Published as Gray, M., & Coates, J. (2012). Environmental ethics for social work: Social work's responsibility to the non-human world. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 21*(3), 239–247.

PREPUBLICATION VERSION

Environmental ethics for social work: Social work's responsibility to the non-human world

Mel Gray[1] and John Coates[2]

Abstract

This article in this Special Issue begins discussion on an environmental ethics for social work and raises arguments as to whether and, if so, why social workers have duties, obligations, responsibilities and commitments to the non-human world. It provides an overview of the field of environmental ethics in searching for a moral stance to affirm an environmental social work. To what extent should social workers engage in fundamental geopolitical issues concerned with climate change, global warming, environmental degradation, pollution, chemical contamination, sustainable agriculture, disaster management, pet therapy, wilderness protection and so on and, if so, why and how? Are these issues incidental and peripheral and only of concern when they impact upon humans or do social workers have a responsibility beyond human interests? What is the significance of the 'non-human' for social work? The article explores the terrain of the burgeoning field of environmental ethics to determine whether convincing ethical grounds for environmental social work might be found beyond hortatory claims of what the profession ought to be doing to address environmental concerns.

---

[1] Research Institute for Social Inclusion and Wellbeing, The University of Newcastle, Australia

[2] Department of Social Work, St. Thomas University, New Brunswick, Canada

Published as Gray, M., & Coates, J. (2012). Environmental ethics for social work: Social work's responsibility to the non-human world. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 21*(3), 239–247.

> We have ears because we can listen attentively. And thanks to this we may hear the song of the Earth, its trembling and quivering that remains undisturbed by the huge tumult that man has, for the time being, organized on its exhausted surface. (Heigegger, in Haar, *The Song of the Earth*, 1993, p. vii*)*

Undergirding social work practice is the belief that human beings have value as morally responsible agents and are owed certain goods by society by virtue of their human dignity and worth. Social workers everywhere would not question the liberal humanistic value foundation of the profession and most would argue society does not fully meet the needs of all citizens, with some arguing that social structures are the cause of most social problems (Carniol, 2005; Mullaly, 2007). Most social workers are ever mindful of the lack of resources available to meet the needs of their clients and see their role as strongly loaded towards those who bear the brunt of society's inequalities and inequities. As with efforts toward social justice, environmental social work broadens these arguments by highlighting the extent to which the poorest and most marginalised populations are hardest hit by environmental fallout. Poverty remains one of the primary drivers of environmental degradation as impoverished people have the fewest options in industrially developed societies, and the very poor in the Global South cut down forests for firewood and agriculture, hunt game for food or over-farm the land leading to soil erosion and aridity, for example. At the other extreme, excessive consumption by the wealthy is a significant driver of environmental decline. Environmental social work sees a role for social workers in challenging local and national governments, and international organisations in enacting policies that not only serve to preserve habitat and species, but also to eliminate polluting and destructive practices carried out most frequently by, or on behalf of, large business ventures. But is this a social work's responsibility and, if so, why?

The need for environmental ethics

While environmental concerns and solutions are complex, it is becoming increasingly clear that such realities such as climate change, soil erosion, pollution and deforestation are affecting human health and well-being and, as the consequences of environmental devastation, social injustices fall disproportionately upon the most disadvantaged. These realities have raised serious challenges for social work. How can the social work profession, raised on liberal humanistic values, be convinced that the non-human world has value and social workers have a role to play, not only in protecting their fellow human beings from the negative consequences of environmental destruction, but also in protecting non-human life forms – plants, trees, rivers, landscapes and so on? On what supporting grounds do we maintain that non-human life – and the natural world more broadly – has necessary value and is morally owed respect and consideration?

By asking such questions, we enter the field of environmental ethics, which has gained increasing interest among diverse disciplines and professions beyond the obvious ones, such as philosophy and the natural, environmental and biological sciences, as well as economics, sociology, politics and law. But social work has come late to the party with a small hard core group of people promoting scholarship in the area of the natural environment, among them those contributing to this special issue (Besthorn, 2000, 2001, 2002abc; 2003ab; Coates, 2003ab, 2004, 2005; Zapf, 2009). This is a complicated area of scholarship because most environmental practitioners who happen to be social workers have found – or are finding – their home outside of social work and many are not familiar with, nor do they wish to write in the style of, professional peer-reviewed journals. They are activists. Their goal is to change the way society responds to the non-human world. They are passionate and committed in their belief that human actions are devastating the environment and that without coordinated human intervention the worst effects of climate change are unavoidable. Environmental activists care about endangered species and endangered forests. They are critical of big business – huge global conglomerates and developers with an eye to profits (and their government allies) rather than environmental protection, the triple bottom line notwithstanding. They are critical of, for example, the lack of green urban spaces and wish to protect what little there is left from further encroachment. They are trying to get people involved in a variety of areas, such as protecting wetlands and watersheds from development, preserving agricultural land, promoting community-supported agriculture and appreciating the value of gardening to offset the impact of poverty apart from the value of home-grown, chemical-free foods for healthy nutrition and physical well-being. They promote community gardens, market gardening and subsistence farming as poverty alleviation measures. They highlight the importance of environmental education to change people's thinking about the environment so it might be protected rather than destroyed. In addition, other areas of involvement aim to reduce energy consumption, polluting transportation and dependence on oil, and support international efforts to protect rain forests, challenge destructive mining practices, redistribute land and protect ground water. Hawken (2006, 2007) reports there are over one million organisations involved in environmental efforts.

