

Nature Restoration: Avoiding Technological Fixes, Dealing with Moral Conflicts

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ABSTRACT:

Today, preservation conflicts often no longer deal with the question whether nature needs to be preserved, but with how one needs to go about preserving it. In this new type of conflict, preservationists see themselves pitted against local inhabitants who contest the preservation goals for a given area. In such instances, preservationists tend to defend their position by withdrawing into a technical discourse about biodiversity preservation. By presenting the case of heathland restoration in the Low Countries, we want to examine how preservationists might reformulate their position so as to highlight the moral concern at the heart of their practice. In order to do so, we will use a broadly hermeneutical approach to ethics which focusses on stories and narratives as expressions of moral self-understanding in need of interpretation and elaboration. As such, our paper is an example of what a Rolstonian ‘ethics of storied residence’ might look like in practice.

KEYWORDS:

Environmental philosophy, environmental hermeneutics, biodiversity, landscape, nature restoration

According to Holmes Rolston, an adequate environmental ethic should focus both on what he calls the nomothetic (or recurrent) and the ideographic (or uniquely particular) (Rolston, 1988: 342). It is the duty of the person to bind these two together in a “personal storied residence in the environment”:

residence in a local environment senses the recurrent universals particularly displayed in that place – the seasons, the regenerative, vital powers of life, the life support, the proportions of time and place. It enjoys these big assurances exemplified in local areas. A human in his biography [...] is a detection device for catching something of that richness and integrity of what is taking place on that landscape (346-347)

An ethic of storied residence should according to Rolston not simply see a particular place as representation of certain universals. We do not value the Grand Canyon because it is a particularly good representation of the universal type “canyonland,” but rather: “because it is the particular place it

is, one of a kind, warranting a proper name” (342).¹ Particular places present us with unique trajectories in which ecological universals, through the process of evolution, combine in ever new, unexpected and largely unpredictable ways to form locally unique environments, landscapes and places. Particular places thus present us with a unique history which is the basis of their individuality, which in turn is the basis for our valuation. Yet humans graft their stories on the land too by dwelling or residing in it. This residence, according to Rolston, must be understood as an interpretative act. Residing in a place entails telling the (hi)story of the landscape and that: ”telling of the story might make the human part in it seem right, fitting, appropriate behavior. Taking a narrative role might make the story, and the human part in it, seem meaningful” (345).

As Rolston stresses, the telling of the story is an act of *interpretation*: ”[landscapes are] like the books in our cultural libraries [...] to be read, palimpsests of the past (343).” The philosophical tradition in which the act of interpretation as part of the quest for meaning takes center stage, is of course the hermeneutical tradition. As John van Buren (2014)² has remarked, Rolston’s account of environmental ethics as ”storied residence” in particular environments therefore opens up an opportunity to construct a hermeneutical approach to environmental ethics.³ Such a hermeneutical environmental ethic focusses on the meanings persons perceive in their environments, whereby the ”perception of meaning” is seen as an act of interpretation of the environment. For Paul Ricoeur, as apparently is the case for Rolston, such interpretation is however always also self-interpretation; it allows us to understand ourselves and our position in the world differently, and hopefully also more appropriately and thoroughly (Ricoeur, 1981, also see Drenthen, 2011).

Van Buren (2014) correctly notes that such a hermeneutical approach is both interpretative and narrative. Interpretative, because it focusses on environments as sources of meaning that need to be appropriated, and narrative, because such appropriations usually take on the form of narrations or stories: ”since it usually entails views of the past, present, and future, and these function like the beginning, middle, and end in the unified plot of a narrative, as defined classically by Aristotle.” (18) It is through the story that the Self can take up a position in a larger context of which he understands himself a part. As Rolston correctly claims, the story enables one to derive both meaning and direction

¹ It is illuminating to compare what Rolston says about valuing natural areas as a particulars with what O’Neill et.al. have said about valuing natural areas as spatio-temporal particulars, especially in chapter 8 and throughout the third part of *Environmental Values* (2008).

² An earlier version of this paper was published already in 1995. Van Buren, John. 1995. Critical environmental hermeneutics. *Environmental Ethics*, 17: 259-275.

³ We do not wish to suggest that the philosophy and ethics of Holmes Rolston *in general* could be understood as somehow crypto-hermeneutical. Indeed, there would be great problems in interpreting Rolston in this way, not in the least because of his insistence upon the existence of objective moral value (inherent value). We do however suggest that *one* way of understanding what Rolston in his characteristically evocative style has dubbed ”storied residence” can be to treat it as an opening to a hermeneutical approach to the environment.

for one's life, allowing one to make sense of both one's life and the environment in which it unfolds. Crucially, because one understands oneself by placing oneself within the narrative of the story, the story allows one to see certain acts as "right, fitting and appropriate", namely when acts accord with the place and role one sees oneself taking up in the story. The story and its entailing self-understanding is thus normatively charged: the self-understanding it brings is a moral self-understanding.

The environmental hermeneuticist will be, as it were, 'naturally drawn' to conflicts about the meaning of places, because it is there that the full effect can be seen of how different interpretations of the landscape give rise to different understandings of place and self; and how this results in differing views about what actions count as appropriate. As Ricoeur holds, hermeneutics is a way of learning how to deal with such conflicts of interpretations (Ricoeur, 1974). Confronted with them, the hermeneutics however does not just take note of the different interpretations in a debate, but it also attempts to stage a conversation between these interpretations, in search of a fusion of horizons where different readers might find a common understanding of a 'text' (Gadamer, 1975).

Consequently, environmental hermeneutics can play both a critical and a constructive role. It can be critical in the sense that a reflection on our understanding of nature can make one more aware of the contingent character of one's particular understanding of nature, and open oneself up to alternative understandings. The other might be right, to use Gadamer's words. It can be constructive by suggesting new articulations and interpretations that seem to voice the moral experiences that underlie any of our relations with the natural world more adequately .

