human intervention in nature (e.g., ecological restoration) can avoid increasing its artificiality. Heyd’s solution is a “judicious combination of a policy of letting be, insofar as natural processes can be allowed to come into their own again through it, and a policy of intervention, to remove human-created obstacles to those natural processes, all the while leaving clear sign of what the human, artefactual contribution is.” [pp. 165-66.] For example, by leaving remnants of a logging or mining operation on site, an ecological restoration can avoid the *artifice* (i.e., deception) of re-presenting pristine, untouched nature. But Heyd accepts the natural/artificial distinction [pp. 127-29], so this feels like an equivocation, even if it “mitigates the problem.” [p. 165.] Consequently, Heyd’s thesis that certain human cultural goods (e.g., Japanese gardens) can meaningfully “point to” natural value despite their “thoroughgoing artefactuality” [p. 162] is only convincing if there are paradigmatic exemplars of wild nature (e.g., untrammelled wilderness areas) to be pointed to as limit cases. An entire world of Japanese gardens or their equivalent, even if they are “unartificial artifacts” [p. 168] still feels artificial in a relevant sense. Heyd would agree, but he tends to deemphasize the rather critical role that human/nature apartheid (a hyperbole of “letting be,” perhaps) implicitly plays in his culture of nature.

Heyd is not suggesting that people become rock art aficionados or gardeners, or that Western, European-based industrial culture suddenly adopt aboriginal worldviews and practices. Rather, these are presented as “examples,” “illustrations,” and “models” of how an environmental culture might be enabled. However, this introduces a potential irony; Heyd’s “culture of nature” by definition needs mainstream adoption. How to get the unconverted to encounter and appreciate nature the way Heyd would like, is really the hard problem. Heyd acknowledges in the Afterword that how to apply his lessons and thought experiments remains largely unanswered, which leaves the gap between theory and practice rather wide, despite his pragmatic intentions.

Heyd’s focus on the relationship between culture and nature might have included more critique of modern consumer capitalism and *its* role in determining culture. But an alternative economic arrangement may not be a sufficient condition for achieving a “nature-affirming” culture, even if it may be a necessary one; there is still the question of how to balance the twin values of human/nature collaboration on the one hand, while respecting nature’s autonomy on the other. It’s an important question, and *Encountering Nature* opens up novel ways of addressing it.