Social work scholarship on the environment first emerged with Soine (1987) and was followed by Berger and Kelly (1993), Besthorn (1997), Hoff (1992, 1993, 1994), Hoff and Pollack (1993), and by Hoff and McNutt (1994) whose edited book was the first social work text to discuss a variety of social work interventions concerning environmental problems (see Besthorn in this issue for further discussion on this). Social work scholarship soon began to argue for a change in paradigm to embrace the non-human world by expanding notions of 'environment' in the person-in-environment configuration that had been largely associated with the *social* environment (Besthorn, 1997; Coates, 2003a; Norton, 2009; Zapf, 2009). An expanded ecosystems perspective remains the theoretical undergirding of this broadened view of the person-in-environment despite the fact it emerged within a humanistic, anthropocentric framework. If social work is to find a place in the environmental movement, its expanded person-in-environment perspective must find a way to overcome its embeddedness in modern, individualistic and anthropocentric thinking (see Norton in this issue for further discussion on this).

Curry (2006) draws a distinction between environmental and ecological ethics, favouring the latter. An environmental ethics focuses on the environment in much the same way as the person-in-environment focuses social work on the environment surrounding humans, but the environment in recent years has come to mean the biological processes and systems – ecosystems in social work – that sustain human life. By way of contrast, an ecological ethics holds that 'ethical questions can no longer be restricted to how to treat other human beings, or even animals, but must embrace the entire natural world' (p. 1). An ecological ethics holds that nature, which includes humanity, is the ultimate source of all value: 'take away the Earth … and all life forms … would vanish' (Curry, 2006, p. 2). Though not without its problems, ecological derives from the Greek word *oikos* which literally means home or household – and was first used by a German natural philosopher, Ernst Haeckel to describe 'the scientific study of the relationships among organisms and between them and their environments' (Curry, 2006, p. 4). Any subject or area of study that emphasises interrelationships is now often described as ecology, hence ecological social work. Curry (2006) uses the term to describe a metaphysical and or political philosophy centred on nature. While we think that Curry's rationale has merit, we use the term environmental ethics to denote a new terrain of ethics in social work, as the term ecology is already intrinsic to mainstream, generic social work practice that has been largely focused on the human and social environment. For us, environmental ethics captures the emphasis on the physical environment which writers within this area in social work – and those in this Special Issue – seek to capture in entreating social workers to broaden their conception of the person-in-environment as much more than a relationship between people and their social environments.

Environmental ethics and social work

Environmental ethics emerged in the 1970s 'when serious philosophical reflection about ethical issues raised by human action in the non-human natural world commenced' (Palmer, 2003, p. 15). Light and Ralston (2003) point out that ethics can help humans to argue why certain actions are right or wrong, however a major issue concerns how inclusive these moral considerations ought to be. Major arguments have included that humans are incapable of knowing independent of themselves (Norton, 2009), only sentient animals have value (Singer, 1975), only species that have subjective experience have value (Regan, 1984), through to views that non-human nature has value equal to that of the human (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Some of the debates revolve around individual vs. collective rights, anthropocentrism vs. ecocentrism, and the place of subjective experience. Light and Rolston (2003) argue that 'we need some way of morally regarding the welfare of those ecosystems either directly or indirectly' (p. 7).

Where the profession stands on environmental social work possibly hinges on how it understands the human relationship to the rest of nature and whether or not the non-human world has intrinsic or instrumental value. The intrinsic stance sees the natural world as good in and of itself while the instrumental view sees its value as derivative from human interests. From an instrumental point of view, the environment, therefore, must be protected to support human sustainability, so issues relating to food security, land protection, sustainable agricultural practices, action against global warming and pollution, aesthetic vistas and chemical-free foods are supported and valued because they are seen to support human well-being. From an instrumental perspective, environmental sustainability and related practices are said to be based on anthropocentric values. On the other hand, those who believe in the intrinsic value of the natural environment argue that valuing nature is not a matter of creating or projecting value, but rather of recognising that value is already present in the richness of nature. Environmental protection policies, habitat protection and endangered species legislation are enacted because of, at least in part, the value of animal and plant life. Clearly, the profession needs to walk a fine line between enlightened self-interest, which saves nature so humans can survive, and an ecocentric approach, which values nature for the sake of nature. Though the actions are often similar, the underlying philosophy differs as shown below. Importantly, according to Sterba (1995), to 'recognize something as having intrinsic value does not preclude destroying it to preserve other things that also have intrinsic value when there is good reason to do so' (p. 209). He cites three principles to reconcile different views: (i) self-defence against harmful aggression; (ii) human preservation (meeting basic human needs at expense of other species' basic needs); and (iii) disproportionality (meeting non-basic human needs – or luxury needs – is not permitted within an ecocentric perspective when they violate the basic needs of animals and plants).

