

# The Twin Myths of Environmentalism: A Southern Response<sup>1</sup>

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*"Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our Children."*

*Ancient American-Indian Proverb*

*Every mammal on this planet instinctively develops a natural equilibrium with its surrounding environment, but you humans do not. You move to an area and you multiply, and multiply until every natural resource is consumed. The only way you can survive is to spread to another area. There is another organism on this planet that follows the same pattern. Do you know what it is? A virus. Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet.*

*Agent Smith, from "The Matrix"*

## **Summary**

Industrial capitalism has profoundly altered the global landscape in the past two hundred years. In the process it has also altered, perhaps even more profoundly, the human mental landscape. Our views on the human relationship to the Earth have departed from the Indian proverb quoted above and come increasingly to resemble Agent Smith's dismal diagnosis. Further, faced with the obvious correlation between material prosperity and accompanying ecological degradation a general conclusion has been reached that social goals, of the radical or the reformist variety (poverty reduction or socialist revolution), are in direct conflict with environmental goals.

In this essay I seek to question two fundamental views that have dominated mainstream environmental thinking in the West, since its inception<sup>2</sup>; one that "nature" needs to be protected from "man", and two that socioeconomic struggles and ends are distinct from, perhaps even contradictory to, ecological ones. A implication of the first view is that the human impact on the non-human environment is largely or solely

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for a class on the "Political Economy of the Environment" taught by Prof. James Boyce.

<sup>2</sup> In using the word "mainstream" I have in mind two dominant strands of environmentalism described by Guha (2000) viz. "back to the land" movements and the conservation/preservation movement. And I seek to exclude more "radical" strands such as deep ecology and environmental justice.

negative and an implication of the second view is that poor people, or those residing in the Global South, are less "environmentally conscious" or are more destructive of their environments, than the rich or those living in the Global North. Using an "Environmentalism of the Poor" approach, I will try to show that both these dominant myths and the implied conclusions arise from common roots in the colonial/industrial capitalist experience.

In Part I, I begin with a brief consideration of the man-nature relationship as reflected in capitalist natural relations.<sup>3</sup> Next I attempt to show the connections between the "protectionist" view in environmentalism and the colonial experience of Africa and India. As an alternative to the "Agent Smith" view, quoted above, I discuss some examples of the positive impact of humans upon their non-human environment. In Part II I take up the issue of the purported conflict between social and ecological goals of humanity and examine some examples that transcend this conflictual view.

### ***Part One- Humanity: Cancerous Growth or Keystone Species?***

#### The protectionist view in the context of industrial capitalism and colonialism

We begin with the question, why do we find ourselves agreeing with Agent Smith? Why do we think nature needs to be protected from humans? Seeing the human impact upon the environment in exclusively negative terms, as evidenced by terms such as "the ecological footprint" has been the tendency of Northern environmentalism. Born in the midst of the degradation spawned by industrial capitalism, this movement has

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term "capitalist natural relations" as a deliberate analogy to Marx's concept of capitalist social relations. The latter refers to the specific form that relations between humans take under the imperative of boundless capital accumulation. The former refers to the form that relations between humans and nature take under the same imperative.

conceptualized the link between humans and nature as an inherently conflictual one. Lewis Mumford puts it thus, "Originating the spectacle of waste and defilement, the conservation movement has tended to have a negative impact: it has sought to isolate wilderness from encroachment (quoted in Guha 2000, p.62). While the relationship does tend to be conflictual in modern capitalism, this is by no means the only possible relation between humans and nature.

What makes capitalist natural relations inherently damaging to the environment? A lot has been said about the incessant accumulationist logic of capitalism and the resulting misuse and overuse of the earth's resources. Even within the relatively conservative discipline of economics, ecological economists have pointed to the absurdity of infinite growth in a finite world (see for e.g. Herman Daly's work). As Thomas Princen notes, "for a business firm the ideal economy is a frontier economy" (Princen 2002, p.104), an economy in which ecological resources and sinks have infinite regenerative capacity. This means that all environmental costs can be externalized thereby maximizing profits and achieving greater cost effectiveness. Neoclassical economics rewards such destructive behavior by calling it economically efficient.<sup>4</sup> The colonial economy was, in many ways a frontier economy. Enduring ideas of the efficiency of industrial production (in agriculture and elsewhere) over other forms of production were first formulated in the period of this frontier economy. Industrial production appeared efficient because the full costs had been rendered invisible ("distanced" and "shaded" in Princen's terms).

