Conclusion: Environmental Ethics as Civic Philosophy

In this book I have offered a new reading of some of the intellectual foundations of American environmentalism. In doing so, I have drawn attention to the wider political and social context of environmental values, placing the latter within a larger discussion about such ends as the revitalization of democratic citizenship, the conservation of regional culture and community identity, and the constitution of the public interest. As I said at the outset, I believe that the philosophies of Liberty Hyde Bailey, Lewis Mumford, Benton MacKaye, and Aldo Leopold offer an important and persuasive counterpoint to the anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism, use versus preservation narrative that has historically dominated discussions of the development of American environmental thought. While they are not the only figures to think and write in this alternative vein, their work offers some of the most powerful statements of what I see as a lost third way tradition in environmentalism. Bailey, Mumford, MacKaye, and Leopold form a remarkable intellectual “hub” within the conservation and regional planning community in the first half of the twentieth century. We can also see evidence of their legacy in the landscape today, most notably in the reform projects of neoagrarians like Wes Jackson and the architects and planners of the New Urbanism.

Among other things, I hope that my recovery of this civic pragmatist tradition can help clear the philosophical ground for a rethinking of some of the ethical assumptions and agendas of contemporary environmentalism. Unlike the approach of Bailey, Mumford, MacKaye, and Leopold, many environmental philosophers and activists today seem to want to circle their moral wagons around a pure and unadulterated nonanthropocentrism rather than accommodate the complex of cultural and
natural values that always intermingle in human experience. The notion of a greater public interest in a healthy and well-planned landscape, the sort of ideal that motivated the third way thinkers discussed in this book, is in these strict nonanthropocentric views eclipsed by the much narrower discussion of nature’s interest. In such a view, the goal of ethical discourse about the environment is typically seen as the radical moral conversion of the citizenry, the wholesale replacement of an unseemly anthropocentrism with a nature-affirming philosophical outlook.

This impulse to effect sweeping nonanthropocentric moral reform within the academic field of environmental ethics was established at its intellectual founding. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the rise of applied ethics as a practical philosophical movement devoted to exploring the moral questions raised by a host of social practices, including those within biomedicine, business, and engineering contexts. Unlike these other approaches in practical ethics, however, many of the new environmental ethicists cleaved from the very beginning to the view that the conventional Western ethical and political tradition was of little use in helping us face mounting environmental problems, such as pollution of air and water, the degradation of land, the loss of species and wildlands, overpopulation, and resource scarcity.

This belief was reinforced during the field’s critical period by influential arguments such as those of historian Lynn White, Jr., whose essay, “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” was briefly discussed in the previous chapter. Of particular significance was White’s plea in this paper for a return to “fundamentals,” a rethinking of the humanist “axioms” of Western culture so that a less destructive and more benign human–nature relationship might be realized. White’s call for a radical new anti-anthropocentric worldview had a profound impact on the subsequent development of environmental ethics. The prominent ecocentric philosopher J. Baird Callicott, for example, has observed that White’s “Historical Roots” essay is the “seminal paper in environmental ethics,” and that following its publication in 1967, “The agenda for a future environmental philosophy thus was set.”

While this may be overstating things a bit, it certainly did not take long for the embrace of nonanthropocentrism (and the denunciation of moral humanism) to become the default position in environmental
ethical writing.\footnote{One of the conclusions that emerged from this line of argument was that our environmental policies, politics, and practices, if they are to be truly principled and morally “correct,” must be justified by nonanthropocentric ethical arguments, i.e., by claims to nature’s intrinsic value. In 1973, for example, the Australian philosopher Richard Routley (later Sylvan) published his pioneering paper, “Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?,” an essay that introduced his now well-known hypothetical “last man” scenario as a kind of moral litmus test to separate anthropocentrists from nonanthropocentrists. As Routley wrote, according to the traditional moral commitments of Western civilization, the last man surviving the collapse of the world system would be committing no wrong if he set about destroying every species of animal and plant on Earth. Because only humans have value in traditional Western ethics, nature is viewed as essentially valueless (in itself). Therefore, we have no established moral tradition that will allow us to authoritatively condemn the destruction of nature on the grounds that it destroys nonhuman intrinsic value.\footnote{Routley’s paper was intended as a strong rebuke of the Western philosophical tradition, particularly the “human chauvinism” he found in its exclusive concern for the interests of humans. Since Routley’s essay is considered to be one of the most important and foundational statements in environmental ethics, a separatist precedent was thus established at the field’s inception. Indeed, many influential nonanthropocentric philosophers writing in the field’s early years implied (when they did not come right out and say it) that those who do not adopt the nature-centered worldview and a commitment to intrinsic natural value do not hold any environmental ethic worthy of the name.}}