Actions that are independent of considerations of human benefit go against the grain of the humanistic and liberal individualistic foundations of social work where values are seen not only as something owed to humans because of their dignity and worth, ability to reason and expectation that people take responsibility for their actions, but also because they are socially constructed and culturally specific. Especially in Indigenous cultures, collective or group rights might predominate over individual rights and interests (Gray, Coates & Yellow

Bird, 2008). In Western societies, human rights heavily informing codes of ethics, community and social policies and theoretical frameworks tend to focus on individual benefit. However, environmental issues have forced us to consider whether this line of thinking can also apply to animals and plants, for example. Should social work consider and incorporate into professional practice the use of plants, animals and ecosystems for therapeutic value? Should social work consider the impact of our actions on the plants, animals and ecosystems where we live and further afield? Why should social work become involved in environmental concerns at all? Is value something humans accord animals and do animals have intrinsic value? (Regan, 1984) Do animals have rights (Singer, 1975) or are they valued only because of their instrumental value for humans?

On the other hand, many poets, novelists and philosophers have sought to capture a sense of place, a feeling of home, the importance of landscape and the wonders of nature through lauding not only their aesthetic value but also their indispensability to human well-being (David Abram, 1997; Thomas Berry, 1988; Daniel Quinn, 1992; Henry David Thoreau, 1854). Scientists have confirmed the veracity of this, and psychologists and marketers as much as beauticians and massage therapists use the sounds and aromas of nature to induce impulse buying or relaxation, respectively. In this vein, much social work scholarship relating to the environment seems to argue for its instrumental value in offering humans a range of physical, aesthetic, and spiritual fulfilment. In fact, it has been extremely difficult to argue for social work to have a mandated or necessary role in environmental issues and problems without reference to human values and interests.

Another strand of social work engagement with environmental considerations is seen in the discourse on social development, which is closely aligned to social work and highlights the importance of *sustainable* development, that is, 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'

(World Commission on Environment and Development, WCED, 1987, p. 1). Sustainable development is a contested concept, however, and is heavily political for those who claim it is a particular approach to serve the needs of the poor and requires authoritative interventions at the structural level (Stavenhagen, 2003; see Peeters in this issue). However, most social workers are situated mainly within human social services where they offer psychosocial interventions for individuals, families and groups but, despite the profession's concern for different levels of practice, when it comes to 'community development, social planning and social policy within the framework of sustainable development' (Hessle, 2005, p. 16), they enter a highly politicised, multidisciplinary terrain where they are often in a minority and lack power. Sustainable development, like social work, essentially concerns forms of resource management to promote social justice and human well-being, with an eye to future generations. For Eckersley (1992), this would fall within the human welfare ecology perspective, where humans are concerned only for their own long-term benefit. However, looking more broadly than sustainable human development, should social work also take non-human interests into account? Should it be concerned about ecosystems, or species whose benefit to humans is unknown? Clearly 'debates over how nature is valued have profound significance for thinking about [social work work's role *vis a vis*] issues of poverty and sustainability' (Palmer, 2003, p. 26).

A new framework for environmental ethics

Such questions point to the way in which environmental ethics veer away from individualist deontological approaches common in social work. They do this through the notion of holism or wholeness or, put differently, through attention to ecological wholes. Thus, species exist in ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole constitutes the unit of attention. These holistic approaches tend to be consequentialist aiming at the good of the whole rather than particular

Published as Gray, M., & Coates, J. (2012). Environmental ethics for social work: Social work's responsibility to the non-human world. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 21*(3), 239–247.

individuals or human interests in isolation, as reflected in the philosophy of Aldo Leopold, which 'enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively, the land' (Palmer, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 24). We see such an approach as being consistent with what Thomas Berry (1999) refers to as 'The Great Work' of our time. Leopold extends human ethics to include the land in much the same way environmental social work scholars have extended the person-in-environment beyond the social to embrace the natural environment (Besthorn, 2002a; Zapf, 2009). The collective, communitarian ethics flowing from this broader focus approximates the values embraced by Indigenous social work (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006; Gray et al., 2008). However, the prospect of sacrificing human interests for the sake of broader environmental goals has been criticised as 'environmental fascism' (Regan, 2003) and is widely viewed as ethically unacceptable (Palmer, 2003). Rather than modernist dichotomies, a proportionist environmentalist approach is sought wherein ecosystems are seen as creative and life-sustaining and where the focus is the interconnected matrix – or interdependence between species – in terms of which life evolves and continues to develop. A new framework is sought that builds upon the various dominant ethical theories pertaining to the environment, including the following:

1. *Deep ecology*, based on the radical 'ecosophy' of Arne Naess (see Besthorn in this issue), emphasises the complex relatedness of all there is in an all-is-one and one-is-all frame grounded in the principle of 'biological equalitarianism'. This flies in the face of most modernist thinking around self-individualisation, self-realisation and self-identity and has been heavily criticised by Richard Sylvan (1986) who highlights the difficulties involved in an environmental ethics – held by many highly political radical environmental groups – built on this 'ecosophy'. Deep ecology replaces the ideology of economic growth with the ideology of interdependence and ecological sustainability. It begins with unity rather than dualism, the dominant assumption of Western thinking. At its heart sits an ecological

awareness of the fundamental interrelatedness of all things: 'In other words, the world simply is not divided up into independently existing subjects and objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between the human and non-human realms. Rather all entities are constituted by their relationships' (Fox, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 254). The cosmology of 'unbroken wholeness [which is the approach of quantum science] … denies the classical idea of the analyzability of the world into separately and independently existing parts' (David Bohm, cited by Fox, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 256).

2. *Ecofeminism* has its roots in the social change movements of the 1960s and 1970s and developed into a feminist approach to ecology and the environment in the 1980s. It establishes a connection between the twin oppressions of women and nature – or environment – highlighting the inextricable link between social and environmental change: 'It is not possible to address women's oppression without addressing environmental degradation' (Gaard & Gruen, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 277), because those most affected by environmental problems are women and children. It provides a relational rather than a mechanical view of nature and the interdependencies arising from relationships of care while rejecting the twin oppressions of women and nature. Ecofeminists reject the abstract, rational, universal approach to ethics and favour contextualism (non-universalism) and diversity (non-reductionism) allowing for 'felt sensitivity' (Warren, 1990) and recognition of difference. Most importantly, ecofeminism emphasises the importance of relationships and interdependencies between humans and the natural world. Critics question whether it makes sense to talk of 'caring' for non-living things (Warren, 1990) and there is some controversy over the place of spirituality in ecofeminist theory (Gaard & Gruen, in Light & Rolston, 2003). In short, ecofeminist theory is 'built on community-based knowing and valuing, and holds the strength of the knowledge is dependent on the inclusivity, flexibility, and reflexivity of the community in which it is generated' (Gaard & Gruen, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p.

287). It grows out of dialogue oriented towards reaching consensus, focusing on commonality, respecting difference and coalition-building with people struggling against oppression.

3. *Environmental pragmatism* concerns the search for practical solutions to environmental problems – an essentially political endeavour – reached through democratic, public conversations – in the Deweyan tradition – about social values relating to the environment (Palmer, 2003). It attempts 'to shift the field's mode of inquiry to a more practical conversation about the multiple values at play in specific matters of environmental policy' (Minteer & Manning, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 319). Like ecofeminism, it favours contextualism and could lead to conflicting environmental policies. It seeks to bypass the conventional groundings of ethics in epistemically oriented categories entertaining the possibility 'At the deepest level, non-anthropocentric environmental ethics may simply be impossible within the inherited [philosophical] framework of intrinsic values' (Weston, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 311). Instead, it argues for the intrinsic value of nature from a position grounded in the poetic tradition of sentience or feelings of attachment to nature: 'These feelings are essential starting points for a pragmatic defence of environmental values' (Weston, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 315) within the framework of a plurality of values, one of which is the value of nature. This system of values is tied to people's beliefs, but this does not make it anthropocentric or subjective for one can value humans without claiming only humans have value. Pragmatism insists on the *interrelatedness of values*, replacing the notion of fixed ends with 'a kind of "ecology" of values … [in the claim we] do not need to *ground* these values … but rather to situate them in their supporting contexts and to adjudicate their conflicts with others' (Weston, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 307, emphasis in original). As Weston notes, pragmatism does not seek knockdown arguments or value certainty. Rather it

accepts an inconclusiveness and open-endedness, not only in how values are attained, but also in how they are maintained, defended or changed:

> *We* learned the values of nature through experience and effort, through mistakes and mishaps, through poetry and stargazing, and, if we were lucky, a few inspired friends … we struggle for our own values without being closed to the values and hopes of others. The search for intrinsic values [then] substitutes a kind of shadowboxing for what must always be a good fight (Weston, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 317 emphasis in original).

4. *Social constructionism* views nature through a cultural lens. Its emphasis on cultural specificity leads to a relativistic view of environmental ethics. At the extreme, one might wonder whether nature really exists or whether it is merely a human construction so diverse interpretations and meanings are attributable to the same 'reality'. Is there a singular entity called nature or merely a diversity of contested natures (Soper, 1995). For social constructionists, nature or the environment is 'socially, culturally, and politically produced in a variety of human discourses and practices' (Palmer, 2003, p. 33). This creates problems for environmental ethicists concerned with nature conservation or environmental protection and weakens the political force of environmental movements which are fiercely principled and partisan.

