

## Objectivity in Environmental Aesthetics and Environmental Protection

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### I. Introduction

The beauty of the environment is a significant motive for environmental protection. Whether it be the preservation of wilderness areas, the protection of the rural countryside from sprawl, or opposition to cutting a neighborhood tree, concern for environmental beauty figures prominently. I will call such aesthetic defenses of the environment aesthetic protectionism. I believe that aesthetic considerations can play a significant role in the justification for environmental protection. A large part of why environmental degradation is so serious a problem is because it involves the destruction of things of substantial aesthetic value. If wilderness, the rural country side, and neighborhood trees were of low aesthetic value (or of negative aesthetic value), both the practice of--and justification for--environmental protection would be seriously weakened.

There are many reasons to resist making aesthetics central to a defense of the environment.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most important one is the common assumption that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and that therefore aesthetic responses are significantly relative. If judgments of environmental beauty lack objective grounding, they would seem to be a poor basis for justifying environmental protection. One of the first to note this problem, put it this way: "If aesthetic value judgments are merely personal and subjective there will be no way to argue that everyone ought to learn to appreciate or regard natural beauty as worthy of preservation."<sup>2</sup>

Even if one rejects the view that aesthetic judgments in general are subjective and relative, one might claim that they are in the case of judgments about environmental beauty. A view common in the philosophy of art is that although there is substantial objectivity in art, the aesthetic appreciation of nature is either thoroughly relative or much less constrained than the aesthetic appreciation of art.<sup>3</sup> Consider a forceful statement of this view from one of the most highly regarded introductory aesthetic textbooks:<sup>4</sup>

A great mountain, Mt. Fuji or the Grand Teton, would probably strike us as noble and strong or expressive of nobility and strength, but it is perfectly conceivable that it might strike an observer from an alien culture as comical or agonized. In the case of a natural object, such as a mountain, such relativity of perception is no real problem, because the mountain itself isn't really noble or comical. We can only say that there are different ways to regard the mountain. . . . It is harder to swallow such relativism when it comes to the expressive properties of art. . . . What I am suggesting is that the emotional qualities that artworks express are not dispensable facts about them, although the emotional qualities are dispensable facts about natural objects. Edvard Munch's *The Scream* is truly frightening . . . The fact that *The Scream* might strike a viewer from another culture as cheerful should not make us think that *The Scream* is a cheerful painting. . . . There is no real fact of the matter about whether Mount Fuji is noble or comical. . . .

Although in this passage John Fisher limits his comments to the expressive features of natural objects, others--and Fisher himself in other writings--generalize this claim of relativity to other aesthetic properties of nature and to judgments about environmental beauty in general.

Such a relativism would seem to be problematic for those hoping to use the environment's aesthetic value as support for environmental protection. Consider this example: A community wanting to preserve the rural

character of its environs against strip-highway, sprawl development argues that great aesthetic value would be lost if the peaceful, tranquil tree-lined boulevard that is punctuated by farmhouses, small fields, and ponds is replaced with the aggressive, cluttered, and gaudy strip-highway sprawl of pawn shops, gas stations, and parking lots so symbolic of our society's careless exploitation and disregard of the natural world. The developers, on the other hand, argue that great aesthetic value would be gained by replacing the monotonous and boring, weed-infested dirt roads with neat and useful shops that express hard work, determination, and entrepreneurial ingenuity. Without some ability to distinguish between more and less appropriate aesthetic responses or better and worse aesthetic judgments about these environments, the appeal to aesthetic considerations would seem to be of little use to environmental protection or decision-making.

This paper explores the debate about objectivity and relativity in environmental aesthetics. It examines arguments for relativism put forward by John Fisher, Malcolm Budd, and Stan Godlovitch, assess their merits, and explores their implications for aesthetic protectionism. The paper also considers the views of three diverse thinkers in environmental aesthetics that provide for significant dimensions of objectivity: Allen Carlson, Noel Carroll, and Emily Brady. My purpose in assessing the debate between relativity and objectivity in environmental aesthetics is to determine to what extent this debate matters for aesthetic protectionism. Does environmental aesthetic relativism really undermine the use of environmental beauty for environmental protection? Is the objectivity provided by the objectivists such that it will allow aesthetics to play a useful role in environmental protection? I consider Marcia Eaton's suggestion that a Carlson-type cognitive view is necessary if environmental aesthetics is to "contribute to preserving sustainable landscapes" and criticize her claim that the protection of nature will be better served by aesthetic responses based on knowledge of--rather than ignorance about--nature.<sup>5</sup>

## **II. The Objectivity-Relativity Continuum**

The debate between relativity and objectivity in environmental aesthetics has been structured to a significant extent by a provocative use of language on the part of a key figure in this debate: Allen Carlson. Carlson develops a strongly objective account of environmental aesthetics by arguing that environmental aesthetic appreciation (and judgment) needs to be "objective" in the sense that it needs to be a response to what the aesthetic object (i.e., the environment) is rather than what it is not. He argues that science is our best guide to the nature of the natural world and thus an aesthetic response to nature must be guided by knowledge of science or natural history more generally (much as an aesthetic response to art must be guided by knowledge of art history). Carlson puts his point by saying that "*the appropriate*" and sometimes "*the correct or true*" aesthetic appreciation of nature must be guided by science. Many find it highly implausible to think that there is only one appropriate, correct, or true way to appreciate nature or specific natural objects.