Although a strong strain of nonanthropocentrism took hold in environmental ethics at its inception and soon grew to dominate the scholarly discourse, it is important to remember that other, more humanistic, voices have always been audible amid the nonanthropocentric chorus. John Passmore’s \textit{Man’s Responsibility for Nature}, published a year after Routley’s paper, was one of the first book-length treatments of environmental ethics and is significant in part for its rejection of the notion, common among nonanthropocentric environmental theorists, that Western philosophical thought had little of value to contribute to the
resolution of ecological problems. The conventional (anthropocentric) ethical tradition, Passmore wrote, with its sensitivity to the consequences of human actions and its stock of moral principles prescribing the advancement of genuine and enduring human interests (i.e., interests beyond immediate physical and material gratification), had more ethical resources at its disposal than the new environmental “mystics” and “primitivists” (his terms) either understood or fully appreciated.

This denial of the need to inject nonanthropocentric principles into the discussion of human relations to nature would gain further play in environmental ethics as the field developed over the ensuing decades. For example, in the mid-1980s, Bryan Norton introduced what he termed “weak anthropocentrism” to the discussion, a broadly humanistic view that distinguished between the purely economic values of “strong” anthropocentrism (a stance Norton rejected) and a “weaker” (i.e., less consumptive) variant of instrumentalism in which the direct experience of nature was seen as providing the means to criticize ecologically “irrational” commitments and could encourage the formation of normative ideals affirming human harmony with the environment.

This same period also saw the emergence of a related set of important discussions in moral and political theory about our duties to future generations and the scope and content of (human) intergenerational justice, conversations that would develop into what we might refer to as “normative sustainability theory” in environmental ethics and policy studies by the mid-1990s. Finally (although this is by no means a complete survey of humanistic approaches in the field), the anthropocentric strain in environmental ethics received a major boost from the coalescence of “environmental pragmatism” in the mid-1990s, a movement that, as we have seen in this book, highlights the moral and political resources residing in an established (i.e., humanistic) tradition for discussions in environmental ethics.

Despite the pedigree and growing number of humanistic (or humanistic-leaning) ideas in the field, it is safe to say that nonanthropocentrism is still the prevailing philosophical posture in environmental ethics. It is also true that many of the field’s contributors remain committed to the eradication of anthropocentric claims and arguments from environmental ethical and policy discourse. For example, Holmes Rolston, one of
the leading voices in academic environmental ethics and the most articulate advocate of the ecocentric program writing today, has stated that “Both anthropocentric and anthropogenic values have to come to an end before we can be the best persons. We have to discover intrinsic natural values.”

Laura Westra, another nonanthropocentric environmental philosopher, has likewise put forth an ecocentric “principle of integrity” that she suggests should serve as the authoritative standard for environmental action, a principle that can even override the democratic will of citizens. And Eric Katz has argued that anthropocentric environmentalist approaches are imperialistic and ultimately devastating to the goals of environmental protection. “An anthropocentric worldview,” he writes, “leads logically to the destruction of the nonhuman natural world.”