For Leopold, the extension of the philosophical study of ethics to the environment is another process of ecological evolution: 'An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct' (in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 38). Central then to his 'land ethic' is the importance of community and the underlying notion: 'the individual is a member of a community of interdependant (sic) parts' (Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 39) balancing his or her competitive and cooperative instincts. This can and all too easily does reduce to a problem of economics which, without an ecological comprehension of the land sustaining the human community, leads to issues viewed through an economic rather than an ethical, ecological or aesthetic lens: Leopold refutes the notion that economics determines all landuse. 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 46). Even well-intentioned conservation efforts run aground when devoid of critical understanding of the aesthetic, ethical and ecological value of the land to the biotic community of which humans are merely a part.

Diverse views on environmental ethics

Broadly, then, environmental ethics concerns people's relations to the natural environment, to the land and the animals and plants which graze and grow upon it. The land is not merely something shared by the human community. It supports diverse life forms and all deserve the opportunity to thrive. Within an ecocentric ethics, it is important to counter human interference in nature rather than arrogantly assume that humanity knows best and should interfere with natural processes. For Sylvan (in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 47), rather than a 'new' ethic, Leopold's argument is an environmental ethic which merely extends ethics to 'moral shame' about wrongful interference with wilderness environments, mistreatment of the land, or harm to animals: If there were an environmental ethic, people who destroyed environmental habitats or were cruel to animals would be called to account for themselves 'morally'. Sylvan (in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 49) sees the dominant Western view as inconsistent with this ethic for, not only does it prevent 'man' from doing as he pleases, but it also takes a romantic view of the land and natural life as living in harmony, of humans living at one with nature, when nature itself can be harsh and violent where only the strong survive.

Published as Gray, M., & Coates, J. (2012). Environmental ethics for social work: Social work’s responsibility to the non-human world. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 21*(3), 239–247.

This critique is problematic. Leopold (1949) did not deny the violence in nature – we have hurricanes and snowstorms in which people and animals die. Problems occur when human intervention upsets the balance of nature to such an extent that human action interferes with evolutionary processes: ‘As the important Western traditions exclude an environmental ethic, it would appear that such an ethic, not primitive, mystical or romantic, would be new all right’ (Sylvan, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 49). Such a shift has myriad implications extending to restrictions on business, landuse and population control. Citing Barkley and Seckler (1972), Sylvan (in Light & Rolston, 2003) notes: ‘The liberal philosophy of the Western world holds that one should do what he (sic) wishes, providing (1) that he does not harm others [that is, other human beings] and (2) that he (sic) is not likely to harm himself (sic) irreparably’ (p. 49), referring to this principle as ‘basic (human) chauvinism’ putting humans first and endowing them with freedom restricted only by harm to other humans. Thus, an environmental ethic shifts the very foundations of modern ethics and ‘compels re-examination and modified analyses of …. *natural right, ground* of right, and of the relations of obligation and permissibility to rights’ (Barkley & Seckler, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 49 emphasis in original). However, Sylvan fails to appreciate that if humans took a long-term view of the impact of their actions, and were less anthropocentric, this liberal philosophy would have relevance for environmental ethics.

The environmental ethic extends this ‘harm’ principle to claim that when humans harm the environment they harm themselves. However, nonhumans – all living things – too bear the brunt of human interference with nature. Given the recent revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, it would be hard to get beyond an ethics grounded in ‘man’s’ flourishing and what is needed for human self-actualisation and well-being, but might ‘being the best we can be’ extend to kindness to animals and caring for the environment? Western Christian ethics – built on Aristotle and Aquinas and extended in Kantian thought – views animals via human considerations, but can it extend to duties and obligations to members of other species? Given that rights are contractual, how can they honour parties not capable of entering into binding agreements? Clearly, in terms of modern ethics, 'only actions affecting our own species have intrinsic moral significance' (Singer, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 59). Even if one were to establish that animals had rights, the field of animal ethics would be fraught with controversy over whether it were ever permissible for humans to kill – and eat – animals, or whether it were allowable to kill abundant species and control pestilent populations or whether such concerns should be limited to endangered species. Consistent with the human welfare perspective, Singer believes, as things stand, 'until better grounds are advanced, the only reason for being more concerned about the interests of animals from endangered species than about other animals are those which relate the preservation of species to benefits for humans and other animals' (in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 63).