In an attempt to put environmental hermeneutics, and thus Rolston's views about storied residence, into practice, we have therefore chosen one 'new' type of environmental conflict, a type that reoccurs regularly at least in the Low Countries, as an example: the conflict over heath restoration-schemes. We are fully aware that our analysis of this particular conflict has little that can be generalized, although similar conflicts seem to have taken place in other parts of the globe.⁴ A concrete application of the hermeneutical method cannot yield but culturally specific meanings, as its whole point is to reflect on how *particular* individuals or groups understand their place in the world.⁵

What *is* however generalizable, and, we believe, of both relative novelty and importance to the environmental debate, is using the hermeneutical method of describing these conflicts.⁶ In short, in

⁴ See, for instance Gobster, P., Hull, B. (eds.). 2000. *Restoring Nature. Perspectives from the Social Sciences and Humanities*. Washington: Island Press

⁵ It however needs to be said that of course nothing precludes that a hermeneutical approach will yield meanings that are more universally shared. Compare also O'Neill et.al. (2008): 121-124

⁶ For an extensive introduction into environmental hermeneutics, its history and its role within and for environmental ethics and philosophy, see *Interpreting Nature. The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*. Edited by Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

analyzing the conflicts over heath restoration, we will focus on the stories that those involved in those conflicts tell themselves about both the particular places and their relations to them, and treat those as accounts of how they interpretatively understand their proper place and role within the environment. As will become clear, such stories are, in accordance with van Buren's remarks on environmental hermeneutics, all about situating *oneself* in a narrative context with a past, present and future. In accordance with Rolston's vision of a storied residence, they deal with how we take up residence in a particular environment—which has both a non-human and human history—by reading ourselves in to it (Drenthen, 2011). By focusing on these stories, we will 'draw out', so to speak, the underlying moral narratives of these conflicts and, while the particular content of those stories might not be generalizable, we believe that the method thus employed is of great relevance of dealing with (moral) environmental conflicts in general.⁷

In the next section, we will first say something about the relative novelty of the particular type of conflict we wish to discuss before we will start delving into the particular stories themselves.

CONFLICTING VIEWS ON BRINGING BACK THE HEATH

Increasingly, preservation organizations seem to be fighting a double battle. Traditionally, preservationists campaigned quite simply for the preservation of nature. They firmly believed themselves to be on the side of nature, protecting it against a greedy and wasteful human economy hungry to convert all of it into industrial parks, transport infrastructure, housing and the like. Quite recently however, the tide has begun to change. In new types of conflict, preservation organizations are challenged precisely in the idea that they stand on the side of nature. Facing protesters, usually local inhabitants who disagree with the preservation goals set for a particular natural area, they stand accused of precisely that what they believed to be fighting against: the destruction of nature.

What has happened? How come nature preservation organizations now, at least in some cases, have to defend themselves against the accusation of nature-vandalism? Of course, one has to understand that often, and especially in Europe, nature preservation isn't simply about putting fences around a natural area in order to let nature further develop on its own accord. Many natural areas are 'humanly mediated', in the sense that they have been thoroughly rearranged by (past) human activities that have fundamentally (re)shaped the ecology of those areas. Such human influence is not necessarily bad or destructive; many of the landscapes and habitats one wishes to protect for their beauty or species richness are precisely areas that have come about through the delicate interplay of human activity and ecological process. Heathlands are a case in point. Having become very rare over the last century, heathlands were once a central component of farming on poor, often sandy soils throughout Atlantic Europe. A heathland needs constant human interference in order to sustain itself:

⁷ Compare on this point also O'Neill et.al. (2008): 121-124

without mowing, grazing, sod-cutting or burning, heathlands disappear. Because the heath lost its role in farming, the activities that sustained the heath for centuries were abandoned and heathlands started to disappear at an alarming rate, which entailed the loss of many species that depended on the heath for their survival. For that reason, heathlands are highly prized in preservation circles and many preservation campaigns aim at protecting or indeed restoring heathlands where possible.

It is especially in that last instance, when heathlands are being actively restored, that preservationists⁸ are often confronted with protests, typically from local inhabitants. Of course, if one wants to restore heathland, one has to destroy the type of nature that is present in the area. A heath is an open, almost treeless landscape; its characteristic fauna and flora abhor the shade. Yet many former heathlands were planted early to mid-20th century with mostly pines to service the oncoming mining-industry, which of course led to the disappearance of most of the sun-loving heathland species. In order to restore a heath, one needs to cut back the forest, to let sun reach the soil again, allowing heathland flora to resurface. And, as is almost always the case, the fauna will follow the flora.

⁸ To some readers, especially those familiar with the North-American tradition of environmental philosophy, it might be surprising and confusing that we use the term ‘preservationists’ to describe organizations that are in favor of restoration. Indeed, in the North-American debate, the terms ‘preservationists’ and ‘restorationists’ are used to describe quite different groups with quite different approaches to environmental matters, often clashing over the question whether nature restoration is permissible or not. Many preservationists place prime value on the ‘wildness’ of a natural area, in the sense that they value the fact that certain natural areas are relatively free from the imprint of human activities. Subsequently they favor a ‘hands off’ approach to nature conservation and tend to reject all forms of restoration, even when ecologically informed, because after restoration a natural area of course cannot be said to be free of human imprint (see, for instance, Elliot 1982). However, when we use the term ‘preservationist’, we do so in a loose and non-technical manner, describing those people who are organized in what in the Low Countries are generally recognized as the nature-preservation organizations [*natuurbehoudsverenigingen*], as opposed to the protesters which are members of the general public and are not necessarily organized in any officially recognized organization. Moreover, drawing sharp distinctions between restorationists and preservationists does not make much sense in a European context. Almost all European nature is of course ‘humanly mediated nature’, in the sense that what are deemed ‘natural’ landscapes and ecosystems in Europe are always (at least partly) shaped by the activities of humans, and thus depend on the continuation of those activities in order to be preserved. Heaths are of course a case in point, as we explain further on in this paper. When one wants to ‘preserve’ a heath, one for instance needs to keep on mowing or burning it. While in Europe such practices would be considered as ‘preservation’, such activities would in a North-American context probably be catalogued under eco-cultural restoration (see for instance Higgs, 2003). Because of those differences in ecological context and in sensibilities surrounding what constitutes preservationist practice and because we use the term in a non-technical way as described above, we feel justified in describing those in favor of heath restoration as ‘preservationists’. See also O’Neill et.al. (2008) for the subtle varieties in perception of what counts as ‘nature’ in the Old versus the New World and the subsequent different evaluation of preservation practices and sensibilities.