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<sup>4</sup> A production process is economically *inefficient* if the same amount of output can be produced by paying less for one input.

European colonialism profoundly changed the ecology of large parts of the world. Further, as Gadgil and Guha (1992) note, not only were the social, ecological and demographic characteristics of the colonized land changed as a result of colonialism, but the changes were such that they primarily benefited Europe (predominantly European capitalists, with some benefits trickling down to the rest of society) This ecological remaking of the world for European benefit has been termed "ecological imperialism" by Alfred Crosby (Crosby 1986). Kenneth Pomeranz (2000) has made some estimates of "ecological relief" afforded to western Europe through its colonial possessions. For Britain, for example, raising enough sheep to replace cotton yarn made from "New World" cotton imports would have required over 23,000,000 acres of land in 1830, a number exceeding Britain's total crop and pasture land. Thus conquest of new lands meant that Europe's so-called "ghost acreage" went up to 120 acres per capita (Gadgil and Guha 1992) providing not just ecological relief, but also cheap sources of land and resources that would help make industrial production appear efficient.

Even as the ecological consequences of colonial practice started becoming apparent towards the end of the nineteenth century, in a surprising move the degradation was often blamed on the "ignorant natives". Colonial forest and wildlife policy in India and Africa can be used as to illustrate how despoliation by colonial practice, to fuel the industrial revolution was in return blamed on the native inhabitants and forests were deemed in need of "protection" from the very people who had been coexisting with them for centuries. Indiscriminate wild game hunting by European settlers in Africa had already provoked in 1900, an international meeting (meaning a meeting of the European colonial powers who ruled Africa) on the protection of wildlife in Africa (Guha 2000).

However, Guha asks, where did the native African fit into this picture? Nowhere, was the answer. In the name of conservation and wildlife preservation, Africans were prevented from hunting in the preserves and where their land fell within the boundaries of a protected area, they were forcibly dispossessed of their lands. Under the perverse logic of colonialism it even became the White Man's Burden to "save the nation's natural heritage from African despoilation" (Guha 2000, p.47) conveniently overlooking the fact that the despoilation had been caused by European settlers in the first place.

In addition to this twisted logic, colonial authorities in Africa and in India, willfully or mistakenly assumed that forests whose use was regulated by community governance (i.e. common property forests) were in fact open access and therefore needed to be converted into State property for their protection. Such annexation of forest land was often carried out under the pretext that all uncultivated land actually belonged to the State and that the forests "were left open to anyone who chose to use them" only by discretion of the State (Gadgil and Guha 1992). The colonial governments' misperception of common property as open access gave impetus to "protective legislation" that shut traditional sustainable users out of the forest, destroying livelihoods. The result was an encouragement of unsustainable use from those same users who were no longer bound by traditional community laws as well as by new users who could obtain access through illegal or State-sanctioned means.

This early colonial attitude towards preservation of forest and wildlife continued to influence the environmental movement into the twentieth century. This view was buttressed by the growing consensus that industrial methods of production were indeed destructive of the environment and hence there was legitimate need for protection, and by

the prejudice that non-modern forms of knowledge relating to the management and use of resources were by definition inferior to modern, "scientific" theories. Thus until recently, environmentalism, at least in the Global North, has been dominated by what Guha (2000) calls "scientific conservation" and the "wilderness idea". While the former is motivated by a scientific/empirical approach to efficient resource management, the later is rooted more in affective response to deforestation and destruction of nature wrought by the spread of industrialism. In practice, both have meant that traditional inhabitants of forests, coasts and so on, have been shut out from their principal sources of livelihood.

