

Who Owns Nature?

by Philippe DESCOLA

International policies for the protection of the Environment rest on a very specific conception of nature, which appeared in Europe during the Enlightenment. This conception is far from being shared by all the peoples of the earth, who value different cosmological principles. According to Philippe Descola, the preservation of biodiversity can only become fully effective if it takes into account this plurality in the understanding of nature.

At the instigation of international organisations such as UNESCO, the World Conservation Union or the United Nation Environment Program, the number of protected areas going under the heading of nature reserves has risen dramatically over the past three decades. Just over 100.000 land and marine sites fall in that category amounting to 19 millions km² or thereabout, that is equal to the aggregated areas of the continental USA and Canada. This growth in the zones excluded from exploitation is as recent as it is spectacular since, as from 1973 their surface has quadrupled. In spite of the differences in status between these protected areas, and the highly variable level of protection actually afforded by them as a result, these special zones are cause that a non negligible part of the world's earth surface, approximately 12% may currently be considered as a sort of public asset. The whole question is to know precisely who is the public which owns this asset and who benefits from it.

Indeed conflicts of ownership are many and there is nothing new to them. The case of Yellowstone National Park, the first natural reserve of modern times, is archetypal of what later happened elsewhere. Created in 1872 in the Northern Rockies on the hunting grounds traditionally roamed by the Shoshones, the Bannocks and the Nez Percés, it is often presented as having been empty of American Indian population

when it was created. Official lore has it that those tribes were filled with a superstitious fear of the geysers the Park is famous for. Nothing is further from the truth as those geysers were the background to seasonal rituals. What is more, a group of about 400 Tukadikas, a Northern Shoshone branch, dwelt permanently within the Park perimeter and was transported *manu militari* about 10 years after its creation towards the Wind River Reservation in an inglorious episode carefully kept out of the brochures produced by the National Park Service¹. Not a day passes without this primitive conflict being played out between city elites desirous to protect the sublime beauty and the famed reserves of biodiversity of the landscape and local peoples sentenced drastically to curb their use of lands they have inhabited often for centuries, indeed to abandon them for good. Here Maasai are prevented from grazing their herds in Serengeti Park and turned into a photo-safari attraction along with the giraffes and the elephants, there, the Jawoyns from Australia's North-Western Territory are obliged to fight a long drawn legal battle to recover their sovereignty over Nitmiluk National Park. Elsewhere, squads of militant ecologists from Boston or Karlsruhe explain to a few hundred Southern Chiapas Lacandons that they have got to quit assarting to grow corn in their *milpas* so as not to jeopardize the Montes Azules biosphere reserve. Everywhere arguments flare up around the rights of one or other community to claim for itself the use of this or that section of the human environment. In fact these conflicts revolve around two questions, closely related but rarely framed in explicit terms: Who owns Nature and whom is it to be protected for? I shall address them in turn before outlining a possible way around them.

Two contrasting types of answers are usually proposed to the first question. First it is possible to insist that only nature owns nature, that it has an inherent value, unrelated to its usefulness to humans and that it must be protected accordingly in and for itself. However this inherent value is not easy to define and its content evolves with time. The instigators of the national parks in the United States wanted to sustain the evidence of the awe-inspiring landscape Providence had entrusted the Nation with, and which was the hallmark of its very special destiny. That nature, the wilderness of the Rockies, of the Californian sierras and of the South-West's arid *mesas* had a very specific role indeed in the construction of the Nation's self-image and in the legitimisation of the Westward drive: expose, in particular through an active and very

¹ P. Nabokov et L. Loendorf, *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2004

early promotion of tourism in the national parks as many people as possible to the distinctive quality of American nature and hence of the People entrusted by God with the task of looking after it². It is plain to see that that nature, vector of the national ideal and open-air cathedral had far more than an inherent value, even if the instigators of nature parks, immersed, for the best part, in Thoreau, Emerson and the Transcendentalists, fondly believed they were preserving it for its own sake.