But accepting this intuition should not lead us to the opposite extreme, that anything goes in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. To deny there is only one correct type of response to an environmental aesthetic object--or to nature more generally--is not to embrace the idea that any aesthetic response is as good as any other. Few, if any, accept such an extreme position.<sup>6</sup> There are a broad range of middle positions between one right answer and anything goes that are far more plausible. This middle range--because it denies that there is only one correct type

aesthetic appreciation of nature—allows for a plurality of correct or appropriate responses and thus accepts relativity at least in the sense of pluralism. But the middle position also allows for the idea that among this plurality of appropriate responses there are better and worse appreciations of—and judgments about—nature’s aesthetic value.

Ronald Hepburn has a sophisticated discussion of how one might think about better and worse aesthetic responses/judgments to nature without being pushed into naive realist sounding phrases like “the correct or true” way to appropriately appreciate nature. Hepburn distinguishes between “trivial and serious” in the aesthetic appreciation of nature.<sup>7</sup> Trivial appreciations might involve hasty, indiscriminating, unthinking, lazy, feeble, immature, self-indulgent (“Look at the rainbow placed here for me!”), confused, superficial, or stereotyped (“Look, it’s Bambi!”) responses that are minimally reflective and perceptually passive. Trivial responses might also distort, ignore, or suppresses important truths about the objects of appreciation, such as a romanticized view of wolves that ignores their predatory lifestyle. There is a well developed literature criticizing the idea that the aesthetic appreciation of nature is appropriately limited to the appreciation of picturesque scenery, as if seeing nature from ready-made viewpoints (i.e., getting out of one’s car only at highway pullovers) was a serious way of appreciating the Natural Parks or nature in general.<sup>8</sup> Serious aesthetic appreciation of nature involves the reverse types of responses.

Thus we should not choose between the view that there is one and only one true type of aesthetic appreciation of the environment (as if this was necessary for aesthetic protectionism) and the view that any type of aesthetic response and judgment about the environment is acceptable, but rather develop a view that allows for a plurality of responses to nature some of which are better or worse (e.g., more or less serious) than each other. We should seek to determine whether such a plurality presents problems for aesthetic protectionism (perhaps because it allows conflicting judgments that make a difference to environmental policy) and whether such objectivity (i.e., better and worse aesthetic judgments/responses) is sufficient for aesthetic protectionism.

### **III. Plurality and Relativity in Environmental Aesthetics**

In this section I consider some of the arguments for relativity in environmental aesthetics and explore whether such relativity is a problem for aesthetic protectionism.

John Fisher has a carefully crafted and thoughtful paper where he defends the value of aesthetically appreciating the sounds of nature while arguing that such appreciation is highly relative and far more so than the appreciation of music.<sup>9</sup> Although Fisher does not in this paper argue that one can generalize his analysis of the relativity of nature’s sounds to all of nature’s aesthetic characteristics, I see little reason to think his arguments have applicability only to the appreciation of nature’s sounds. In fact, Malcolm Budd has presented very similar arguments for the relativity of environmental aesthetics in general.<sup>10</sup>

Fisher distinguishes between two dimensions of objectivity: What he considers the obvious requirement that all aesthetic appreciation—including nature appreciation—be guided by the object (“the guidance by the object requirement”) and the “agreement criterion,” according to which aesthetic judgments should be potentially universal in the sense that “proper aesthetic judgments are true and require agreement from other perceivers who are sensitive, rational and appropriately placed” (p. 171-72). Fisher rejects this agreement requirement. He argues that

agreement does not follow from the guidance by object criterion, because an aesthetic response can be guided by an object's characteristics while being underdetermined by them. Although he thinks this underdetermination is also true of the appreciation art objects, aesthetic judgments of nature's sounds "will be many times more underdetermined than are typical judgments of art or musical works" (p. 177).

Malcolm Budd agrees that there is a freedom and relativity in aesthetic appreciation of nature that is not present with art: "The aesthetic appreciation of nature is . . . endowed with a freedom denied to artistic appreciation" (p. 156). Fisher notes that unlike art objects (including music), natural sounds are not intentional objects created to be appreciated in certain ways. This fact leads him to conclude that "the person who listens to nature is simply free of the criteria that govern appreciation of music and that function to rule out many possible ways of listening . . ." (p. 177). Budd makes the same claim about the appreciation of nature in general: Nature appreciation, he argues, is looser than art appreciation because nature was not designed for aesthetic appreciation and thus its appreciation is released from the constraints of art appreciation (p. 155).

