

In Praise of Beauty

By [Stan Rowe](#)

Editor's note: This is an historic article on nature's beauty that describes an attempt by the (now defunct) Canadian Environmental Advisory Council (a federal citizens' advisory group) to define the meaning of the term "environmental ethic." The CEAC 'ethic' was published in the Council's document: *An Environmental Ethic - Its Formulation and Implications*, Report No 2, January 1975 and attempts to argue its case. CEAC concluded that the ethic might not be acceptably human. It put aside the notion that the intrinsic beauty of Earth's natural world could serve as a guide to human conduct and added that the utility/function of the environment should also be recognized. The ethic stated:

Every person should strive to protect and enhance the beautiful wherever his or her impact is felt, and to maintain or increase the functional diversity of the environment in general.

The above definition was re-visited in a (1986) symposium held at Simon Fraser University titled *Environmental Ethics: Philosophical and Policy Perspectives*, Volumes I & II (available at the York University Library). In this symposium the argument for the 'ethic' is summarized by Norman H. Morse who was a member of the CEAC. Environmental philosopher, Stan Rowe, examines the faults of the proposed ethic and proposes an ecocentric solution.

Rereading "*An Environmental Ethic: Its Formulation and Implications*" brought to mind again a few impressions that Norman Morse's comments today have reinforced.

The first is that the Environmental Advisory Council, after the conception of the Ethic manfully made a pro-life choice and resolved not to abort it despite a difficult gestation and fears that the issue might not be acceptably *human*. This I interpret from the two introductory statements, the intent of whose exegeses seems to be to cushion the audacity of the message by suggesting that it can be rationalized into something else. Suppose, the commentaries seem to say, that in following the aesthetic sense attention were to be distracted from *humanity*?

The second impression is the daring of the "Ethic", proposing Beauty as a guide for conduct. This ill accords with the western tradition, and some might object that it borders on the indecent by invoking a standard outside the bounds of such reasonableness as our science-based society allows and condones.

Nevertheless, I gather that the "Ethic" appealed to many as it did to me. Dr Morse set up a new signpost, indicating the direction of a road not yet taken seriously. By implication his choice of beauty-as-guide tells us that practical reason on which we have pinned our hopes is untrustworthy. Without some additional source of inspiration, knowledge as know-how befuddles the sense of

direction, taking us on random walks or steering us around in circles. Something more than facts, information, and logic is needed if people are to be motivated as environment custodians and healers.

Those who over the past few decades have worked for protection of the environment (more accurately, for protection of the planetary surface) must agree, I believe, that the results of the intellectualizing brought to the task have been disappointing. Many of the arguments for preservation were not very good in the first place. Calculating, self-serving, and platitudinous by repetition, their lack of appeal to the aesthetic sense turned us into the very Phillistines we condemned.

The strength that people find in themselves to oppose the desecration, destruction, and pollution of the world seems to be initiated more in the heart than in the head. Its source is an affective attraction to the diversity of organic wholes, an innate sense of the rightness of harmonious relationships between mankind and the Earth, a devotion to Beauty in nature as we learn to recognize and receive it. Doubtless this primeval love of Nature – of the locality, the region, the biosphere -- is strengthened by understanding, a point to be returned to in a moment. But it makes good sense, as argued by Dr Morse, that, to be universally attractive regardless of culture, an environmental ethic ought to appeal to the fundamental aesthetic sense that all humankind seems to share.

We do not need to start at point zero, the author says, for humanity has already made a beginning. We can press ahead, striving "for greater appreciation and enhancement of the beautiful, without becoming disillusioned should progress be slow." Then an important point is made. The beautiful is not just visual and affective; it also captures the intellect. Thus "it behooves man to develop an understanding of the beautiful, *and of the morally beautiful*." Here attention is called to the beauty of right action toward all Nature of which humanity is an integral part, thus saving the "Ethic" from the accusation, frequently heard, that those with intense interests in the environment have abdicated from the struggle for justice in human affairs.

How shall we set about releasing and developing this necessary sense of environmental beauty along with a supportive understanding of why it is a Good? The fact that the aesthetic sense is non-cognitive does not condemn it to thoughtlessness. A strong rationale is necessary to give the sentiment authority. It will be fatal to expose it to the workaday world intellectually unarmed, or in so vague and ill-defined a form that even cynics, confident of its untranslatability into effective action, will endorse it.

