

Review

The need for anthropocentric approaches vis-à-vis ecocentric views in conservation of global renewable resources

Ben Belden Mugula

Department of Science Education, Bugema University, P.O.Box 6529, Kampala, Uganda.
E-mail: bbelden2002@yahoo.com. Tel:+256-774 210487; Website: www.bugemauniv.ac.ug

Received 25 September, 2012; Accepted 16 February, 2013

This paper is based on review of literature to describe the need for emphasizing more anthropocentric approaches vis-à-vis Eco-centric views for rational and supportive conservation of global renewable natural resources. The broader context, significance and associated setbacks of both perspectives and their contribution towards conservation of natural resources are initially explained. Secondly, reasonable perceptions are examined basing on their validity, ease of communication, simplicity, and multi-stakeholder acceptance in conservation. Finally, anthropocentric approaches are proposed as inevitable to guide discussions for developing planning and policy models for conservation of global renewable resources.

Key words: Anthropocentrism, eco-centrism, natural resources, multi-stakeholder conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding Anthropocentrism and Eco-centrism in Conservation

The term “anthropocentric” was first coined in the 1980s amidst the controversy over Darwin’s theory of evolution. The theory puts humankind at the center of the universe, (Kortekamp and Moore, 1983). The inconsistency to this idea is the ecological argument that humans are also members of the biotic community of the universe, and so all other living things are (Taylor, 1981). This implies that, all species including humans are integral parts of a system of interdependence. Most crucial is the belief that humans are not inherently superior to other living beings: we do not have good reasons to believe that humans are better than other beings. To this end, anthropocentrism openly means human-centered, and its philosophical form suggests that humans alone possess intrinsic value (Goralnik and Nelson, 2012). The same argument is underscored by a belief that whatever surrounds humankind in the universe is beneficial to his survival, and the humans can measure any given thing’s importance and value (Szybel, 2000). Because, humans inherently attach great importance to natural resources,

this could explain why science and other means should be use to help mankind sustainably use natural resources (Bourdeau (2003). Similarly, Karpiak and Baril (2008) emphasised the value of natural resources to mankind by considering anthropocentrism as a belief that nature is important and central to human wellbeing. Besides, Karpiak and Baril (2008) defined Ecocentrism as the belief in the intrinsic importance of nature. Eco-centrism, values elements of the natural world as ends in themselves (Goralnik, 2012). In contrast, it also presents itself as the opposite of anthropocentrism, but on closer examination it appears to be an extreme form of anthropocentrism itself, (Drenthen, (2011). The eco-centric way of thinking is mainly based on the humanistic way of assigning a significance (that is independent of human interests), to specific human categories. The obstacle to this perspective lies in the difficulty to explain why the human tendency and how it can be used objectively to judge things as superior or inferior, and how non-human meaning could arise out of this judgment. The difficulty in explaining the said obstacles renders the eco-centric view of positioning man (as superior or inferior) in any scientific and objective

perspective as meaningless. In this case, it is important to critically examine those elements that may justify humankind to be more “superior” and expected to act prudently in conserving natural resources. The word superior is not used to imply ‘selfishness’ in looking at non human species (renewable natural resources), but to mean a higher level of responsibility in acting objectively towards natural resources. However, conceiving nature as a network of interdependent living beings of which we are part, this provides us with a context out of which we can understand ourselves and articulate a vision of what our life is about (Drenthen, 2011). Eco-centric approaches consider biodiversity to have an intrinsic value which is worth protecting, regardless of its use to humankind. The argument targets conservation of all species, even though are ecologically comparable species (Reid and Miller (1989). Though this approach has several shortcomings, it could be used as another strategy for protecting ecological services derived from renewable natural resources. However, this goal can hardly be achieved without inclusion of anthropocentric approaches.

The role of anthropocentric approaches in conservation

Anthropocentrism holds that natural resources should be conserved and given moral consideration because its degradation or conservation can in turn harm or benefit humans. For example, it would be considered wrong to cut down rainforests because they contain potential cures for human diseases (Kortekamp and Moore, 2002). This benefit is explicit to human kind and can easily be appreciated rather than one reasoning that cutting rainforests is wrong because it leads to extinction of species. The latter statement reflects an eco-centric perspective and does not sound explicit. Besides, Environmental ethicists also seem to support an anthropocentric basis for conservation when they argue that humans need to protect renewable natural resources because they are the major cause of their loss particularly through habitat loss, overexploitation and other disturbances (Reid and Miller (1989). While intrinsic arguments for protection of biodiversity are compelling, it is ultimately arguments of human benefit that realistic conservationists find most appealing: for instance; as humans, we are wholly dependent on diversity of living things for survival. The renewable resources include; genetic diversity, species, populations, communities and ecosystems, and landscapes which provide numerous benefits to humankind. Some of these benefits include; Economic

benefits, (direct and indirect); aesthetic benefits; and scientific knowledge.