As Regan (in Light & Rolston, 2003) points out, animal liberationists are against cruelty, and stand for animal welfare and protection, and for human compassion and responsibility toward animals and, one might add, in the same way as social workers promote human welfare. Their duty is to improve animal life, preserve habitat protection, oppose unnecessary use of animals in biomedical research experiments and oppose cruel practices such as hunting and trapping. The case of animal liberation, however, is not well-served by the utilitarianism of deep ecology with its focus on the whole rather than the parts it comprises. This implies, in a healthy ecosystem, individuals – whether they are humans, animals, or plants – are not the primary consideration; it is the diversity, sustainability, health and balance of the whole ecosystem that is of prime concern. In other words, it recognises the priority of the whole ecosystem over the needs of any one species, including the human. . In animal rights philosophy, as in social work, where the rights of individuals are primary and inviolate, the needs of an individual could take priority over the health of the ecosystem. This example brings to the fore 'the difficulties and implications of developing a rights-based environmental ethic … [including] reconciling the *individualistic* nature of moral rights with the more *holistic* view of nature emphasized by many of the leading environmental thinkers [including Leopold mentioned above]' (Regan, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 72 emphasis in original). For Regan, this position is tantamount to 'environmental fascism' and he thinks it can lead to the violation of the rights of individual members, all of whom – whether plants, animals or humans – have intrinsic value. In other words, there is no hierarchy of interests or rights, such as human rights overriding animal rights. Rights-based morality is absolutist in that it does not permit the violation of individual rights for the greater good of the biotic community. Rights-based morality is based on a Western dualistic foundation which is used to critique a philosophy that fundamentally opposes dualism. Hence Regan perceives reluctance on the part of environmentalists to take rights seriously and to respect the rights of individuals comprising the biotic community.

Perhaps most compatible with social work is the human-centred approach to environmental ethics which, unlike deep ecology, is not necessarily holist or organicist in its conceptions of the kinds of entities deemed appropriate objects of moral concern:

> Nor does such a system require that concepts of ecological homeostasis, equilibrium, and integrity provide us with normative principles from which could be derived (with the addition of factual knowledge) our obligations with regard to natural ecosystems. The balance of nature is not itself a moral norm, however important may be the role it plays in our general outlook on the natural world that underlies the attitude of respect for nature. I argue that finally it is the good (well-being, welfare) of individual organisms, considered as entities having inherent worth, that determines our moral relations with the Earth's world communities of life (Taylor, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 74).

Though criticised for its anthropocentricity, a human-centred approach holds only that humans can be said to have duties and obligations to the natural world and that these are good for human well-being. The life-centred model differs, however, in arguing *prima facie* moral obligations are owed to all members of the biotic community because they too should be helped to maintain a healthy existence in their natural state. The focus is the good of species and natural ecosystems as ends in themselves rather than as means to human ends, as in the human-centred view. All living things by this explanation have inherent worth, not just humans: 'Their well-being, as well as human well-being, is something to be realized *as an end in itself*'' (Taylor, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 75 emphasis in original). This is similar to the centrality of potentiality proposed by Albrecht (2001). Life-centred models such as this are all grounded in Aristotelian notions of flourishing wherein all living organisms have inbuilt capacities for successful coping given a receptive environment, and their existence is thus preserved through the stages of the 'normal' life cycle (as in Erikson's theory of human development familiar to social workers).

Taylor (in Light & Rolston, 2003) calls the attitude of respect for nature a biocentric – ecocentric – worldview informed by lessons from the science of ecology regarding 'the interdependence of all living things in an organically unified order whose balance and stability are necessary conditions for the realization of the good of its constituent biotic communities' (p. 75). It comprises three basic elements: (i) a belief system supporting an attitude of respect for nature; (ii) an attitude of respect for all living things as basic objects of moral concern; and (iii) an ethical system of duties and obligations tied to this moral attitude. The biocentric outlook holds: (i) humans and all other living things are equal members of Earth's community; (ii) the Earth's ecosystem as a totality is a complex web of interconnected and interdependent elements; (iii) each individual organism is a teleological centre of life driven to fulfil its own purpose; and (iv) the claim that humans are superior is groundless and merely the perpetuation of humans' irrational bias in their own favour. In this system, the laws of genetics and natural selection apply. Free of human intervention, a biocentric worldview promotes the idea 'ecosystems would return to their proper balance, suffering only the disruption of natural events such as volcanic eruption and glaciation' (Taylor, in Light & Rolston, 2003, p. 77). However, climate change advocates argue that human intervention has caused these natural disruptions, making corrective human intervention essential to restoring the balance of nature. Clearly from the discussion thus far, an environmental ethic is a complex balancing of different kinds of moral concerns for individuals, species and natural ecosystems and this balancing of concerns produces troubles for advocates of inviolate human and animal rights.

Despite the conclusion that the role human activity has played in exacerbating climate change is 'beyond a reasonable doubt' (Garnaut, 2011, p. 2) (see Lysack in this issue), for some, the whole environmental movement, and especially that surrounding global warming and climate change, is built on contestable science and, beyond an ethical concern, has become a political issue. As ever, ethics and politics present a complex terrain and opinions among social workers will differ widely on such matters. At this point, there are more questions than answers, not only because of matters relating to the science on environmental issues, but also because this is a relatively new area for social work and one in which a healthy debate is sure to ensue.

Conclusion: What falls within the ambit of social work?

