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# Pragmatic Pluralism in Protecting Nature

**Infinite Nature.** Hull, R. B. 2006. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL. 271 (xiii + 258) pp. \$25.00 (hardcover). ISBN 0-226-35944-1.

Bruce Hull offers a scholarly and thoughtful book about contemporary environmental movements with the aim of resolving the internecine conflicts that divide different factions, for instance, deep ecologists from social ecologists and ecocentrists from biocultural activists, who promote sustainable but continued development of natural resources. In Hull's view much of the failure to make significant progress in environmental protection in recent years can be attributed to the fundamentalism of environmental activists who each see nature from one particular perspective and deny the validity of all other points of view. Such dogmatism is misplaced, according to Hull, because it is obviously counter-productive and because there is no single nature. Rather, there is a multiplicity of *natures*, indeed, an infinite number of them depending on how each of us views the world around us. His message is that we should embrace this plurality of ways in which nature can be conceptualized or, as he likes to put it, "constructed." A pragmatic pluralism is supposed to dissolve the polarization between the different factions of fundamentalists in the environmental movements today. The position comes close to pure relativism, according to which all views are equally worthwhile, and constructivism, which denies the ex-

istence of any objective reality beyond social constructions. Hull's discussions, however, make it clear that he does not want to go quite that far. There is genuine concern throughout the book of the real harm being done to the natural world, including the humans living in them.

The book covers a lot of ground on environmental thinking in North America, from Thoreau and Jefferson to contemporary writers such as Jared Diamond and Richard Posner. There are 14 chapters (if one includes the Conclusion), and 12 of these are devoted to a different construction of nature. Hull notes the extensive transformations that Native Americans' cultures wrought on the landscape before European contact and contrasts what we have learned from recent historical work with Romantic constructions of uninhabited wilderness in pre-Columbian America. He does not shy away from discussing the injustices perpetrated on Native Americans in the name of what some neo-Europeans viewed as nature protection. Manifest Destiny also transformed North Americans' views of the land, and the book covers relatively familiar ground here and when it straddles the contrast between Muir and Pinchot and their followers. Thoreau and Leopold are interpreted as pluralists and unifiers, to be contrasted with today's fundamentalists. The interpretation of Leopold's land ethic as including human interests is convincing (although not particularly original having long been championed by Bryan Norton and many others). Sustainable devel-

opment is endorsed in its proper context, when it is truly sustainable into the indefinite future. Even sociobiologists and their contemporary followers are treated with respect. Hull is consistent in his aim of conflict avoidance.

Within all this pluralism, if there is any unifying theme, it is that humans should not be seen as separate from nature: we are part of nature—at least on all credible constructions—even as we act to dominate the rest of the natural world. The breadth of this book is what separates it from much of contemporary work in what may loosely be called environmental philosophy. This breadth naturally leads to the pluralism the book promotes. It is unfortunate, though, that the discussions of the book are almost entirely limited to a North American context. If Hull had considered to the voluminous work on natural resources (including biodiversity) that have come from Latin America and southern Asia, especially over the last few decades, it would only have helped the case for pluralism that he is promoting. But this is perhaps a minor complaint given the audience that he clearly has in mind—environmentalists living and working in North America—the book makes an interesting new contribution.

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