Given such sentiments, it is perhaps not surprising that Leo Marx, the distinguished cultural historian and author of the classic study of the American pastoral tradition, *The Machine in the Garden*, felt compelled to label ecocentric environmentalists “the puritans of today’s environmental movement” in an essay published in the *New York Review of Books* a few years back. While Marx was specifically referring to the deep ecologists, his observations are just as fitting for the more mainstream thinkers in environmental ethics who, even if they do not explicitly identify themselves with the deep ecology movement, nevertheless have embraced a similar radical vision of reform focused on the impassioned defense of the intrinsic value of nature and the rejection of all varieties of humanistic outlooks. Whether or not this vision reflects a puritanical attitude, it is certainly clear that many writers in the field today hold exceedingly strong—often proudly uncompromising—convictions about the moral course of environmentalism. It must be centered on protecting nature for its own good rather than for its contribution to human values and interests, and we must work to dismantle all forms of humanism and stop the vulgar instrumentalization of nature that reduces wild species and ecosystems to mere means in the service of human-defined ends.

By focusing so intently on the question of the independent moral standing of nature and the overthrow of anthropocentrism, however, I would argue that the field of environmental ethics has ironically
undercut its ability to promote what are presumably its wider social and policy goals. Indeed, I think the ideological approach dominating much of nonanthropocentric environmental ethics today has seriously compromised the field’s ability to play a meaningful role in the development of broad-based environmental reform movements and policy coalitions. The almost knee-jerk rejection of all things human by many strong nonanthropocentrists has found ethicists (and their activist counterparts) turning their backs on many of the moral and political commitments that underpin most public policy arguments, not to mention American political culture more generally. Furthermore, and most distressingly, I think it puts them at odds with the public, who we know is often motivated by long-term human interests, such as a concern for the well-being of future generations. And it is an attitude that finds environmental ethicists parting company with an earlier generation of environmental thinkers, including the revered Aldo Leopold, who did not believe that caring for nature required the purging of humanistic values from our environmental discourse.

This is unfortunate because the field does have the potential to contribute to a larger and more useful discussion about the value of nature as part of the moral and political commitments of a “good” society. Unlike the strong nonanthropocentrists in environmental ethics, I do not believe that we need to completely dismantle humanism, nor do I think that an unyielding “nature-first” philosophy must necessarily be the foundation of an effective and principled environmentalism and, by extension, a morally defensible environmental politics. Instead, I would suggest that we learn from the third way thinkers examined in the previous chapters and seek a more integrative and pluralistic environmental ethics, one in which our many and often disparate environmental values, including intrinsic natural values, are seen as products of shared human experience, welded solidly to the frame of our established moral and political traditions.

This does not mean that a concern for nature’s good has no moral bearing. Bailey and Leopold certainly show us how arguments about intrinsic value can occupy a significant place in our environmental valuations, and that these may even be pragmatically necessary for achieving certain environmental ends, such as conservation of rural life.
and land health (ends that in turn promote additional cultural and civic values). Yet both Bailey and Leopold (as well as Mumford and MacKaye) also teach us that human moral, social, and political values have an important role in justifying the environmentalist agenda, and that an environmental ethic that seeks to play one type of valuing off the other rather than accepting their mutually reinforcing character in experience denies the essential continuity of nature and culture. It also fails to take advantage of the powerful connections between them that can generate social action on behalf of important environmentalist objectives.

To get us past this kind of adversarial and dualistic way of thinking about environmental values and goals, in this book I have attempted to contextualize environmental ethics by examining its character and development within specific historical, intellectual, and geographic settings, including places (e.g., agrarian and urban landscapes), movements (e.g., nature study, regional planning), and philosophical traditions (e.g., classic American philosophy and pragmatism) that have traditionally not been focal points of environmental ethical narratives. The result, I hope, has been a more expansive reading of the philosophical and political bases of environmental thought, an analysis that avoids the trap of trying to shoehorn the work of important environmental writers into the confines of narrow anthropocentric or pure nonanthropocentric compartments.