It is precisely this clearing of the forest that usually sparks the most vehement of protests, especially when it concerns several hectares in a relative short space of time, which is often the most efficient way of working. In recent years, at least two of such protests have reached the national press in the Low Countries, next to numerous protests that have had a more local impact. In The Netherlands, a scheme called 'Heiderijk', connecting the last remaining pieces of heathland in a (re)forested area in the east of the country, along the German border, between the communities of Groesbeek, Malden and Nijmegen by cutting several dozen hectares of forest, has been met by fierce protests of local inhabitants. The same has happened in the north-east of Belgium, where about a hundred hectares of forest needed to be cut down in the forests surrounding the monastery of Averbode in order to give heathlands a new chance.

Remarkably, the protests on both sides of the Dutch/Belgian border are quite similar, as they are similar in almost all of these cases throughout the Low Countries.⁹ Both groups of protesters are baffled by the fact that the preservation organizations in charge are turning the forests, which the locals all identify as 'their own neighborhood forest', into 'lunar landscapes' of tree trunks and caterpillar tracks. They invariably accuse the preservation organizations of choosing for heathland-restoration out of self-interest. According to them, the choice for heath has nothing to do with nature at all: heathlands need to be constantly managed in order to be preserved; in restoring heathland, those organizations thus assure themselves of future work. Moreover, such organizations can get more subsidies for the maintenance of heaths than for the maintenance of the forests they replace. Why should one go back to heathland anyway? The heath is a historical landscape, why would a historical landscape be more valuable than the forest it replaces? Is the choice for heath rather than forest not purely arbitrary? On the basis of what criteria can such a choice be made anyway? Shouldn't one rather let nature be instead of trying to create a kind of historical surrogate-nature through highly artificial means? Isn't heathland the result of over-exploitation by humans in the past anyway? The forests we always enjoyed walking through have been shattered: who wants to walk in the blazing sun surrounded by dried up grass? Is all of this necessary for those few grasshoppers, bees and snakes one wishes to save? What about the forest animals, don't they count? No, nature is clearly not on those preservationists' minds: they are surely paid by the contractors that cut down the forest; they're only interested in cleaning up the balance sheet of their organizations through selling wood.

From their side, the preservationists point to ecological values in order to defend themselves: those forests are relatively young and the ecological value of forests increases with age. It is almost only in

⁹ We base our account of the discourse of both the protesters and the preservation organizations on an analysis of texts found on four representative websites dedicated to the cases at hand: two for the protesters and two for the preservationist, distributed evenly over both countries. For the organizations who protest the removal of the forest we selected <http://groenebomen.wordpress.com> for Belgium and <http://redonsbos.nl> for The Netherlands; for the preservationists, we selected <http://www.heiderijk.nl> and <http://www.averbodebosenheide.be> for Belgium.

old-growth that you will find typical and valuable woodland species, such as the Wood Anemone, Wild Arum, Wood Garlic and the Black Woodpecker. One can hardly call those forests natural anyway, in fact, they are tree-plantations: they were planted with the specific goal of providing the mining-industry with poles for the construction of shafts after the heath had lost its pivotal role in farming. Because those forests were designed as tree-plantations, the trees have been planted so close together that little light can penetrate to the forest floor, leaving little opportunity for forest-floor species to grow. If you make the forests more open, other species will get a chance to colonize the area, especially heathland species. Those heathland species have suffered greatly from the disappearance of the heath, many of them have become very rare or are endangered; we must give them new opportunities by increasing the area of heathland habitat. This is also the priority for the European Union: they have decided that where possible, we need to promote heathland species. In any case, we're not planning on cutting every tree, a big part of the forest will remain in place, and studies show that people tend to enjoy the mixture of closed and open landscapes we are trying to achieve through our restoration efforts. Wait and see: it might not look very attractive at the moment, but in a couple of years this barren stretch of sand will be a purple sea of heather teeming with life.

In these cases, preservationists run up against the protests of concerned local inhabitants which contest the claim that the preservationists know what is best for nature, or even that preservationists are actually concerned with nature in the first place. Of course, these type of conflicts not only arise in the case of heathland restoration, but also when for instance measures are taken to remove (weedy) exotic species, or generally whenever drastic measures are deemed to be necessary to develop a type of habitat quite distant from the one actually present.

We believe that these conflicts have more than just a local import. They reveal something fundamental about the way in which moral conflicts are being dealt with in present preservationists' controversies. Indeed, we believe that part of the escalation of such conflicts is the result of those conflicts not being articulated enough, or more saliently, not being articulated in the right way. While overtly such conflicts are usually fought out on empirical grounds with the conflicting groups contesting each other's expertise in a certain domain (heathland species/true forest species will never grow here, they don't know what they're doing!) the smoldering and often underdeveloped moral issue under many of these conflicts is one about the meaning of place and how we, both as humans in general and inhabitants of a local area, need to relate to nature and to very specific places.

UNKNOWN, THEREFORE UNLOVED

In the preservationist discourse, the main stress is on the importance of the diversity, rareness and richness of species. This stress on species should come as no surprise. The diversity of species is an important aspect of the concept of 'biodiversity'. According to a widely used, general definition of the

term, biodiversity is the diversity of genes, species and ecosystems present on earth.¹⁰ The term 'biodiversity' itself was invented in the mid-nineteen eighties by a select group of mainly North-American biologists, who named themselves 'conservation biologists' in order to give voice to the enormous variability and complexity of life on earth, and, maybe more importantly, to the deleterious effects we were having on this variety and complexity of life (Takacs 1996). Most of them had experience working as ecologists in field stations across the tropical America, where they were confronted first hand with the devastating effects human encroachment was having on the variability of nature. Having been privileged witnesses of this large scale devastation, these biologists felt a unique responsibility in addressing these issues publically. The term biodiversity was therefore consciously launched by the conservation in an attempt to raise both political and public awareness about the loss of biological variety.

Today, one can of course hardly imagine any debate on nature preservation without 'biodiversity' being mentioned, even to the extent that nature preservation is often simply equated to the preservation of biodiversity (McKloskey 2008). In this respect, the concept has been very successful in achieving the goal for which it was launched: the loss of biodiversity is seen as priority number one by both environmental policy (from the local all the way up to the global level) and by preservation organizations. A not altogether unintended side-effect on this stress on the importance of biodiversity is the fact that conservation biology has propelled itself into a central position of authority within the preservation discourse (Takacs 1996). Indeed, conservation biologists are the central experts in biodiversity: not only did they coin the term; it is also their main area of research. If nature preservation is thus to be about the preservation of biodiversity, conservation biologists are the central experts in the field of preservation.