In opening this discussion on an environmental ethics for social work, many questions emerge, among them:

1. Should biodiversity be an important issue for social workers and, if so, why?

2. Does pet therapy or the use of pets when intervening with clients constitute part of social work practice?
3. Should social workers be concerned with agriculture, particularly poor farming practices resulting in soil erosion rendering land no longer arable?
4. Should social workers be concerned about the chemical contamination of soil, water, food and so on and, if so, why?
5. Should social workers be involved in environmental restoration, for example, the restoration of the land following human use? Is the damage done to the environment fixable?
6. Should social workers be concerned about hunting, especially of species facing extinction (e.g., killing rhinos for their tusks) or about killing of any animals whatever the purpose?
7. Is sustainable development with its human-centred focus an important issue for social workers and should they be engaged in its promotion and, if so, how?
8. Should social workers be promoting the protection of untouched, pristine land or landscapes?

And the list continues. The articles in this Special Issue continue this discussion. Besthorn examines the continuing relevance of Naess' Deep Ecology for environmental social work. Lyzack examines a particular mode of environmental engagement. Miller et al. make a plea for environmental or ecological justice while Schmitz et al. explore synergistic relationships between social work and environmental practice. Norton, like Besthorn and others in this issue, appeals for a broader understanding of the environment beyond the social and Heinsch entreats us to value nature for its transformative potential.

The challenge for social work is whether its mandate to serve the needs of people, especially the poor and marginalised, will remain focused primarily on social issues or whether it will expand its framework to incorporate interventions and theoretical developments that act on threats to human well-being and arise from local and global, natural and human-influenced environmental changes, such as pollution, rise in sea levels, change in weather patterns and migration. Whether social work acts from an anthropocentric or ecocentric perspective, environmental destruction always has consequences. When threats are immanent, as in tsunamis or hurricanes or local pollution, the impacts are direct and substantial. However, the question remains to what extent and on what grounds social work will be involved in confronting environmental calamities that have a less-direct impact on humans, or which negatively impact other species and life forms in ways that may or may not be seen to have relevance for human well-being. Certainly, the contributors to this special issue would argue that social workers have a responsibility to the human and non-human worlds, but whether or not we collectively provide sufficient grounds to convince you, the reader, remains to be seen. IJSW would welcome opinion pieces on the matters raised and we do hope the discussion we have begun here will continue.

References

Abram, D. (1997). *The spell of the sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books

Albrecht, G. (2001). Applied ethics in human and ecosystem health: The potential of ethics and an ethic of potentiality. *Ecosystem Health, 7*(4), 243–252.

Barkley, P.W., & Seckler, D.W. (1972). *Economic growth and environmental decay*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich.

Berger, R., & Kelly, J. (1993). Social work in the ecological crisis. *Social Work, 38*, 521–526.

Berry, T. (1988). *Dream of the earth*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.

Berry, T. (1999). *The Great Work: Our way into the future***.** New York: Harmony/Bell Tower.

Besthorn, F. H. (1997). *Reconceptualizing social work's person-in-environment perspective: Explorations in radical environmental thought.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas.

Besthorn, F. H. (2000). Toward a Deep-Ecological Social Work: Its Environmental, Spiritual and Political Dimensions. *The Spirituality and Social Work Forum*, *7*(2): 2–7.

Besthorn, F. H. (2001). Transpersonal Psychology and Deep Ecological Philosophy: Exploring Linkages and Applications for Social Work. *Social Thought: Journal of Religion in the Social Services, 22*(1&2), 23–44.

Besthorn, F. H. (2002a). Natural Environment and the Practice of Psychotherapy. *Annals of the American Psychotherapy Association*, *5*(5), 19–22.

Besthorn, F. H. (2002b). Radical Environmentalism and the Ecological Self: Rethinking the Concept of Self-Identity for Social Work Practice. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *13*(1), 53–72.

Besthorn, F. H. (2002c). Is it Time for a New Ecological Approach to Social Work: What is the Environment Telling Us? *The Spirituality and Social Work Forum, 9*(1), 2–5.

Besthorn, F. H. (2003a). Environmental restoration and restorative justice. *Social Policy Times*, *3*(2): 21–27. Retrieved from http://www.rcssp.org/sptm1.htm

Besthorn, F. H. (2003b). Radical ecologisms: Insights for educating social workers in ecological activism and social justice. *Critical Social Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal Dedicated to Social Justice*, *3*(1), 66–106. Retrieved from http://www.criticalsocialwork.com/CSW_2003_1.html

Carniol, B. (2005). *Case critical: Social services and social justice in Canada* (5th ed.). Ontario, CA: Between the Lines.

Coates, J. (2003a). *Ecology and social work: Toward a new paradigm*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Books.

Coates, J. (2003b). Exploring the roots of the environmental crisis: Opportunity for social transformation. *Critical Social Work, 3*(1): 44–66.