However, beyond anthropocentric values for renewable resources, there are emotional, spiritual and religious justifications that prevail. This is not because mankind does not properly understand values for renewable resources, but even their isolation from nature leads to deliberate or accidental artificial mimicking of the natural world as a fundamental and inevitable need “biophilia” (Reid, and Miller, (1989).

Inevitability of anthropocentric approaches in conservation

It has been argued that anthropocentrism is unavoidable for conservationists who wish to articulate ethical perspectives on the world. Additionally, not all anthropocentric approaches are problematic. The current ‘humanistic anthropocentrism’, which argue that non-human entities can have value if they are only valuable (useful or pleasant) for humans is seen to have selfish tendencies (Drenthen, 2012). However, such tendencies are baseless because all non-human species have potential to be useful either at the moment or some moment in future. In addition, it is argued that anthropocentric approaches can reduce intellectual friction between “nature protectionists” and social conservationists” since eco-centric emphasis on “intrinsic value” seem to be confusing (Miller, Minter, and Malan 2011; Torkar, and McGregor, 2012). It is further argued that “intrinsic” value perspective of eco-centrism cannot guide the decision making required by rational conservation especially in a multi-stakeholder context and on a global scale (Justus, Colyvan, Regan, and Maguire, 2009), due to the much confusion associated with what intrinsic value is and how it could govern decision making in conservation. Similarly, many conservation biologists believe that the best ethical basis for conserving natural resources is their claimed intrinsic value which is directly or indirectly linked to human wellbeing.

Even other widely popularized and desirable approaches to conservation such as “The participatory approach”; “integrated conservation and development programs” and “collaborative forest management” are majorly based on anthropocentric values and approaches (Fagerström, Messing, and Wen 2003; Ericson (2006). These anthropocentric based programs have been used widely on a global scale to engage local people, in sustainable management of renewable natural resources, fostering local capacity, and support for land-use planning and conservation programs (Ericson

(2006). Although Bayram (2012) doubted the capability of anthropocentrism in producing long-term, real solutions to deal with environmental problems, due to its tendency to favor humans over nonhumans. However, the same argument was contradicted by saying accepting that "Human beings are prone to protect what they consider as intrinsically valuable" (Bayram (2012). In the same vein, Szybel (2000), made an attempt to disprove such claims. He stated that anthropocentrism requires an impartial respect for what is good for human beings and this result in many unselfish acts. If humans view natural resources as a source of benefits to them, it is then likely that their destructive actions towards those resources will be minimized. In such situations where destruction to natural resources is inevitable, they will attempt to restore it back to its normal state by using available knowledge, science and other means or skills (Bourdeau (2003).

DISCUSSION

Though other reasons such as "intrinsic value, "revenge for human destructive actions", (Reid, and Miller; 1989; Karpiak and Baril (2008); Goralnik, (2012), exist to justify why man should conserve natural resources, they seem not convincing to mankind particularly in a multi-stakeholder context and on a global scale. The explicit reason remains that natural resources provide direct and indirect benefits to mankind and thus deserves to be conserved. These benefits are fundamental to the existence of present and future human life. This calls for prudent actions towards natural resources so as to share the accruing benefits with our children and future humankind. In addition, the way natural resources are treated affects humans too, Koch (1992), and that is why humans have to be objective in their actions towards natural resources. (Alan and Kate, (2001) also argued that biological systems are important to human beings because the viability of social and economic human systems depends upon the resilience of such systems. This further emphasizes the fact that all biological systems have a more direct influence on the human wellbeing, and this forms a basis for their protection by humankind.

In 2003, Bourdeau argued that humankind should protect the environment with a view that it provides direct and indirect benefits. These benefits may not only be material needs for survival and well being but also amenities and aesthetic satisfaction. This requires recognizing even indirect functional services from natural resources to all humans including future generations. However, one may ask why humankind is concerned

about the future human life and not only concentrating on the present generation. Alan and Kate, (2001) clarified that present generation should have an interest in future generation which implies a duty of care for all humankind. The fact that we love our children, we should therefore conserve natural resources 'today' with a view of leaving as many options for the future generations. This helps us to exercise justice, love and care for those who will be loved by our children and so forth. Furthermore, it serves to ensure continuation of benefits for human life from renewable resources if we act prudently by practicing justice and a duty of care for future humans. In such a situation it is baseless to perceive anthropocentrism as a promoter of human selfishness but a promoter of natural resource conservation because it recognizes its significant contribution to the human wellbeing. If we need to maintain benefits from natural resources, we should also desist from subjective questions such as those questions posed by Bourdeau (2003), about future humans like; how many generations to be taken into account, whether they have moral standing even though they do not yet exist, who represents their interests, and whether there is an implicit social contract between past and future generations. Such questions may serve to imply that present humans are selfish, without justice and love for their children.

