



University of Alberta
Environmental Research and Studies Centre

Volume 4, Issue 2

October 2004

Is It Better To Be Natural?

Michael Simpson,
PhD Candidate,
Department of
Biological Sciences,
University of Alberta

*Rocky
Mountains*



We refer to nature often enough, you would think that we know what it is. Moose, moss and dung seem natural. But what about salami, socks and singing in the shower? Does it matter?

It might if you are gay, an animal rights activist, or a share-holder in Monsanto. Appeals to naturalness have featured in debates as diverse as same-sex marriage, our treatment of animals, and genetic modification. They rest on the notion that nature is real and not a figment of the imagination. But is that true? And if not, should we be using nature for political ends?

We often refer to natural history, the natural world and Mother Nature. We hear of the benefits from natural extracts and natural foods. Environmentalists warn us that we are disturbing the natural order or upsetting nature's balance. But what is this thing called nature?

For my Masters thesis, I asked people that question. Not surprisingly, living things frequently came up first.

"Animals, birds, hedgehogs, foxes, anything like that," said one. "Birds and bees. Trees. Flowers," said another.

A picture of the Rocky Mountains always got responses like this: "My word for that is awesome. Splendid. That is nature."

But a postcard from New York City brought such comments as, "I don't consider that to be a natural environment... I don't see any nature in that at all."

Not all sentiments were shared, however. One person thought that The Butchart Gardens on Vancouver Island was, "just, like, pure artificial and, I just think it's so nasty." But another did see it as nature, albeit "with an awful lot of help from man."

Why would we agree about certain things being natural, and disagree about others? Is it because the characteristics of naturalness are



The Butchart Gardens

not clear to everyone? Or do we determine these characteristics to suit ourselves?

In the way that we talk about nature, certain qualities are often implied. Naturalness is healthy. Nature is pure, sometimes in the sense of being "wild, rugged, untouched by human hands". I asked someone why they thought that city buildings were unnatural. "The materials are put together by people who want to make a brick," they said, "and therefore the ingredients may be natural but the actual products aren't." Unnaturalness, then, can be a quality of human artefacts, irrespective of what they are made of. Yet, some things we make and do, like the Butchart Gardens, might be seen as natural if they are nice to look at.

These ideas suggest that naturalness is a contingent condition. They indicate a willingness to see nature in a positive light, while thinking ill of unnaturalness and equating it with certain things we do. Why else should natural things be healthy? Why would we think that anything we make is unnatural? Why should unnaturalness result only from changes made by us, when things are altered dramatically all the time by processes we intuitively think of as natural? And why should it make a difference what something looks like? If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, notions of naturalness based upon it would be a matter of personal taste. Naturalness would then be no more an objective quality of things than is quality itself.



New York

A more scientific definition of nature might come from the world's best lexicographers. The Oxford Canadian Dictionary defines nature (in the context in which we typically refer to the environment) as 'the physical power causing all phenomena of the material world.' According to Merriam Webster Online, nature is 'a creative and controlling force in the universe,' or 'the external world in its entirety.' Dictionary.com describes nature as 'the material world and its phenomena' and 'the forces and processes that produce and control all the phenomena of the material world.'

These definitions are also selective, however. Why are only physical or material things natural? Is nature solely creative? Are thought, emotion, flood and fire natural?

So what, though, if lexicographers also can't make sense of nature? It is a useful term for describing things because when we hear it, we can be fairly sure we know what the user wants it to mean. We should be wary, though, when something is judged according to its naturalness. Even if our idea of naturalness is free of moral biases, our notions of moral goodness aren't. Hence, nothing can be objectively good by virtue of being natural. Yet, political positions are sometimes justified on the grounds that nature and virtue inherently go together.

In recent debates over gay marriage some opponents have argued that gays should not be allowed to wed because it is 'unnatural.' The point of this argument is to circumvent debates over subjective moral objections. The same principle underlies criticisms of GMOs that claim they are unnatural. It appeals to the assumption that anything unnatural is unequivocally undesirable. But how can that be if unnaturalness itself is not unequivocal? At best, we would have to believe that unnaturalness is inherently bad, or that something is unnatural because it is undesirable, not vice versa. Either way, this argument is not as objective as it might seem, so it cannot form the basis of an unbiased opposition to anything.

The exploitation of sentiments about nature's virtue can also be found on many everyday products that are marketed as natural as though this, in itself, makes them superior. Yet the benefits of something must come from qualities within it. Naturalness cannot be one of these if it is defined contingently.

If moose, moss and dung are natural, whatever that means, that doesn't make them good. Equating naturalness with virtue is a value judgement. Consequently, suggesting that something is unequivocally right or wrong because of its naturalness or unnaturalness is misleading. The value of anything often comes from our affection for it, our sense of moral duty to it, or its benefits. These qualities should be the basis of our support of things that we see as natural, not naturalness itself.

Profound Legacies: Land Trusts in Alberta

Nav Virk,
Law Student,
Faculty of Law,
University of Alberta

There is not one adjective that can fully describe Sandy Cross' personality, but 'profound' concisely characterizes his legacy. Sandy Cross the grandson of prominent Albertan A.E. Cross who

founded the Calgary Stampede, was a successful businessman and rancher in his own right.

Cross' legacy has become his land. Over the last decade of his life, Sandy Cross along with wife Ann donated more land—in size and value (estimated at nearly \$28 million at present)—to land conservation than any other Albertan in history. The Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area is now an award-winning, 4800-acre day use natural area located just south west of Calgary. The conservation area is dedicated to protecting habitat and providing space for native species of wildlife. It is home to the largest red-tail owl population in the world; offers conservation education programs (particularly to young people) without jeopardizing wildlife and habitat; and, manages human use of the Area through an 'entry by appointment only' system.

Land-use and protection, cultural and personal heritage, and a tax-benefit provided by the Canadian Ecogift Program are among the reasons why land conservation occurs.

"There are endless reasons why landowners are motivated to conserve their land. Sandy and Ann loved the beauty of their land—for Sandy it was nearly an extension of