The situation is not vastly different in the rest of the world. The first parks created a little later by the United Kingdom and France were not developed on their soil but in their colonial empires with motivations akin to those which had inspired the United States' nature reserves³. The object was to present national and international tourists with the evidence that natural environments, particularly the forest over which colonial powers had assumed dominion were in good hands; as were the indigenous peoples the Europeans had taken upon themselves to educate, in particular through banning some practices supposedly detrimental to the aforementioned environment. Never mind that these practices, from slash and burn horticulture in forest to the creation of sacred groves on the village perimeter, were often at the roots of the high biodiversity observed by agriculturists and forest supervisors – who failed to grasp its causes. Preserving species and ecosystems by managing them just like temperate-zone state forests was another way to assert the merits of the civilising mission the colonial nations had taken on.

The ascription to nature of its own inherent value is much more recent. It first came in the shape of protecting certain zones as the habitat of threatened species the perpetuation of which had then to be ensured. Originally, this applied to spectacular species or those whose symbolic projection stirred up sympathies. It was felt that the world splendour would be diminished, and humankind found guilty of a serious dereliction of duty if the giant panda from the Sichuan forests (Wolong Reservation 1973), the Bengal tiger (Sundarban Reservation, 1973), or the African elephant (Ngorongoro Conservation Zone, Tanzania, 1979) came to disappear. Indeed, there is nothing very new to this idea in Europe; it has been around since the Middle ages' Natural Theology. English jurist Sir Matthew Hale, neatly summed up its principles

² On this subject, R Nash's analyses in R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, New Haven, Yale University press, 1973 remain requisite reading.

³ The first part of Abel Selmi's thesis soon to be published in its own right offers a precious history of the French nature park creation policies in their empire (*Le Parc National de la Vanoise. Administration de la nature et savoirs liés à la diversité biologique*, 756 pages, EHESS thesis); With regards to Indochina, see F. Thomas, *Histoire du régime et des services forestiers en Indochine française de 1862 à 1945. Sociologie des sciences et des pratiques scientifiques coloniales en forêts tropicales*, Hanoi, Editions Thê Gioi, 1999.

when he wrote in the second half of the 17th Century that man “Viceroy (...) of this inferior world” was vested by God with the “power, authority, right, dominion, trust and care (...) to preserve the face of the Earth in beauty, usefulness, and fruitfulness”⁴. It will be noted by the by that such passages born of a providentialist reading of Genesis are anything but universal even if their mutation into the common places of global environmental politics somewhat obfuscates their Christian origin. It also becomes apparent that it is pretty difficult not to confuse nature’s inherent value with nature’s instrumental value, justifying, along with Hale, the necessity to preserve it both on grounds of usefulness and fruitfulness and beauty. Beauty can incidentally rate as an interest argument since humans alone show the aptitude to delight in the sights of nature, and those humans at that concentrated in the few civilisations having developed a landscape aesthetics and to be found essentially in Europe and the far East.

Remains what Hale calls fruitfulness. It is indeed the founding principle of the final turn taken by the pleas in favour of nature preservation for inherent reasons. These days, the preferred term for this is biodiversity, but the idea remains the same: all natural species must be protected – as against only those that humans can identify with or which are iconic to the place – because, in their totality, they contribute to the greatest possible number of life forms. This is indeed a value *per se*, flowing from a normative decision which needs no justification as such when humanity as a whole agrees to confirm it: when it comes to culture, diversity is preferable to monotony. This is a proposal which I entirely agree with and which arises, like any ethical choice, from a personal preference in favour of one of the alternative which I deem unnecessary – and probably impossible to rationalise.