Yet, in other respects the concept of biodiversity seems to be failing. Being a scientific, abstract term, it is not readily apparent why one should value 'biodiversity' as such. Indeed, while one might be easily convinced by the need to preserve appealing 'flagship species', the most famous of all being the panda, it is not clear why one should value all of those other unknown, less appealing and sometimes even downright repelling species that make up the vast majority of life within ecosystems.

Indeed, one of the reasons that it is relevant to know that the concept of biodiversity was launched by biologists working in tropical America, is precisely the fact that the neotropics lack the kind of 'charismatic megafauna' other regions do have to serve as flagship species (Oksanen 2004). While the East has its pandas, tigers and orangutans, Africa its gorillas, rhinos and elephants, tropical America seems to be lacking in clear candidates to act as mascots for preservation efforts. That is one of the reasons why the concept of biodiversity was used: in order not to depend on the presence of one appealing species, one stressed both the threat to and the value of the totality of life and its complex,

¹⁰ See for instance UNEP. 2013. *What is Biodiversity*. http://www.unep-wcmc.org/what-is-biodiversity_50.html (accessed 29 August 2013)

interacting structures. It was then argued that it was precisely in the interaction that the value of those lesser appealing species lies: life is structured as a complex web of interactions, and if you take one node out of the web, however humble that node might seem, this will create knock-on effects, leaving a much bigger whole than could have been guessed.

The problem is however that this is a very dangerous argument.¹¹ If one argues for the preservation of a given species on the basis that its disappearance will lead to the disappearance of a whole number of other species, because they were all constitutive of and dependent on the same functional whole, one only has to doubt whether the existence of that particular species is indeed so crucial to the presence of others in order for the argument to lose all of its force. More often than not, it is indeed quite unclear what the functional role of a species is. There are numerous examples of species that were considered to have an important functional role within ecosystems but have died out without any radical changes happening to the ecosystems of which they were a part. In such instances, the only option that seems to be open to preservationists is point to the ‘intrinsic value’ of species. Yet pointing to the ‘intrinsic value’ of species is often treated with distrust: aren’t the preservationists hiding their own highly subjective preferences for particular species and particular forms of nature preservation under the cloak of morality?

PAYING LIP SERVICE TO PARTICIPATION

As Keulartz et al. (2004) correctly note, up to the mid-nineties the European Union believed nature-policy should be a top-down affair on the basis of: “the assumption that it is up to scientific experts and not to ordinary citizens and politicians to determine the direction of nature policy” (83).¹² Ecological knowledge was seen as the starting-point of nature-policy. Areas that were to fall under the NATURA-2000 network for instance, a network of preservation areas with the highest preservation priority crisscrossing the European Union, were selected on the basis of ecological criteria alone, such as their biodiversity value. Yet when it came down to implementing the NATURA-2000 network locally, it quickly became clear that ecological values often clashed with the interest of local inhabitants, leading to numerous conflicts that bogged down the implementation of policy.¹³ Therefore, the European Union opted to change the top-down approach for more interactive and

¹¹ Compare Sahotra Sarkar. 2005. *Biodiversity and Environmental Philosophy. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Compare also with; Julien (1998). Natura 2000: The Ecological Network of the European Union, *European Nature. Magazine on the Interface of Policy and Science*(1): 12.

¹³ For an analysis of these types of conflict in France, see Alphandéry, P. and A. Fortier (2001). Can a Territorial Policy be Based on Science Alone? The System for Creating the Natura 2000 Network in France, *Sociologica Rurales* (41): 311–28.

participatory forms of government, inviting all stakeholders to be part in the policy-making process from the start.

European policy thus shifted away from an emphasis on purely ecological values to incorporate the many ways in which nature is of importance to local stakeholders. This shift away from ecological values has of course been met with some distrust by the preservationists community: would this shift not lead to a “dilution of preservation goals, in the sense that less hectares will be designated as nature areas, and that the type of nature to be realized will shift from deeper to lighter shades of green” (83)? In practice however, it is more often the case that the participatory element in nature-policy is mere window dressing: rather than attempt to include locals in the policy-making process itself, the ‘interaction’ remains limited to informing the local public about the reasons why a certain preservation measure will be taken. The preservationist camp often seems unable to take seriously the idea that locals can have a relevant and valid opinion with respect to nature-policy and preservation measures. After all, the preservationists see themselves as the experts par excellence in matters of nature preservation. Surely they know what is best for nature.¹⁴

This failure to take the input of local inhabitants seriously as a substantive contribution to the policy-making process is also present in the Low Countries. In reaction to complaints that nature policy had become “too technocratic” and “too dominated by ecological values” (Keulartz et.al. 2004), the Dutch government stressed the need for taking into account the multiple ways in which nature mattered to people in order to create a broader public support for nature preservation. The problem however is that ‘the way nature matters to people’ was too easily equated with ‘the way people experience nature’. In order to maintain or create sufficient public support, it appeared that all that was needed was to keep on offering people a satisfying experience of nature, and thus to keep this experiential dimension in mind when planning preservation measures.

But what if the experience of local inhabitants clash with the plans of the preservationists, such as is the case in the Heiderijk or Averbode? Of course, in such instances preservationists will keep on insisting on the priority of ecological values, i.e. biodiversity. Indeed, we should protect nature for nature’s sake, and we have all agreed (through international and national legislation) that biodiversity is what is important about nature. Whether a particular species is rare is an objective fact, whether or not a certain area can give one a pleasurable nature-experience only depends on subjective preferences. We cannot let something as trivial as personal tastes in nature experiences determine the preservation agenda. Moreover, we are already taken the experiences of people into account. Once the admittedly unpleasant phase of deforestation is behind us, the area will once again provide ample

¹⁴ For the problem of the dominance of the scientific/cognitivist approach within preservation practice, see Alphandéry and Fortier (2001) and Arjen Buijs. 2009. *Public Natures. Social Representations of Nature and Local Practices*, Wageningen: WUR Wageningen.

opportunity for agreeable nature experiences: studies show that people actually prefer the mix of more open land and forest we are actually trying to create.

