Environmental Attitudes Through Time

Our attitudes to our environment are widely and often acrimoniously discussed, commonly misunderstood, and will shape our future. We cannot assume that we behave as newly minted beings in a pristine garden nor as pre-programmed automata incapable of rational responsibility.

Professor Berry has been involved with many national and international decision-making bodies that have influenced our environmental attitudes. He is therefore well-placed to describe what has moulded our present attitudes towards the environment. This book presents data and concepts from a range of disciplines – genetics, anthropology, sociology, history and theology – to help us understand past responses and how these affect our future. With a historical overview and a discussion of the current situation, this book informs decisions that will have profound impacts on all of us both today and in the years to come.

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Preface

This book is not a straightforward account of how our attitudes to the environment have changed through history, although history comes into it because the changes described herein have necessarily occurred in time. Neither is it yet another lament about the environmental damage that is accumulating round us, despite Panglossian deniers attempting to persuade us that all is well. Rather, it is a review of our response to the factors which have shaped us since the time when we became fully human five million years or so ago. Perhaps the best way to regard it is as an annotated chronicle – perhaps idiosyncratic but I hope reasonably objective – of the challenges from the environment as seen by one person (me) embedded within a clamour of fellow-travellers and dissenters. In some ways it is like John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in describing landmarks on a journey, but that parallel fails because this particular journey does not have an obvious goal, unlike Bunyan’s pilgrim. Nor is it a journey where it is better to travel than to arrive, because of the impending avalanche dangers that line it. Furthermore, it has proved impossible to follow single-mindedly a definitive route, and it has often been necessary to explore (as it were) the scenery around the path. It would be good to think that this would lead to a clear conclusion, but I am only too aware that the end-result is messy and has many loose ends. I have no doubt that I will be condemned for omissions which some will regard as significant or even essential. There are many other topics I might have included, but this is a travelogue, not a textbook. The best I can do is to hope that there will be general agreement about the overall direction of travel and the adjustments we have had to make in the past, and that this will help towards an awareness of the challenges of the present.
My involvement with the issues described in this book date back nearly half a century when growing awareness of the environment, particularly its newly recognized importance following the European Environmental Year in 1970 and the imminent United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (1972), prompted a publisher to invite me to write a short book about environmental ethics – a task which I interpreted somewhat liberally as going well beyond a branch of academic philosophy (which it is) but more radically as exploring the no-man’s land where philosophy, psychology, politics, history and management economics converge. I found myself pitch-forked into a world where science met ethics and both met action (and inaction). As happens on such occasions, I became an instant expert on the subject. I was appointed rapporteur to the Ethics Group of the UK Response to the World Conservation Strategy. This led to me serving as a member of the Ethics Working Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and taking part in discussions with the International Environmental Law Commission as they prepared a Covenant on Environment and Development for the United Nations. I was one of the three UK representatives to an Economic Nations Summit Conference on Environmental Ethics¹ and was involved in a series of consultations on ‘a Christian Attitude to the Environment’ convened by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh at St George’s House, Windsor (a follow-up to the Assisi Declarations of the World Wide Fund for Nature, p. 209).² I have been privileged to serve as President of the British Ecological Society and of the European Ecological Federation, and have mixed with some of the world’s leading environmentalists. I gave a series of Gifford Lectures in 1997–8 (published as God’s Book of


Do these experiences merit a book? Emphatically not if the intention is mere autobiography. My intention is to use my particular involvement to illustrate the general situation. This book will only be worthwhile if it helps us to understand the complicated interactions of biology, sociology and morality which make us what we are and enable us better to respond to environmental challenges – which have been the subject of many committees and conferences, whose proceedings rarely make exciting reading. I cannot promise that the answers are simple. US lawyer and Yale Professor Gus Speth is on record as saying ‘I used to think that the top global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy.’ We ignore this complexity at our peril. Our genes record past battles to survive in many environments but they (which means we) are also part of a contemporary and often unpredictable world, however much we would like to believe that we are autonomous units and can live entirely apart from our surroundings. The story recounted in the following pages is about this complexity: sometimes we can decide our own fate, but increasingly we are at the mercy of forces beyond our control and dependent on the actions of governments and corporations. This takes us ever further away from personal decision making to the often dry and seemingly dull and distant controls of national and international bodies. Notwithstanding, we are still faced with having to make decisions about our use of technology and our dependence on vested interests, however much we may fear (or
perhaps welcome) being replaced by servant robots. Unpicking the reasons behind these decisions is what this book is about.

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I have not consciously plagiarized anyone, but I must acknowledge a number of authors who I have found particularly helpful and have drawn upon:


Some of the more immediate references and links are listed in footnotes. Most of these can be ignored, but I include them to confirm particular assertions or to make acknowledgement where due. Otherwise ‘further reading’ is listed at the end of each chapter. I have not attempted to source all my statements, but I hope I have provided enough information for anyone interested to dig as deep as they want.