Yet the arbitrariness in this is rarely acknowledged, quite the reverse: the advocates of an optimal biodiversity rate are busy resting the legitimacy of their position on a string of reasons most of which eventually boil down to highlighting its advantages for humanity. The most widespread of these arguments represents that, on the hundreds of thousands of species we still know nothing or very little about, some probably conceal molecules that will be useful to feed or heal humans; their protection is therefore a good investment against future risks. A more subtle variation highlights the fact that our limited knowledge of synecologic interactions within

⁴ Sir Matthew Hale, *The Primitive Origination of Mankind*, London, 1677, p. 370, quoted by C. Glacken, J., *Traces on the Rhodian Shore. Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967 p. 481. (original text found @ <http://tinyurl.com/2ocn5y>)

generalised ecosystems - those in which there are many different species, but few individuals of each species - militate in favour of precaution, as we still have next to no knowledge of the effects upsetting the ecosystems could have on climate hydrology or the proliferation of undesirable organisms. Finally the least utilitarian arguments stress the evolutive advantages of genetic diversity for the adaptation of – notably sexed – organisms to very diverse life conditions; hence the necessity to preserve the greatest possible number of genomic figures present in species in order to ensure the perpetuation and the growth of the diversified life potential which epitomizes our planet. Apparently utterly disinterested, this nature protection motivation, here a hypostasis of life preservation no less, rests on the pronouncements of experts speaking simultaneously in the name and place of natural species, of some sort of transcendent teleologic principle and of the immense human community who, for want of the adequate knowledge, will have to take this argumentation at its face value. To the question ‘who owns nature?’ the answer in the present case is indeed ‘to each and every one of the species that make it up’, but, as none of them, excepting our own, has made its feeling known on the matter, it is some of its members’ point of view which is bound to prevail. It should therefore be stated that any ethics of nature is by definition anthropogenic and that it necessarily articulates values propounded by humans.

Let us now consider the utilitarian answers proposed to figure out who owns nature. There will be no need to dwell on them at length for they are ubiquitously implicit in the answers privileging its inherent value. In short, nature must be protected because it holds unexplored potential resources and because jeopardizing its internal balances will have disastrous consequences for humanity. Suffice it to note that both ecocentric and anthropocentric approaches, at least the way they are framed by international organisations and reliable media, speak on the matter for universality, allegedly better suited to the defence of humans and nature’s interest than the utilitarian, reputedly selfish and short-sighted recriminations of Pyrenean farmers confronted to bears or Norwegian whalers facing quotas. Besides, utilitarian arguments lend themselves better to playing on the guilt of local populations resisting the protection of a species or a site than their ecocentric counterpart. Saying, as do most environmentalist NGOs “the destruction of the Amazonian forest will prevent the discovery of cancer treatments and contribute to global warming” is much more hard hitting than saying “clearing forest plots in this High Pastaza catchment basin amounts to diminishing the biodiversity of one of the richest ecosystems in the

Amazonian piedmont". In short some instrumental conceptions of nature are presented as nobler than others because they refer to a superior level of common good, embracing as they do the interests of a larger number of human and non human beings. Are we then to think that the number of entities concerned is enough to legitimise nature's appropriation? The more the perennity of a resource – a species, a group, an ecosystem – will positively impact on the greater quantity of existing entities, with an optimum target of the whole biosphere, the less those penalised by this perennity will feel entitled to make a stand.