The question is whether the conflict that surfaces here can be brushed aside so easily. Is it really a conflict between ecologically illiterate local inhabitants who want to defend their subjective preferences against preservationists that use their expertise to defend and promote only the best interest of nature itself? It seems that by saying that the locals are only interested in a certain *experience* of nature doesn't allow for an adequate articulation of the moral issues which lie at the heart of this conflict. When one looks at the viewpoint of the protesters, it appears that they want to defend their *nature*, not merely their *experience* of nature. When the preservationists thus want to appease the protesters by saying that the type of nature they will be developing will provide opportunities for as much, or even more opportunities for nature pleasant nature experiences, they miss the point that the engagement of those locals with their local reserve is a *moral* one. It is an engagement with a particular natural area out of the belief that this particular area is worth protecting.

GOING BEYOND EXPERIENCES

The problem is that by stressing the fact that it is all about the way in which one experiences nature, one reduces nature to the status of a simple means to have certain (pleasurable) experiences. A real moral approach to nature cannot however start from such an instrumentalist perspective. When we want to protect nature, we do not (only) do so because nature is in some way of use to us, but because nature is in some way of value to or meaning for us. Usually, one refers to the concept of 'intrinsic value' in order to describe the idea that nature is in itself valuable, yet the concept of intrinsic value seems to dissemble more than it reveals. It does not seem to be able to fully express what it is like to experience nature as valuable or meaningful: that nature has a sort of gravity, a sincerity, that it impresses and fascinates, appeals and touches, and that the desire to preserve nature is a reaction to feeling enthralled by her in such a way.

In *Burden of Dreams*, the making off-documentary of Werner Herzog's masterpiece *Fitzcarraldo*, Herzog describes his feelings for the jungle as following:

[Klaus] Kinski always says [the jungle] is full of erotic elements. I don't see it so much erotic; I see it more full of obscenity. It's just, nature here is vile and base. I wouldn't see anything erotic here. I see fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival and growing and just rotting away. Of course there is a lot of misery, but it is the same misery that is all around us. The trees here are in misery and the birds are in misery; I don't think they sing, they just screech in pain. [...] It is a land which God, if he exists, has created in anger, the only place where creation is unfinished yet. Taking a close look at what surrounds us there is some sort of a harmony here. It is the harmony of overwhelming and collective

murder. And we in comparison to this articulate vileness and baseness and obscenity of all this jungle, we in comparison to that enormous articulation, we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban novel, a cheap novel. And we have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery, overwhelming fornication, overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order. Even the stars up here in the sky look like a mess. There is no harmony in the universe, we have to get acquainted to this idea that there is no real harmony as we have conceived it. But when I say this I say this all full of admiration for the jungle. It is not that I hate it, I love it, I love it very much.

Despite the fact that Herzog seems to find nothing but vileness and obscenity in the jungle, his statement is nevertheless one of deep appreciation for the jungle. Indeed, it is precisely *in* its obscenity that Herzog finds himself confronted with something bigger and more primary than himself, something to which he can only react with humbleness. Yet precisely because the recognition of the jungle is inextricably tied up to the vileness and baseness of the jungle, one cannot understand Herzog's appreciation of the jungle in terms of a recognition of its 'intrinsic value' in any strict sense of the word, nor does he clearly value nature as a source of pleasant experiences. Despite the vileness and obscenity we owe nature respect according to Herzog, we should become humble in front of it and even try to love it. In all of its monstrosity it is indeed bigger than us: it overpowers us and points to our insignificance. That is precisely the reason while we are so enthralled by her: nature puts us in our place. Herzog's statement about the jungle presents us with an extreme expression of what the recognition of nature as morally relevant is about: nature's importance is tied up to the idea that she is external to us, seems to contain more truth than we do, and in some way is more real than the suburban triviality of our daily lives. It is because nature seems to present herself with a pretense to meaning in this way that we want to confront ourselves with her and protect her.

All of this is denied in an approach that tries to express our relation to nature in terms of subjective experiences. Such an approach does not try to deal with what nature *is*, but how it is *experienced*. Nature can no longer function as a critical element in such a discourse: it is no longer that which is external to us, but is precisely totally consumed by our experience of it (Drenthen 2005). The fact that when we are interested in nature, when we value it or find it meaningful, we are not simply interested in *experiences* of nature was of course famously worked out by Robert Elliot in *Faking Nature*

(1982). In a slightly different context, Elliot shows through a couple of thought experiments that a wilderness-enthusiast called John is not simply interested in experiences of the wild; these experience have to be experiences of the wild itself, because it is the *wild itself* that he values, not simply his experience of it: "John wants there to be wilderness and he wants to experience it. He wants the world to be a certain way and he wants experiences of a certain kind; veridical" (88). That he wants to experience wilderness at all, is but a function of the fact that he values wilderness, the "wilderness experience" he seeks thus loses all meaning if it isn't an experience *of* the actual wild.

In the thought experiments, John falls, among other things, in the hands of a “utilitarian-minded supertechnologist” (88) who without John’s knowledge hooks him up to an experience machine which gives him the wilderness experience of a lifetime. In another example, he is taken, unknowingly, to a perfect plastic reproduction of a forest where again he has a great wilderness experience. In both instances Elliot however convincingly claims that if John were to know about the *reality* of his experiences, he would feel: “profoundly disappointed, perhaps even disgusted at what at best is a cruel joke” (89).

If experiences were all that counts, we actually wouldn’t need nature at all: virtual reality could deliver experiences that are just as good, or, because of their accessibility and controllability, maybe even better than real experiences of nature. The point Elliot is getting at is that in our experience of nature, we want nature itself to be revealed, we want to get into contact with the reality of nature, a reality that *exceeds* our experience of it. It is only if we are convinced by the fact that in our experience something of the true reality of nature lights up that we will be satisfied in our experience. This entails, among others things, that when we are made too explicitly aware that we are being manipulated into having a particular kind of experience, the experience itself will lose most of its force. Indeed, once we feel we are being manipulated to have a certain experience, we can no longer believe that we are actually experiencing anything real.