In recent years indigenous and traditional knowledge has been gaining in legitimacy (even having made it into the development rhetoric of the World Bank) and Amanor (2003) notes that community participation is being increasingly seen as central to effective natural resource management, heving been given a prominent place in international summits such as the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, for example. However, participatory community management as practiced still remains largely in the "technocentric, top-down framework" (Amanor, p.8) Present-day forestry management remains influenced largely by colonial forest policies; policies that were primarily concerned with securing control over land and natural resources for the colonial authorities (Marx's primitive accumulation). Amanor notes,

"colonial framework for community development, taken into the post-colonial political setting by the new independent governments, has tended to temper any move towards a more democratic rural administration based on elected councils. Instead the emphasis has been on participation without representation. Communities are expected to participate in the implementation of development projects without any voice in their design" (p.9).

Natural assets: Positive human interaction with the non-human environment

To reiterate then, two factors conspire against our ability to conceive of positive human-nature relationships. First, generalizing from the modern industrial experience we equate human production and consumption with ecological degradation and unsustainable resource use. And second, the triumph of modern ideas of efficiency of industrial production have systematically devalued traditional knowledge systems within which a positive relationship can be conceived. In context of contemporary participatory forest management in Africa, Amanor (2003) notes:

Paradoxically, just as colonialism justified state appropriation through crisis narratives on the incapacity of the peasantry to manage forestry resources, community forestry now justifies the need for participation and community regulation by resorting to the same narratives. In both cases there is little attempt to understand the human imprint on nature, including the positive interactions between rural people and forests, and to build new initiatives based upon this history. (p.2)

This is beginning to change, however, as biologists, ethno-ecologists and anthropologists begin to piece together the valuable ecological contributions of communities all over the world engaged in sustainable and sustenance-based resource use. Devon Pena, in the context of his study of the acequia agrosystems (discussed later) says that "humans can act as a keystone species - a species so central to the health of the ecosystem that without it many other species could not survive" (Pena 2003, p.169). This view is diametrically opposed to the "Agent Smith view" of humans as a cancer upon the face of the planet. Let us look at some specific examples of this phenomenon.

According to Boyce (2006, p.86) "the single most important example of humans acting as a keystone species are the agro-ecosystems that maintain the world's crop genetic diversity." Most of the world's centers of seed biodiversity are located in countries of the Global South, where industrial, monoculture farming has yet to

completely displace small farmers (who are generally the creators and stewards of this diversity). Thus Mexican farmers grow more than 5000 different varieties of maize, where in the US, with a much larger cultivation area, half a dozen inbred lines account for 70% of the cultivation (Boyce 2006, p.88). The creation and maintenance of crop genetic diversity is not only important from an intrinsic diversity (or deep ecology) perspective. Diversification is also an important principle in the reduction of susceptibility to natural and man-made disasters. A single new pest or a pesticide-resistant strain can wipe out a monoculture, as was demonstrated by the destruction of one fifth of the US maize crop by leaf blight in 1970. This makes necessary the heavy use of pesticides, in turn causing negative externalities in the form of species destruction and human health hazards due to contamination of ground-water (Boyce 2002). On the other hand cultivation of different species or strains can hedge risk of wide-spread failure and reduce pesticide use. In a culture where portfolio diversification is an accepted principle of sound financial investment practice, this idea should not be new or strange! Of course, the reason for monoculture farming is the demand for higher productivity in the short run. Thus Brush (2002) notes that "For individual farmers and communities, the declining variability in crop populations is a byproduct of the quest for higher productivity. The originally diverse crop inventories of North America were almost entirely eliminated in the development of modern American agriculture" (p.4).

However even as recognition of this valuable ecological service provided by farmers of the Global South, has grown, crop genetic diversity itself faces newer threats. One such threat discussed by Boyce (2002) is trade liberalization (or "globalization"). Maize production in Mexico, on small farms is increasingly threatened because under the

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) more "efficiently" produced (i.e. cheaper) US maize will flood the Mexican market. The other significant threat comes from what Vandana Shiva has called "enclosure of the knowledge commons" (Shiva 2005). Thus far, agricultural germplasm has been recognized to be the common heritage of humanity (open access). Anyone with modest credentials can approach ex-situ gene banks maintained by national governments, to obtain the germplasm. However, as Brush notes, common heritage,

...does not exclude all private ownership of genetic traits. Once traits have been isolated and used to create new crop varieties, the gene sequence or the variety can be privatized as intellectual property. The contradiction between open access to plants in the farmer's field and privatization of plants in the seed company's test plots is consistent with the usual logic of intellectual property, whereby goods from the public domain can be drawn upon to create private goods. (p.6).