This takes us to the second question: whom must nature be preserved for? The answers hang of course on those given to the first question but they also open on other issues. The most widely shared answer is, as we saw, that nature must be protected as a global common asset, that is at the highest possible level of generality. The preservation of a species is not, as a rule, undertaken for the sole benefit of that species but in so far as it contributes to general biodiversity; The preservation of an environment is not, as a rule, undertaken for the sole benefit of the species living in it but in so far as it contributes to the greater diversity of ecosystems as a whole; the preservation of earthly biodiversity is not, as a rule, undertaken for the sole benefit of the species that make it up and of humankind who may gain by it but in so far as it contributes to the bountiful life witnessed, to date, on our planet alone. Indigenous people living in environments declared threatened have got the hang of the reasoning behind the pre-eminence of universal interest over local interests and how they can make the best of it. Accordingly they have begun to present themselves as the keepers of nature – an abstract notion which does not appear in their languages or cultures – to whom the international community should entrust the mission to keep watch at their level on environments which it is becoming clearer everyday have been shaped by their practices. Over and above the fact that such an assertion is a good way to take steps against land spoliation, it accepts that Australian Aborigines' bush fires, Amazonian and South-Eastern Asia's slash and burn horticulture or pastoralism beyond the Polar Circle have profoundly altered the phytosociological structure and animal populations distribution in ecosystems apparently unspoilt by any human interference. This said, not all local populations show willing to wield universal values in order to preserve a modicum of autonomy. If what is going on in the Alps with wolves, in the Pyrenees with bears and in the Bordelais with wood pigeons is anything to go by, in France, the opposite would appear to be standard practice: insistence on local specificities as a way to escape universal tyranny.

Should we not then review our most sweeping principles in order to take on board the existence of many natures and in order to protect them all? In order to spare the abstraction of public good to those who have other ways to arrive at shared worlds? In order not to brutalise all those peoples who have, over time, produced all those specific natures? If we can face the fact that Enlightenment – paramount though its part has been in the promotion of human dignity and peoples’ emancipation – is but one of many ways to agree principles for a manageable togetherness, then we must also admit that there are no absolute, scientifically founded criteria on which to justify universally recognized values concerning the preservation of natural and cultural assets. It does not follow that values now acceptable to the vast majority could not be ratified in a normative act: the right to live in dignity and not to forego one’s language, the right to exercise one’s free will in the debate of public interests or the right to live in a healthy environment are probably demands that most humans could endorse. But these values are not inherent to the human estate; their universality should derive from a debate and a trade-off, that is from a common decision which it is hard to imagine could be arrived at collectively, given the impossibility to represent impartially the full gamut of viewpoints entitled to a voice on these issues⁵.

The question is further complicated by the fact that the values that predicate international politics on nature preservation are steeped in a very specific cosmology which I have described as naturalist and which is not yet shared by all the peoples on earth, far from it. For naturalism is just one of many ways to configure the world, that is to contrive some identifications by allotting attributes to existing beings, ascribing, starting from the available options, to an unspecified *alter* a physicality and an interiority comparable to or differing from those found in any human experiences. So that identification can go down four ontological routes. Either most existing entities are supposed to share a similar interiority whilst being different in body, and we have animism, as found among peoples of the Amazonian basin, the Northern reaches of North America and Siberia and some parts of Southern Asia and Melanesia. Or humans alone experience the privilege of interiority whilst being connected to the non-human continuum by their materiality and we have naturalism – Europe from the classical age. Or some humans and non-humans share, within a given framework, the same physical and moral properties generated by a prototype, whilst being wholly distinguishable from other classes of the same type and we have totemism – chiefly to

⁵ On this subject see the pronouncements collected by B. Latour et P. Gagliardi, *Les atmosphères de la politique. Dialogue pour un monde commun*, Paris, Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2006.

be found among Australia's Aborigines. Or all the world's elements are ontologically distinct from one another, thence the necessity to find stable correspondences between them and we have analogism –China, Renaissance Europe, West Africa, the indigenous peoples of the Andes and Central-America⁶.