One can now better understand why the remark that the newly created natural area will also be a source of pleasurable experiences misses a crucial point and indeed won’t convince the locals to start supporting the plans. On the contrary: the more the preservation agencies will exert themselves to provide opportunities for such experiences –by placing bird hides, picnic tables, interpretative panels and mapping walks – the less the area is able to retain its power to enthrall us, precisely because the less one will be able to see it as a reality that surpasses our own. In our moral experience of nature, we want to be moved by nature *itself*. In order to be moved by nature itself, nature needs to be experienced as having a certain independence vis-à-vis us, as not made or controlled by us.

This is what is at stake for the protesters in the Heiderijk case and at Averbode: they not only like those forests because they can walk there, but because they are fascinated by them. Those forests were never put there for their enjoyment or indeed, as far as they are concerned, for any other particular reason. Those forests are ‘just there’ to be discovered, and that is precisely what makes them so fascinating: the fact that they have a ‘thereness’, a reality of their own that can be explored, kept track off, studied, admired, that can surprise precisely because it is able to present itself in unexpected ways, rather than only through the preset interpretation of the preservation organization in charge of it. Nature can only appear as meaningful when it is a ‘given’, when it is not staged to impress.

When the preservationist organizations are reproached for creating a “surrogate nature”, then the core of the problem seems to be that according to the protesters, the preservationists have a hard time accepting the ‘givenness’ of nature. Instead of accepting those forests as simply nature that is there, they want a nature that is made fully subservient to the plans and expectations of the preservationists:

to house the kinds of plants and animals that they, for whatever reason, like. Nature, as that which transcends the “all too human”, which is simply there as a given, is then precisely transformed to serve “all too human needs”. That is where the reproach that one is not really interested in nature itself comes from: the fact that the actions of the nature preservationists seem disrespectful of the givenness of nature. All preservation seems to have to start from the recognition, as Herzog does, that there is something bigger, pre-given out there that requires an attitude of humble respect. Of course, a local forest will not be so easily experienced, as in Herzog’s impression, as sublime moral depravity, but this does not do away with the basic insight that respect for nature entails respect for something which is pre-given, something which exceeds our experience of it.

TECHNOCRATIC RESTORATIONS

One can level the same sort of criticism at restoration attempts that focus on enhancing biodiversity and for that reason are prepared to intervene drastically into natural areas and processes. The enhancement of biodiversity as a justification for nature restoration is often presented as a pure technical matter: we are under the obligation by national and international law to preserve certain species and in order to preserve those, some managerial intervention in nature is needed.¹⁵ As such, nature once again is presented as a means to attain particular human goals, rather than as something that is pre-given and needs to be respected: nature preservation as a technical rather than a moral practice. The idea that what nature means to people can be reduced to the way in which it is experienced seamlessly fits into this story. The preservation organization presents itself as the specialist in determining what the ecological value of a particular natural area is and how to enhance it through technological means, while at the same time it is the specialist in determining what constitutes a leisurely experience of nature and how one should organize a natural area so that it affords such experiences. In both cases, nature itself as an entity in need of respect, seems to have vanished from view: nature can be manipulated to ensure the presence of species and to generate a certain pre-determined experience.

It is in this context that the Canadian environmental philosopher Eric Higgs has pointed to the dangers of the ‘commodification of nature restorations’ (Higgs 2000, 2003). Higgs envisions two

¹⁵ We do not want to suggest that a concern biodiversity necessarily leads to a technocratic approach to nature conservation, nor indeed that such a concern sprouts from a technocratic approach to nature. There are moral reasons to be concerned with species and the stress that is put within nature preservation on the preservation of biodiversity can be explained as being driven by such moral concerns. Yet, it is our contention that the way in which these moral concerns are being articulated and ‘translated’ into preservation practice does not do justice to those moral concerns, precisely because the preservation of species is approached in a merely technocratic manner. Further on in this paper we show how a non-technocratic approach to biodiversity-preservation might look like.

routes for future nature restorations. The first one is that of increasing professionalization and technification, which he calls the “technological restoration”. The other route is that of “focal restoration”, which stresses the creation of “engaged relationships between people and ecosystems” (2000: 197). Although these two tendencies do not mutually exclude each other, Higgs points out that the technological restoration is gaining popularity among preservationists.

Higgs’ analysis is based on two important factors. First, advances in technological capabilities entail that we are increasingly in control of nature and can thus (re)arrange her to suit our desires and purposes. Second, there is a growing acceptance of the idea that whatever we believe nature to be is strongly mediated by our personal tastes and our culture. When these two elements combine, the danger is that a form of nature restoration arises that will no longer treat nature as something pre-given which needs to be respected, but that will completely model nature to the needs, desires and preferences of humans.

In this way, nature would become a consumer-good, part of the experience-economy, so poignantly described in Tracy Metz’s *Fun* (2002): no longer acting as a border to whatever we can do to it, but appearing as an endlessly malleable hyperreality which can be shaped to fit the ever changing desires of the consumer. Nature restorations then become a ‘commodified practice’ in which a careful treatment of nature as something that is pre-given and needs to be respected is replaced for a practice that strives to develop a certain image and expectation of nature as quickly and efficiently as possible.

According to Higgs, such a hyperreal nature might indeed give us a richer and more accessible experience of nature. Does one want to see red deer? Then why not build a comfortable lookout near their rutting ground, neatly worked into the landscape, conveniently near to a car park yet not so near as to disturb the illusion that civilization is miles away. Whatever the heart desires, nature provides. With the aid of eco-technology, of course. Some have already suggested that nature organizations should start charging entrance fees for such experiences.

THE MORAL DRIVE UNDERNEATH RESTORATIONS

Stressing the importance of nature experiences in an attempt to counterbalance the technocratic character of restorations has a counter-productive effect. By telling a merely technical story about biodiversity supplemented with one about an enriched experience of nature, one raises the suspicion that one is out to sell a pre-packaged product rather than be concerned with nature itself.

Yet it is clear that the preservationists themselves are also driven by a moral view of nature and the way we should relate to it, even if hitherto they seemed to lack the vocabulary to articulate it. Although the adversaries of the forest clearings reproach them that they want to create a kind of surrogate nature, preservationists understand their practice in a different light. Indeed, they believe that the respect for nature as a ‘given’ lies at the heart of their practice. Moreover, they believe their

whole restoration attempt is precisely inspired and steeped in respect for that pre-givenness (Drenthen 2009).