Indeed, the history of capitalism is littered with many examples of this process whereby goods from the public domain "are drawn upon" to create private goods, the original enclosures of common property farmlands in England being an oft-quoted but by no means unique example (Marx 1867/1976). The enclosure of the knowledge commons means that knowledge that was previously governed by common property rules or was open access, can be turned against the very people who have produced the knowledge in the first place. One solution in the form of more tightly regulated ex-situ gene banks and indigenous knowledge databases is a poor substitute for on-the-ground practice because, as Brush points out,

...gene banks are effective for conserving the "hardware component" of crop genetic resources (e.g., alleles) but not the accompanying "software" (e.g., local knowledge and farmer selection practices). The fiction of the adequacy of gene banks allows states either to overlook the poverty and marginalization that threaten farmers who produce and maintain genetic resources, or to promote misguided economic development schemes that result in the destruction of those resources as a side effect (p.6).

Our second example of humans acting as a "keystone species" is from the farming communities of the Upper Rio Grande, in North America studied by Devon Pena and colleagues (Pena 2003). In this bio-region the key human-generated component are "acequias" or "earthen-work, snow-fed, gravity-driven and cooperatively maintained irrigation ditches." (p.169) Human activity in the acequia "landscape mosaic" creates ecological niches that are vital to the survival of many non-human species of plants and animals. Thus Pena notes that "...the acequia agrosystems are storehouses of native wild plant and landrace crop genetic diversity." (p.172) The health of the ecosystem in this case is connected to a "prosperous and equitable local and regional economy" rather than being threatened by it. Pena and colleagues have identified three major ecological contribution of the acequia systems. First, as noted earlier, in addition to being productive agricultural systems, they are storehouses of crop genetic diversity. Second they support artisan production (wood products, blankets, hand-woven rugs, tools etc), subsistence production of food as well as plants of medicinal value. And third, they provide additional ecosystem services such as soil formation and water regulation for the bioregion.

However, as in the case of crop genetic diversity, "enclosure threatens the land and water rights of the acequia communities" (p.176). This time the enclosure is physical rather than being of the knowledge commons as in the case of crop diversity. Along the lines suggested by Boyce (2003), Pena proposes specific strategies for natural asset building in the acequia bioregion in the form of public investment, redistribution of land

to the original claimants and internalization of the costs of environmental stewardship by rewarding the farmers for their services.

### *Are social and ecological goals truly in conflict?*

#### Red versus Green

Almost since the dawn of industrial capitalism in Western Europe in the late Eighteenth Century, consistent social and ecological critiques have been leveled at it. Marx and Engels, but also the utopian socialists stand out as severe social critics by bringing attention to the extent of human degradation visited upon Europe and its colonies by its spread (for e.g. see Engels 1844/1969). Almost contemporaneously, poets such as Wordsworth and writer like Ruskin were lamenting the divorcement of humans from the land (i.e. the countryside), in what Guha (2000) calls the "back to the land movement". However, few managed to combine the social and ecological critiques into a comprehensive indictment of industrial capitalism. The Marxists and socialists of other persuasions have usually seen technological solutions as being adequate to tackle capitalism's ecological crisis and have not critiqued the fundamental conception of the man-nature relationship that underlies it. Noting the tension between Indian Left and environmental movements, Prasad (2004) has observed that the Left "unlike the Indian environmental movement...does not believe that traditional systems are either sustainable or egalitarian in character." (p.13) As a sign of the times, in the last few years "Green Marxism" has emerged as a field that attempts to integrate newer ecological critiques of capitalism within the framework of Marxism (for e.g. see Foster 2000). On the other side of the divide many "green" activists and thinkers, particularly in the advanced capitalist

economies have been very concerned with global issues such as climate change while not really questioning the social injustice at the core of capitalism that is responsible for countless environmental crises of smaller proportions (of course the newly emerging environmental justice movement is an exception to this trend). Moreover, the emphasis on “doomsday scenarios” and global catastrophes has tended to obscure the myriad smaller environmental crises that the poor face everyday in the South *and* the North. I have argued elsewhere, that Gandhi and his co-worker J.C.Kumarappa, were two early critics of industrial capitalism who refused to segment its effect upon humans from its effect on nature, but instead viewed them as aspects of the same logic (Basole 2006).<sup>5</sup>