Now, modern universalism flows directly from naturalist ontology, based as it is on the principle that beyond the muddle of particularisms endlessly churned out by humans, there exists a field of truths reassuringly regular, knowable via tried and trusted methods, and reducible to immanent laws the exactness of which is beyond blight from their discovery process. In short, cultural relativism is only tolerable, indeed interesting to study, in that it stands against the overwhelming background of a natural universalism where truth seekers can seek refuge and solace. Mores, customs, ethos vary but the mechanisms of carbon chemistry, gravitation and DNA are identical for all. The universalism of international institutions implementing nature protection policies springs from extending these general principles, originally applied to the physical world alone, to the realm of human values. It relies in particular on the idea that the Moderns alone would have availed themselves of a privileged access to a true intelligence of nature whilst other cultures would have arrived at mere representations – crude but worthy of interest, according to those charitably inclined, false and pernicious by their contaminating capacity for the positivists. This epistemological model, which Bruno Latour has called 'particular universalism'⁷, entails therefore inevitably that nature protection principles be imposed to all the non-moderns who were not in a position to acquire a clear grasp of their necessity for want of adopting a thinking pattern like ours, and more particularly for having failed to imagine that nature existed as a sphere independent from humanity. You lived once in symbiosis with nature, Amazonian Indians are told, but now, you have chain saws and we must teach you to leave alone your forests become world heritage on grounds of their high rate of biodiversity.

How are we to make that universalism a bit less imperial without renouncing in the process the biodiversity which enables us to preserve the world's dazzling splendour? One possible avenue, the twists and turns of which I have begun exploring elsewhere would be what could be called a relative universalism, with relative as in "relative pronoun", that is making a connection. Relative universalism does not stem from nature and cultures, substances and spirits, discrimination between prime and

⁶ For a more in depth study see Ph. Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005.

⁷ B. Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes. Essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, Paris, La Découverte, 1991, p. 142.

second essences, but relationships of continuity and discontinuity, of identity and differences, of likeness and unlikeness which humans establish everywhere between existing beings by means of tools inherited from phylogenesis: one body, one intentionality, one aptitude to discern distinctive gaps, the ability to establish with any Other relations of closeness or enmity, of domination or dependence, exchange or appropriation, subjectivation or objectivation. Relative universalism does not demand prior equal materiality for all, and contingent meanings, it is content to recognize the irruption of discontinuity, in things like in the mechanisms to grasp them and to admit that there are only a restricted number of formulae suited to their best use, either by endorsing a phenomenal discontinuity or by invalidating it within a continuity.

However, if relative universalism is to lead to an ethos, that is to rules for world use to which every one could subscribe without denying anyone the values of their upbringing, this ethos has yet to be built stone after stone, indeed connection after connection. The task is not beyond us. It supposes a grand stock taking of inter-human connections and of those between humans and non-humans and an agreement to banish those which give rise to general opprobrium. It is more than conceivable that the most extreme forms of inequality would come under this heading, such as the gratuitous taking of life, the objectification of beings endowed with sensible faculties or the standardization of lifestyles and behaviours. And as, because of the consensus needed to arrive at the selection of the connections retained, none of them could be deemed superior to another, the values attached to practices, knowledge and wisdoms or singular sites could rest on the connections they bring out in the specific context of their use, without slipping into contingent justifications or narrow interest calculations in the process. For instance, resuming the protection of nature argument: where humans consider it normal and desirable to engage in intersubjective relationships with non-humans, it would be conceivable to legitimate the preservation of a particular environment not in virtue of its inherent ecosystemic features but of the fact that animals there are treated as persons by the local populations – truth to say, usually hunted, but subject to ritual precautions. This would give a category of protected zones broadly operating on an ‘animist model’ – in the Amazon basin, Canada, Siberia or the Malaysian forest. This would not preclude the adjunction of justifications based on the naturalist type of connection – e.g. biodiversity optimisation or carbon capture – in so far as the second type of connections, those favoured by remote actors did not excessively undermine the conditions in which the local actors exercise the type of connection they have set up. It is pretty clear that the

connections presiding over the registration of Mont Saint Michel of the Banaue rice terraces as World heritage sites would be quite different: no longer the presence of non-humans seen as subjects, but the materialisation of a project connecting macrocosm and microcosm, the traces of which can only be found in analogic civilisations wherever they flourished. One might say that this is in the realm of Utopia: undoubtedly, if Utopia is understood in its better sense of a multiplicity of virtual futures opening the possibility for solutions not hitherto considered.

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