As mentioned earlier, I also think that the tradition advanced in the preceding chapters offers historical justification and a further elaboration of the emerging pragmatic approach within environmental ethics, providing this movement with a philosophical “usable past” (as Mumford’s compatriot Waldo Frank might have put it). The recent turn to pragmatism by a number of environmental philosophers is by no means an unprecedented or unusual move within environmental thought. Instead, it is a recovery of a significant, though largely lost moral tradition in the story of American environmentalism. I believe that this contextualist reading makes for a more interdisciplinary approach to environmental ethics and that it reorients the discussion in a way that maximizes the public potential of the field by revealing the historical and intellectual depth of the civic pragmatist vision.
On this last point, I would argue that the adoption of a more democratic style and public orientation in environmental ethics has never been more necessary, nor more timely. In the past decade or so we have seen the rapid growth of what are variously referred to as “collaborative resource management,” “community conservation,” or “grassroots ecosystem management” approaches, dynamic forms of social action in which citizens share responsibility for environmental planning, decision making, and management with a range of local, state, and federal agencies.\textsuperscript{16} Supporters of these efforts argue that they promise more equitable and effective implementation of environmental plans and policies, and that they can improve overall environmental governance. These models are also praised for their ability to encourage social learning, trust, and mutual understanding among citizens, activities that can build social capital and civic capacity within local communities. While they are not a panacea for all of our contemporary environmental ills, and are subject to all the distortions and frustrations of democratic politics, these citizen-led movements clearly offer a vital role for the public in the environmental planning and policy arena, and perhaps signify an intriguing shift toward a wider “civic environmentalism” within various sectors of the environmental movement.\textsuperscript{17}

I think that environmental ethics today stands at a crossroads with respect to the intellectual and institutional development of American environmentalism. On the one hand, it has a great opportunity to help environmental activists, professionals, and citizens articulate and justify their efforts within these emerging place-based and civic-spirited movements for environmental reform. In order to do so, however, I believe that the field needs to change. Specifically, I think it must get rid of its “puritanical” baggage (as Leo Marx might put it) if it is truly serious about taking part in what is increasingly a socially diverse, geographically varied, and politically dynamic planning and policy discussion. Pleas for radical nonanthropocentric reform may well have appeared philosophically warranted (and strategically necessary) to the first generation of environmental theorists and advocates howling in the ethical wilderness in the early 1970s. Yet given the mainstreaming of American environmental values and the rise of an extensive (though certainly far from complete) environmental policy regime over the past several
decades, as well as this more recent ascendance of citizen-led environmental coalitions focused as much on pressing social and civic issues as on environmentalist concerns (traditionally understood), I believe we find ourselves in a very different sort of historical moment than that faced by environmental philosophers and advocates in the early 1970s.

What we need now, I would argue, are not environmental puritans, but rather environmental civic philosophers; that is, ethicists, political theorists, and social critics who are deeply concerned with understanding the diverse environmental values and commitments of citizens and who seek to connect this normative inquiry, not just to widely supported environmental policy and planning goals, but also to the other social and moral ideals and agendas of the democratic community. I wholeheartedly agree with the political theorist Benjamin Barber, for example, who has suggested that the environmental movement today would do well to develop a robust civic philosophy able to articulate a shared notion of the public interest in a healthy and sustainable environment. “Nowadays,” Barber observes, “rather than developing a discussion on behalf of the civic good, environmentalists often feel compelled to engage defensively in strident, unlistening polemics focused as much on their own moral self-righteousness as on the common good, or, say, the rights of hikers and bird-watchers deployed as counterweights to the rights of snowmobilers and loggers.” As a result, he concludes, “In the face of adversarial interest politics, the public good that might bring together loggers and bird-watchers in a community of concern about sustainable environments goes missing.”

I would hope that the third way environmentalism I have reclaimed in this volume could help to set the historical and intellectual stage for this new kind of civic philosophical program in environmental thought and practice. Ultimately, I believe it is a tradition that points toward a transformed environmental politics, one that can unite nature conservationists and regional planners, wilderness advocates and rural reformers, New Urbanist supporters and boosters of sustainable agriculture, and environmental reform more generally, with a wider social and political criticism.