Coates, J. (2004). From ecology to spirituality and social justice. *Currents: New Scholarship in the Human Services, 3*(1), unpaginated. Retrieved from http://www.ucalgary.ca/currents/files/currents/v3n1_coates.pdf

Coates, J. (2005). Environmental crisis: Implications for social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services, 16*(1): 25–49.

Coates, J., Gray, M., & Hetherington, T. (2006). An 'Ecospiritual' Perspective: Finally, a Place for Indigenous Approaches. *British Journal of Social Work, 36*(3): 381–399.

Curry, P. (2006). *Ecological ethics: An introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Devall, B., & Sessions, G. (1985). *Deep ecology: Living as if nature mattered.* Salt Lake City, UT: Peregrine Smith Publishing.

Eckersley, R. (1992). *Environmentalism and political theory: Toward an ecocentric approach*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Gaunaut, R. (2011). The Gaunaut climate change review: An update 2011. Retrieved from http://www.garnautreview.org.au/update-2011/garnaut-review-2011/summary-20June.pdf

Gray, M., Coates, J. & Yellow Bird, M. (Eds). (2008). *Indigenous Social Work around the World: Towards culturally relevant education and practice*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate.

Hawken, P. (2006). *How to stop our political and economic systems from stealing our future*. Retrieved from http://www.alternet.org/story/54920/paul_hawken%3A_how_to_stop_our_political_and_economic_systems_from_stealing_our_future

Hawken, P. (2007). *Blessed unrest: How the largest movement in the world came into being and no one saw it coming*. New York: Viking Press.

Hessle, S. (2005). Sustainable development and social work. In S. Hessle & D. Zavirsek (Eds.), *Sustainable development in social work: The case of a regional network in the Balkans* (pp. 11–25). Studies in international social work, No. 5, Department of Social Work, Stockholm University.

Hoff, M. D. (1992). *Integrating global environmental issues into the social work curriculum.* Paper presentation at the Annual Meeting of the International Association of Schools of Social Work, 1992 Conference, Washington, D.C.

Hoff, M. D. (1993). Social dimensions of the environmental crisis: Challenges for social work (with R. Polack). *Social Work*, *38*(2), 204–211.

Hoff, M. D. (1994). Environmental foundations of social welfare: Theoretical resources. In M. Hoff & McNutt, J. (Eds). *The global environmental crisis: Implications for social welfare and social work* (pp. 12–35). Brookfield, VT: Ashgate.

Hoff, M. D. & McNutt, J. G. (Eds). (1994). *The global environmental crisis: Implications for social welfare and social work*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers.

Hoff, M., & Pollack, R. (1993). Social dimensions of the environmental crisis: Challenges for social work. Social Work, *38*(2), 204–211.

Leopold, A. (1949). *A sand county almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Light, A., & Rolston, H. (2003). *Environmental ethics: An anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Published as Gray, M., & Coates, J. (2012). Environmental ethics for social work: Social work's responsibility to the non-human world. *International Journal of Social Welfare, 21*(3), 239–247.

Mullaly, B. (2007). *Structural social work: Ideology, theory and practice (*3rd ed.). Ontario: Oxford University Press.

Norton, C.L. (2009). Ecopsychology and social work: Creating an interdisciplinary framework for redefining person-in-environment. *Ecopsychology*, *1*(3), 138–145.

Palmer, C. (2003). An overview of environmental ethics. In A. Light & H. Rolston III (Eds.), *Environmental ethics: An anthology* (pp. 15–37). Oxford: Blackwell.

Quinn, D. (1992). *Ishmael: An adventure of the mind and spirit*. New York: Bantam/Turner.

Regan, T. (1984). *The case for animal rights*. London: Routledge.

Regan, T. (2003). *Animal rights, human wrongs: An introduction to moral philosophy*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Singer, P. (1975). *Animal liberation*. St Albinos: Paladin.

Soper, K. (1995). *What is nature?* Oxford: Blackwell.

Stavenhagen, R. (2003). *Needs, rights and social development*. UNRISD Overarching Concerns Paper No 2. Geneva: UNRISD.

Sterba, J. (1995). Reconciling Anthropocentric and nonanthropocentric environmental ethics. In J. Sterba (Ed.), *Earth Ethics: Environmental ethics, animal rights and practical applications.* (pp. 199–213). Englewood Cliffs, CA: Prentice-Hall.

Sylvan, R. (1986). A critique of deep ecology. *Radical Philosophy*, *40*: 2–12; and *41*: 10–22.

Thoreau, H. D. (1854). *Walden; or, Life in the woods.* Boston: Ticknor and Fields.

Warren, K. (1990). The power and promise of ecological feminism. *Environmental Ethics*, *12*, 125–146.

World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). (1987). *The concept of sustainable development.* Retrieved on 4 May 2011 from www.eucluster.net/files/definition_01.doc?fileid=106

Zapf, M. K. (2009). *Social work and the environment: Understanding people and place*. Toronto, Canada: Canadian Scholars’ Press.