Preservation organizations do not devise their restoration plans *ex nihilo*, as if they would determine how to manage or restore a certain area without any reference to the concrete situation on the ground. Every nature restoration, or at least every good nature restoration, starts off from a meticulous reading of the landscape in its present state: the soil, the landscape history, the list of species present in the area; all are treated as pieces in an archive that tells the story of how the past of an area has led to its present state. The task for the preservation organization is then to interpret that story and see how one can continue it into the future. Interpreting that story is something else than letting one's fantasy run wild: an interpretation has to account for what it interprets in a satisfactory manner. Just like the concrete words in which a text is formulated set definite boundaries to the sorts of meaning we can ascribe to a text without necessarily determining the meaning of the text in a univocal way and thus leaving room for interpretation, the 'archive' of a certain spot can be taken as a pre-given reference-point that orientates a restoration attempt in a certain way, without pinning down the direction unequivocally.

Seen in this light, preservationists aren't busy realizing their own preferences but engaging in practices that try to do justice to a specific place, on the basis of a careful reading of such a place. Here, the story of the preservation organization shifts from a technical discourse on biodiversity and the means to ensure its presence to a moral one about the preservation of the meaning of a certain place and how one should relate to it. This opens up the possibility to give a new, richer account of certain, sometimes drastic, restoration measures (Deliège 2007): this is not only about certain species whose presence needs to be safeguarded through a number of artificial intrusions into the area because 'we' like or value those species, but about preserving species that are a part of the story of a certain place, and that therefore quite literally 'have their place' there. And who are we to deny them their spot?

The adversaries of the deforestation sometimes claim that in order to preserve those species for which one wants to restore heathland, it doesn't matter much that one restores heath to that specific place. Take the smooth snake, a target species for the restoration in the Heiderijk. Smooth snakes are not common in the Netherlands, being restricted to a number of heathland and peat-bog reserves. Having a population of smooth snakes is thus, seen from a Dutch preservationists viewpoint, something to cherish. As a cold-blooded animal, the smooth snake needs open, sunny and sandy spots to warm up. This is especially true for pregnant females: they're ovoviviparous, so pregnant females need to bask in the sun to let their eggs ripen. Heathland, peat-bogs or open-spaced forests with large clearings form ideal habitat. Clearing dense stands of trees and restoring heathland thus seems like an ideal measure to take in favor of the smooth snake.

Yet, why should we choose the smooth snake over closed canopy forest and its denizens? Does the smooth snake's survival as a species depend on us cutting forests? The smooth snake has a big range

that stretches from the Atlantic to the Caspian Sea, comprising most of Europe and a large part of the Near East. As a species, it is not threatened with extinction, on the contrary, it is categorized as 'least concern' by the IUCN. So, what would be so bad about the smooth snake disappearing from the Heiderijk, or even from the whole of the Netherlands? There's plenty of room for it elsewhere.

If the preservation of the smooth snake as a species was the only justification the preservationists could give for the cutting of the forest, they would have little defense against such an argument. For the smooth snake as a species, it makes little difference whether it loses some habitat in the Heiderijk or not. But if you include the smooth snake in the larger story of the history of the forests to the south of Nijmegen and how these forests once formed an unbroken stretch of heathland, their disappearance might appear in a different light. The loss of the smooth snake then constitutes a loss of meaning for a particular place. Without the smooth snake, the place's story is simply incomplete, as if some words are missing from a poem; suddenly there is a loss of meaning, a gap in the archives (Drenthen 2009). What is lost is a layer of meaning from a certain area, a loss of an inspiring story that could be told about a certain area. Seen in this way, it is not about our preference for this or that story, but about the potential of an area to be evocative out of its own accord, about recognizing, or failing to recognize, what has made a certain area to what it is.

By refocusing the discussion from a technical discourse on the preservation of species to one that stresses the specific meaning of a place, one can also avoid the sterile, empirical discussion about the naturalness of the heath or the forest. For the protesters, forest is real nature: that's what's there at the moment and will develop itself further if given the chance. Moreover, before heathlands were created through agricultural practices, most of them would probably have been forests. The forest does not need any help from humans to maintain itself, in contrast to heathland, which needs continuous human management. Yet those protestors seem to pay too little attention to the fact that the forests we find in the Heiderijk and Averbode are young forests, planted with a very specific goal in mind: to provide wood for the mining industries. Those forests are far from 'natural': the monotonous species composition is unlike any 'natural forest' and the trees are densely packed to ensure a rapid and straight 'matchstick-like' growth. Such forests do not durably sustain themselves, they need to be managed too; indeed they were designed to be managed. It is impossible to claim that these forests resemble anything like the 'original forest' that might have stood here centuries and maybe even millennia ago: *that* forest has truly been lost.

When one stresses the meaning of a certain place, a call to return to the 'truly original' landscape might even be a result of a lack of respect for the pre-givenness of a certain place. A story about the forests south of Nijmegen in the Heiderijk that does not thematize the fact that they were cleared to make room for heathland during many centuries and possibly even millennia is an inauthentic story that misrepresents the particularity, the pre-givenness, of that place. A story that negates the forests and only talks about heath is of course an inauthentic story for the very same reasons.

The point is that the main question is not whether this or that particular type of landscape is authentically *natural* or not. Both the forest and the heath are as natural or artificial as each other, if ‘natural’ here stands for ‘relatively free of human interference’. We therefore do not need to expect any satisfactory outcome of such a debate. Yet, the authenticity of a given area is not solely determined by the question whether it is authentically natural or not. The fact that both forests and heath are ‘humanly mediated landscapes’ does not make them inauthentic landscapes. The question about the authenticity of a certain place deals with the question whether or not a place can manifest itself to us as conveying meaning (Deliège 2007, 2010). In such a framework, nature preservation is all about the question of how one can let the meaning of a particular natural area continue to resonate, how one can enable it to tell its story itself. It might be possible that in order to achieve that, humans need to interfere with the area, yet this does not mean that humans can simply and arbitrarily decide on what will happen: every good attempt at nature restoration, just as every form of good nature preservation, starts off from the insight that there is a certain pre-givenness that needs to be respected, and that clearly defines the borders of what is suitable and desirable.