CONCLUSION

The need for a better model and approach for acceptable conservation in a multi-stakeholder context for a convergence of values was suggested (Miller, Minter, and Malan 2011). This paper describes a suitable approach for promoting rational conservation of renewable resources in a multi-stakeholder context and global scale. This is crucial because eco-centric views such as 'intrinsic' value of global renewable resources may be logical, but largely abstract to humankind mostly in a multi-stakeholder framework. Additionally, continuous reliance on such "abstract" and non-simplistic approaches could lead to more irresponsible and adverse actions by humans towards our precious renewable natural resources. The more anthropocentric based approaches are more explicit and capable of gaining wider audience to support long-term conservation of natural resources in a multi-stakeholder framework. I therefore propose more emphasis to anthropocentric approaches vis-à-vis eco-centric approaches as best suitable to guide discussions for developing planning and policy models for conservation of global renewable resources.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the Department of Science Education, Bugema University, Uganda, for providing logistical support towards this manuscript. Dr. Bauke de Vries is acknowledged for his technical advice during the writing of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Alan H, Kate R (2001). The Ethics of conservation: The Thing mount Working paper series on the philosophy of Conservation; Report of Country council for Wales, Lancaster University.
- Bayram, (2012), On the Role of Intrinsic Value in Terms of Environmental Education, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 47. Pp. 1087–1091
- Bourdeau PH (2003). The man-natural resource relationship and environmental ethics. *J. Environ. Radioact.*
- Christie PK, Galen L Baril (2008). Moral reasoning and concern for the environment. *J. Environ. Psychol.* Vol. 28 (3) pp. 203-208
- Drenthen Martin (2011). Ecocentrism as Anthropocentrism. *J. Ethics, Policy Environ.* Vol. 4. (2). 2011, 151-154
- Ericson JA (2006). A participatory approach to conservation in the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, Campeche, Mexico, *Landscape and Urban Planning*. Vol. 74 (3–4). Pp. 242-266
- Fagerström MH Hoang, Messing I, Wen ZM (2003). A participatory approach for integrated conservation planning in a small catchment in Loess Plateau, China: Part I; Approach and Methods, *CATENA*. Vol. 54 (1–2). Pp. 255-269
- Goralnik L, Nelson MP (2012). Anthropocentrism. *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* (2nd Ed.), 2012, pp. 145-155
- Gregor Torkar, Sue LT McGregor (2012). Reframing the conception of nature conservation management by transdisciplinary methodology: From stakeholders to stake sharers. *J. Nature Conserv.* Vol. 20 (2). Pp. 65-71
- James Justus, Mark Colyvan, Helen Regan, Lynn Maguire (2009). Buying into conservation: intrinsic versus instrumental value, *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*. Vol. 24 (4) . pp. 187-191
- Kennedy J, Koch j, Elers N (2004). Viewing and managing natural resource as human-ecosystem Relationships: *J. for. Policy Econ.*
- Koch, Carl (1992) In search for a Land ethic, Woodrow Wilson Biology Institute, Available online at: http://www.woodrow.org/teachers/bi/1992/land_ethics.html
- Kortekamp KV, Moore Collen F (2002) Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism: Moral Reasoning about Ecological Commons Dilemmas. *J. Environ. Psychol.* Vol. 21 (3). 2001. pp. 261-272
- Martin Drenthen (2011). Ecocentrism as anthropocentrism, *Ethics, Policy and Environment*. Vol. 14 (2). pp.151–154
- Per Ariansen (1998). Anthropocentrism with a human face, *Ecological Economics*. Vol. 24, (2–3). 1998, pp. 153-162
- Pluhar Evelyne B (2002), Non-obligatory Anthropocentrism. *J. Agric. Environ. Ethics*, 13: 329-335.
- Taylor, P. (1981). The Ethics of Respect for Nature, *Environmental Ethics* 5, 197–218.
- Reid WV, Miller KR (1989). Keeping Options Alive: The Scientific Basis for Conserving Biological Diversity. World Resources Institute, Washington DC.Selma Aydin
- Thaddeus RM, Ben AM, Leon-C M (2011). The new conservation debate: The view from practical ethics, *Biological Conservation* Vol. 144 (3). Pp. 948-957
- Szybel David (2000). Taking humanism seriously: “Obligatory” Anthropocentrism. *J Agric Environ Ethics*. 181, 182-190