In a backhanded way the difficulties are indicated by the few examples of the Beautiful given in the "Ethic" as compared to the many examples of the Unbeautiful, the latter including egocentrism, oppression, exploitation, fanaticism, slums, poverty, overpopulation, pollution, denuded land, distracting noise. All people perceive the ugly more or less clearly, giving the lie to those who claim that ugliness is in the eye of the beholder. But by what touchstone can beauty and the activities that will nurture it and spread its aura everywhere be discovered?

The thumbnail summary of the "Ethic" reads: "Every person shall strive to protect and enhance the beautiful everywhere his or her impact is felt..." Then, continuing, a proximate end is proposed, to be pursued until a conception of the Beautiful is developed and widely accepted by everyone: "...and to maintain or increase the functional diversity of the environment in general." Thus, *functional diversity* is to be the surrogate for beauty until the real thing comes along.

At this point I have trouble, and not just because unbeautiful jargon is introduced. Is there no better compass to point us toward the Beautiful than "functional diversity"? I think there is, in the concept of Health whose root is wholeness and whose meaning is dynamic harmoniousness.

Today agreement is widespread on the importance of beliefs to that which is perceived. In the words of the young geologist, newly instructed in the theory of plate tectonics, "I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't believed it." Society's paradigms or belief systems are fitted like spectacles on each little citizen by parents and teachers, filtering and constraining the way reality is sensed and interpreted. It may be that the simplest sensations from nature are relatively unfiltered sunsets and rainbows, waves lapping on the beach or the susurrant of wind in the pines. These immediately satisfy the senses, and have no need of a remoter charm by thought supplied. Maturer perceptions of beauty, however, require that the seeing eye be directed by ecological paradigms of organic wholeness, developmental integrity, vital health.

Hope is offered for those who find current ethical systems too anthropocentric, too humanistically intuned and therefore destructive of the world, but who have faith that moral conduct can be broadened to a constructive mode within which humanity is accommodated and integrated through devotion to Beauty, interpreted as health, haleness, wholeness, holiness at the supra-organism levels of place, region, and biosphere. Indeed, the paradigm of beauty-health-wholeness finds clearer support in nature at the supra-organism levels of organization than in the human species, for the very good ecological reason that humanity, divorced from the world environment, is obviously incomplete.

What must strongly be disbelieved, following Albert Schweitzer, is that ethics speaks only to the world of interpersonal affairs rather than to the world of all creation. Once humans see themselves as integral parts of the natural world rather than separate from it, an ethic that embraces that wider environment ceases to be optional. On the other hand, grave doubts attend those prudential ethical systems that view preservation of the world as nothing more than a necessary expedient for saving the human race.

Unfortunately, the paradigms, the belief systems, that can make Beauty the sturdy guardian of the world are neither widely disseminated nor strongly entertained. The idea of a healthy humanity-enveloping ecological system whose magnificent design reflects several billion years of continuous and continuing organic development is, to the majority, an irrelevant fairy tale. For most people the prime realities of the world, demanding all waking attention, are the fictional symbols of an economics that has forgotten its "eco" roots. Nor have ecologists, whose roots are also in the "eco" Earth home, been outstandingly helpful. By and large they have paid slight attention to the holistic quality of existence, preferring to promulgate a dogmatic, organism-centred, neo-Darwinian view of competitive evolution that translates socially into the very unbeauties that plague all cultures of the world where the western influence is felt.

At this stage of fumbling for concepts that can help people to be recreators of a healthy and comely biosphere, healers and beauticians of the Earth, cosmeticians of the cosmos, it makes good sense to turn a deaf ear to the science-minded, those blinded by facts, brimful of know-how, and rather to seek guidance from seers who have attempted to unclutter their minds of conventional paradigms.

Let us practice looking beyond the human species, while ruminating on the words of the likes of Robinson Jeffers:

To know...that however ugly the parts appear
the whole remains beautiful. A severed hand
is an ugly thing, and man dissevered from the earth and stars
and his history...for contemplation or in fact
Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness,

the greatest beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty
of the universe. Love that, not man
Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions,
or drown in despair when his days darken.