FOCAL RESTORATIONS

By shifting the attention to the meanings an area incorporates, we avoid both too much subjectification and too much objectification of nature preservation practices. Moral meanings do not exist in objective nature but neither are they merely subjective experiences: they testify of the way we are always already engaged in the world. Nature restorations have to pay careful consideration to the way in which nature has always mattered to us, how particular places are always already enmeshed in the stories we tell about ourselves and our communities. These stories are not mere subjective projections: particular places are always already ‘wrapped up’ in stories that transcend our, and even humanity’s time-frame. The story of a particular place is for instance not only about the history of its cultivation (as is the case when one talks about heathland), but also about the deep-geological time that explains why a certain soil is there which was conducive to heathland-farming in the first place. Yet those stories cannot simply be objectively gleaned from the landscape either, as if in retrieving these stories we were just ascertaining facts about the landscape. The point is that one needs to *inscribe* oneself in the landscape, take up an active position within the meaning of the landscape in order to let *it* reverberate. One has to position oneself against and within the landscape in an attempt to testify of the always already existing relation between humans and that particular natural place.

According to Higgs, that is what focal restorations are all about: the creation of engaged relationships between people and ecosystems that present the commanding presence of nature. Such an approach not only demands ecological measures, but also cultural ones: rituals, community building, nature education and so on. It also presupposes that we see the relation locals have with ‘their forest’ as more than merely consumptive: the attachment they feel to a certain area, and the

concern they feel for the area from that attachment, is not only an interest in having pleasurable nature experiences, but a concern for a nature that is 'just there' and therefore deserves protection.

CONFLICTING STORIES, MORAL CHOICES

The idea that we can make or simulate nature will eventually cave in on itself and make it impossible to address the deeper moral issues at play in nature restorations. The choice to preserve nature is not a technical, but a moral choice. Moral meanings exist because of the meaningful stories we tell about this world. One of the most powerful and deeply entrenched moral meanings in the Western European culture is that nature has a deep moral meaning precisely because it transcends our limited human perspective. A justification of nature preservation therefore demands stories that show how we can relativize our own importance, transcend our all-too-human desires, and how to make a meaningful connection between our human society and the wider nature on which it rests.

Of course, this will not solve every possible conflict. As always with the interpretation of stories or works of art, there can be big, even unbridgeable differences between interpretations. The meaning of both forest and heath is tied up in important ways to the fact that they are, in an important sense, 'gifts of time'. While for the preservationists, that time includes the period in which the Heiderijk and Averbode were heathland; it does not for the protesters. The preservationists either implicitly or explicitly refer back to the centuries in which the heath dominated. Many present locals lack such associations with deep time. The heath has been gone too long in order leave markers that would be obvious to untrained eyes.

Such conflicts are often interwoven with different readings of the landscape, readings that interpret landscapes in terms of involvement, co-operation or even co-creation of humans and land, or rather as a scission between humans and nature. Are heathlands the result of centuries of over-exploitation, or the result of traditional farming techniques that opened up space for other organisms as well? Are the recent forest neglected wood-plantations, or the result of a policy that allows the forest to develop by itself? It will therefore be difficult to find measures that both restore heath and treat the forest respectfully. When heath restorations not only deal with the recovery of heathland species, but also with amending the broken relationship between humans and the land, it *is* relevant to know whether a forest has been chopped down by a bulldozer or by a storm. From a technical viewpoint, both events might set the same ecological processes in motion, and both events might therefore be seen as identical. But of course, in the one case humans decide, in the other humans undergo nature. It is possible that waiting and doing nothing is no good option, but in such a case the preservationists should start with the recognition that there is a tension between the moral goal and the technical means to achieve it.

STORIED RESIDENCE AS CENTRAL TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN

Preservationists should not only be concerned with ‘nature itself’, but also with the people who are concerned with nature. This does not have to mean that human desires must always be central. Studies show that a great number of Dutch at least value the existence of other species, even when they are of no use to humans and not even only when they are directly enjoyable to us (De Groot et.al. 2011). Even the desire to preserve nature for itself is in the end a reflection of human values that are shared and recognized by us. As such, you could call this a human desire, but then you transform it: people do not necessarily want to see their own desires satisfied, they want nature to do well.

Yet the desire does engage our total human being: for he who holds such a wish, there is no difference between human desire and the interests of nature, only between a short-term self-interest and a broader scope that holds that human life has meaning precisely through being situated in a larger natural context. When people say they are concerned about the future existence of species, this is not only the result of the belief that those species are useful or the source of pleasant experiences, but because they feel connected to that which transcends their own self-interest: nature as a force that carries us, as a place where other living creatures also reside, creatures that sometimes need protection against our short-term interests and desires.

When people decide to care for nature together they do so from a social and ethical context in which stories play a key role: stories that situate them within the greater story of the environment, stories that allow them to take up a 'storied residence' in the environment. It is through these stories that we tell each other why and how nature matters. The irony is that nearly every preservationist has such a story to tell: a story about love, admiration, wonder and connectedness, a desire to work towards a world in which humans and nature can go together.

CONCLUSION: ENVIRONMENTAL HERMENEUTICS AS A MODEL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN PRACTICE

In this paper we have argued that hermeneutics can provide a fruitful perspective on conflicts of interpretation about the specific meanings of storied residence. We have tried to demonstrate how environmental hermeneutics can help explicate the interpretational base of our being-in-the-world by articulating those pre-existing meanings and interpretations that already play a role in how we act and think, and in doing so force us to have a second look at them. Some of our previous interpretations of the land may prove to be inadequate or outdated once we properly reflect upon them. A hermeneutical environmental *ethics* will ask in what sense these old interpretations can still be considered adequate articulations of how the world we find ourselves in beckons to be understood, or whether we should seek new articulations. Rearticulating these meanings can be laborious, but plays a critical part.

The task of a hermeneutical environmental ethics, then, is to articulate and make explicit those interpretations and meanings that are already at work in our everyday practices, to bring them to light and make them explicit, and to confront existing meanings and interpretations with other, less obvious interpretations. Doing so will increase our sensitivity for the many different meanings that can be at stake in our dealings with a particular place, although it will also make the questions of ethics even more complex than they already are. However, by showing how our understanding of ourselves is already emplaced, a hermeneutical environmental ethics can help us to better understand what is at stake in our complex relation with the landscape.

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