
Diversity Deep and Wild

Like so many of his writings, David Orr's "Diversity" compels us to reexamine its topic in a broader and deeper context. Were I to try to compose a Cliff Notes version of the essay, it would go something like this: We purport to value diversity throughout our society—in education, in culture, and, not least, in conservation biology. Yet we really do not understand what diversity is or honor it in some essential ways. The reason, Orr tells us, is that "the effort to preserve differences runs counter to a deeper taboo." This taboo is the direct and inevitable outgrowth of some of the very cultural forces that pretend to value diversity—in particular, the needs of capitalism and the nation-state to exert control over people, institutions, and wild nature. And there's the rub, for "the logic of human control and mastery as now conceived and practiced runs counter to the 3.8 billion years of evolution . . ." The multiple and nonlinear paths of evolution, Orr reminds us, reflect unpredictability and wild creativity, not convenience and control.

I concur thoroughly with Orr's central thesis, that we have constructed our valuing of diversity on a shaky understanding of it and that huge cultural forces are arrayed against all expressions of diversity, biological and human alike. Within this agreement, I extend two ideas a bit further. First, although Orr correctly links the madness for control with the modern world view, the willingness to trade diversity for control is wedged much further back in the human psyche. Second, diversity is but a subset of an even larger, less understood, and arguably more essential quality—wildness. Our close focus on the notion of diversity may, in fact, obscure our

longer-range vision of what we should value.

Attacking diversity has been a mainstay of most dominant human civilizations. We could select from countless examples: diversity suffered at the birth of agriculture a decamillennium ago, during the inexorable expansion of the Roman Empire, and during the anti-intellectual reign of the medieval church. When foraging and hunting yielded to growing crops and domesticating animals as the primary means of food acquisition, several key aspects of the human relationship with more-than-human nature began to change dramatically. People interacted with and ingested only a fraction of the species their ancestors did, and these relationships were fundamentally altered: simplification, control, and repetitive tasks supplanted full bodily and sensory immersion in wild diversity (Shepard 1998).

Prior to agriculture—which is to say, for most of human existence—people lived with a much more dynamic sense of diversity: the boundary between human and animal consciousness was much more fluid, and forms interchanged freely. People could walk as Coyote or fly as Raven, while Bear might take a human wife (Snyder 1990). Luckert (1975) referred to this as a state of "prehuman flux." Human awareness of biodiversity was more personal and more diverse. People sought wisdom, understanding, and healing along diverse paths, as shamans conversed directly with the realm of the sacred through highly personalized, idiosyncratic methods (Campbell 1983; Whitley 2000). By its very nature, shamanistic behavior could not be homogenized.

Even so, a sense of "enchantment"—an animated sense of interwoven con-

sciousness, riven with meaning—continued to permeate the human relationship with nature through Greek, Roman, and medieval times (Berman 1981). The net effect of the Scientific Revolution—the "definitive contribution" to the modern world view (Tarnas 1991)—was a disenchantment of the world (Berman 1981). Personal attempts to participate in and identify with one's landscape, once the norm, were systematically devalued. Thus, the ascendance of the modern scientific mind during the latter portion of the Renaissance suppressed the diversity of human interactions with landscapes and ecological complexities.

In the twentieth century a science emerged with the explicit intention of valuing, understanding, and maintaining biological diversity. But conservation biology sprang forth from a scientific tradition that has fostered the very problems it seeks to resolve—a myopic methodology that disregards the validity of many (most?) paths toward human knowledge and that for 300 years has concentrated much of its brilliant spotlight on devising ways to control diversity, not harbor it. One question, then, emerges from David Orr's article: Is the scientific root of conservation biology firm enough to once again honor the diversity inherent in the human psyche? Within the Society for Conservation Biology, long arguments about the proper role of a conservation biologist—as advocate or scientific researcher—belie a dangerous mistrust of such diversity.

And yet diversity is but one thread of something larger and more fundamental: wildness. Wildness by its very nature lies beyond definition and control. A few of the better attempts underline the challenge. Snyder (1990)

called it “the process and essence of nature . . . shifting scales, it is everywhere.” Evernden (1992) lyrically declared that endangered mammals are “made of” wildness before they are made of tissue and protein. Sanders (1998) described wildness as “beyond our will” and pointed out that it plays the role of both creator and destroyer. Grumbine (1994) clarified that wildness in humans involved interaction between self-regulating body and unconscious mind in constant contact with environment. Difficult to define, yes. But that does not mean we should disregard it. An insistence on limiting concern to measurable phenomena leads to a distorted picture of reality, a part of “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (Daly & Cobb 1994).

“Do we really want diversity?” Noss (1987) asked us in a different context, pointing out how easily the concept can be manipulated for exploitative ends. Yes, we want native diversity, at a variety of scales. But are we overly fixated on diversity? I suggest that to some extent we are. When I travel from the central high-

lands of Arizona to south-central Alaska, by virtually any metric I move along a transect of decreasing biodiversity. Yet wildness as represented by Alaska—geologically fresh landscapes, enormous in scale, harboring fierce animals—certainly should not be ignored by conservation biologists because of low diversity. We may not be able to invent measures to account for its meaning, yet wild nature inspires all our work on its behalf. We may need to pay heed to older, more diverse strands of our shared ecopsychological history to find rationales for valuing that which we can barely describe. Conservation biology has made an important contribution by provoking society to pay attention to biological diversity. To succeed in protecting it, though, we need to understand diversity more fully, including its limitations as a conservation strategy and our cultural inhibitions about valuing it.

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