#### Do the poor care about the environment?

An implication of this divorcing of the social from the ecological critique has been the second enduring myth of environmentalism is typified by Hobsbawm's comment that "the main support for ecological policies comes from the rich countries and from the comfortable and rich middle classes" (quoted in Guha 2000 p.98). Similar sentiments have been expressed by others. In economic terms environmental quality is considered a "luxury good" for which demand rises more than proportionately with income (or at least

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<sup>5</sup> It is clear when one reads Gandhi or Kumarappa, that, while the distinction between human/social and non-human/natural/ecological costs is recognized, the intimate link between the two under industrial capitalism is not only recognized, but doubly emphasized. The core idea behind sustainable development, that the historical movement of the materially wealthy countries of today cannot be replicated by the poor ones without disastrous consequences, ecological and social, is encapsulated by this quote from Gandhi, in Hind Swaraj:

“God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 millions took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.”

a normal good, where demand rises in step with income). However as Boyce (2004) notes "this demand-driven model neglects the supply side of environmental quality." Due to well-known income disparity between the North and South, just to equal the degradation generated by the top quintile of the world's population, the degradation per-unit income in the bottom quintile would have to be 16 times greater. "Such a disparity seems improbable", Boyce concludes.

Grossman and Krueger (1995) in an influential study showed that environmental quality (as measured by 12 different indicators of air and water pollution) first deteriorates with economic growth, only to subsequently improve with more growth. This is the so-called "environmental Kuznets' curve". The results of Grossman and Krueger, even if taken to be accurate as face-value, have been widely (and wildly) extrapolated (even against caution advised by the authors themselves) to conclude that the cure for ecological degradation resulting from economic growth is more growth. Perhaps because of the inherent appeal of the idea (fitting in nicely as it does with accumulationist logic), a few basic points seem to have been missed. First, as the authors point out, the results may or may not generalize to other pollutants. Second, to the extent that sectoral changes, say a reduction in manufacturing and an increase in services, are responsible for pollution reduction, and are accompanied by no great change in global production/consumption, this merely shifts the problem to other areas of the globe. Finally, and more pertinently for the present argument, even if growth did result in more "environmentally friendly" technologies, the result does not imply anything one way or other, for ecological impacts of non-industrial or sustenance-based approaches to production and consumption.

Contra this kind of reasoning, an important achievement of the "environmentalism of the poor" has been to point out that there is no conflict between ecological goals such as sustainable resource use on the one hand, and social justice goals such as livelihood and food security on the other hand. In the Global North the overwhelming presence of industrial capitalism and the immense increase in material luxury it has brought, have obscured the link. We now discuss two examples of sustainable resource use.

Anthony Hall (2004) describes the "extractive reserves" of Brazil's Amazonia. Hall claims that the indigenous populations of Brazil's Amazonia and their role in managing the anthropogenic (as opposed to virgin) forest have long been ignored by conservationists (reminiscent of similar practice in colonial India and Africa, discussed earlier). However, their livelihoods threatened by cattle-ranching and other type of "development", the rubber-tappers of Brazil's Amazonia led by Chico Mendes (who was assassinated in 1988) have successfully fought against deforestation by cattle-ranchers and for their own right to extract the forest resources in a sustainable fashion. Their victory is recognized by the designation of parts of Amazonia as "extractive reserves", the concept combining two ideas of extraction of resources for human use while also functioning as a reserve (i.e. using only the "interest" and not the "capital"). Hall notes that the recognition of the extractive reserves "represented a major conceptual break from the crude protectionist principles of the past that assumed all human presence in conservation areas to be inherently harmful to the environment" (p.9) and that the "the extractive reserve attempts to reconcile objectives previously considered incompatible by mainstream policy-makers; namely the protection and conservation of forests alongside their sustainable economic use for the benefit of local populations" (p.1). Thus the

extractive reserve concept challenges both the persistent myths of Northern environmentalism we have been discussing here.

A similar sentiment is echoed by John Kurien while discussing the coastal fishing communities of Kerala, India. Kurien says,

Human activity need not lead inevitably to depreciation and ruin of nature's capital. Instead humans can nurture and invest in resources found in nature. A good example of natural asset building via investment in marine fisheries comes from Kerala, in south India, where coastal ecosystem people confronted with a 'Hardinian tragedy' of a ruined commons initiated collective action to rejuvenate the natural assets of the sea (p.12).

The Hardinian tragedy referred to by Kurien is of course Garret Hardin's famous "Tragedy of the Commons (1968) or more appropriately, the tragedy of open access.

Kurien starts by noting that the solution to Hardin's tragedy of open access has been to advocate private or state property. However, closer study of communities that depend on natural resources for their livelihood suggests a different solution. In coastal Kerala, as in many other coastal regions of the world small-scale fishing communities have survived for centuries. Ecologically sophisticated methods of resource use and institutions for regulating that use have been developed by such communities. As Kurien points out such community-based resource management (CBRM) is not necessarily egalitarian or democratic, but it is part of "the moral economy of the community" that ensures food and livelihood for all before any surplus is sold in the market. (p.2). However conversion of the community-managed resource into an open access resource due the coming of mechanized large-scale fishing operators (e.g. trawlers) in the name of modernization and development has depleted fish stock and threatened the livelihood of these communities. In Kerala, a struggle has been mounted against mechanized fishing by militant fisherfolk

unions in order to claim their community rights. In a similar vein like Pena, Kurien suggests various means through which natural assets can be built in the ocean through investment, internalization, appropriation and redistribution (Boyce 2003) that will reward these communities for their ecological services and rejuvenate their resource.

### Local Economies and Distancing

A recurrent theme in our discussion of the environmental services that sustenance-based communities provide all over the world has been the importance of the local; local (i.e. ecosystem specific) knowledge and local economies. Vandana Shiva asserts that "Localization of economies is a social and ecological imperative" (Shiva 2005, p.10). Similarly Devon Pena avers, "Sense of place, defined here as local knowledge of the ecosystem, can be crucial source of social capital for land-based communities." (Pena 2003, p.169). Locality is important because as Kurien notes in the context of coastal fishing communities, these communities share a "strong connectedness to the resource and have a long-term stake in its secure future as their lives depend on it." Thus the localization of resource use, becomes an important determinant of its wise and sustainable use. This is in opposition to the global marketplace logic that drives firms to relocate wherever the next cheap resource is to be found, without concern for what they leave behind. Invoking Princen's idea of distancing, in particular geographical distance, one can see how geographically distant production and consumption have played their part in facilitating social and ecological destruction by severing of negative feedback that would signal resource depletion, pollution as well as exploitation. For Gandhi, *swadeshi* or the local economy was a response to the capitalist global economy that results in

colonialism and imperialism. Kumarappa (1945) explains the moral basis of *swadeshi* as follows. “Those of us who apply human standards of value (to production) have to inquire into all aspects of manufacture. It is an arduous task and it becomes almost impossible for ordinary persons to undertake it when the articles come from far off countries.”

### *Conclusion*

In the preceding pages I have attempted to offer a (admittedly very limited) historically founded theory and some examples of what has been called the "environmentalism of the poor". I argued that the roots of the twin myths of Northern Environmentalism, that nature ought to be protected from human touch, and that "environmental consciousness " is the domain of the rich, are to be found in the colonial/capitalist experience and in the colonial devaluation of non-modern knowledge systems. We discussed some examples of positive human impacts upon the environment and showed some examples of environmentalism that insists not only on environmental quality but also on the right to use resources in a sustainable fashion. Contra Hobsbawm, support for ecological policies does not come only from rich countries or from the comfortable rich and middle classes. In fact for the sustenance economies of the Global South a clean and safe environment is often a matter of life and death rather than a luxury good to be consumed in a national park. Increasingly even environmental movements in the North are refusing to accept dichotomies between social disparity and ecological degradation, between equity and efficiency etc. The Environmental Justice movement, which we did not discuss here, is a

case in point. Taking cue from Polanyi (1944) and Martinez-Alier (1999), we must attempt to move towards market embedded in society and society embedded in ecology.

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