That art objects have been designed for aesthetic appreciation by an artist may well put constraints on proper appreciation that are lacking in the appreciation of objects not so designed. The truth of this claim, however, may depend on one's theory of art. It is not clear that certain formalists would assent to it and the claim puts weight on artist's intentions that anti-intentionalists may reject. Even if we grant the claim (as I am inclined to do), it needs to be noted that intentional design can not only constrain the aesthetic response but also open up avenues for more interpretations and types of appreciative responses. There may well be a greater multiplicity in appropriate appreciative responses to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* than there are to that toilet sitting in the warehouse. Or consider the appreciation of a moose versus the appreciation of a painting of a moose. A moose painting could have all sorts of meanings that a moose itself does not. Interpretation and evaluation of a moose painting involves issues of artistic intent and style and cultural context of the painting that both constrains and complicates its appreciation. The lack of artistic intent behind the object of nature appreciation removes a type of complexity and this might actually limit the multiplicity of appropriate responses to it.

Both Fisher and Budd note the relative lack of framing in nature when compared to art. Nature does not come with a frame around it (as does a painting and artworks more generally), and thus there are a multiplicity of different and legitimate ways to frame it. Budd argues that—in contrast with art appreciation—there is no proper level of observation for nature. One can look at nature through a telescope or a microscope, or with one's unaided eye. He also argues that there are no proper or optimum conditions for observation: One can observe nature when it is foggy or clear, bright or dark, from near or far. He also claims we may use any sense modality or mode of perception. In general, Budd argues, we are free to frame natural objects as we please. Thus "there is no such thing as the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature" (as there is with art) (p. 156).

While there is clearly something right about these claims, there is equally clearly something mistaken as well. Once we have settled on a particular natural object as the object of aesthetic attention, many of these supposed choices are no longer arbitrary. One doesn't look for fish in the river with a telescope or a microscope. Aesthetically appreciating a cliff is not best done from an airplane six miles high or on a pitch black night. Glenn Parsons notes

that “smell, touch and taste require close proximity and mountains are generally not the sort of things we try to feel all at once or put in our mouths.”<sup>1</sup>

Fisher claims that how one frames nature is *partially arbitrary*: “One can choose principles of framing, but they are partially arbitrary, even if natural in one respect or other” (p. 173). Fisher argues--again in contrast with musical appreciation--that the appreciation of natural sounds lacks institutional conventions that determine and guide appropriate appreciation. “I see no way to raise the status of this framing to make judgments objective without claiming that we have conventions--not just typical or understandable responses--for listening to the sounds of nature and this is not a plausible claim about acts of listening to nature in our society” (p. 174). Thus Fisher argues *what* we should listen to in nature, for *how long*, and in *what way* is pretty much up to us. Fisher illustrates framing relativity with the following examples:

Suppose you are sitting in a hot tub in a city in the Arizona desert listening to the sounds around you. Do you just listen to the Western Warblers and the wind in the fruit and palm trees or do you (should you) also notice the sounds of hot tub jets and popping bubbles making a pleasant hissing on the water? Do you add or ignore the sounds of ventilator fans spinning hot air from the attics and occasional jet planes overhead? At Niagra Falls do I strain to hear birds in the forest over the constant roar of the water. . . . In the Tuscan countryside do I ignore the high pitched whining of mosquitoes? Shall I just focus on the loons from across the lake in Minnesota or shall I strain to hear others from more distant parts, and do they go together with the chattering of squirrels and the buzzing of flies? (p. 173)

“Nature does not dictate an *intrinsically* correct way to frame its sounds in the way that a composer does” (p. 173) and “There are a large multiplicity of structures and relations that we might hear and all seem equally legitimate” (P. 176).<sup>2</sup>

I think Fisher and Budd have made a good case that we need to adopt a pluralism about appropriate responses to environmental sounds and beauty more generally. The aesthetic appreciator clearly has great freedom in framing the experience of nature’s sounds and its other aesthetic objects and this results in a multiplicity of appropriate appreciative acts and judgments. Fisher and Budd are right that it is highly implausible to insist that there is only one correct way to frame and aesthetically appreciate nature.

Does such a plurality of appropriate aesthetic responses to the environment present a problem for aesthetic protectionism? One might think not: The aesthetic freedom to focus on one loon or forty--or to listen to hot tub bubbles alone or along with the warblers--would seem to have little relevance to using environmental beauty for policy. Whether I look at mountain through the fog in the early morning light or during the middle of the afternoon on a perfectly clear day, or whether I focus on the smell of the mountain’s spruce trees after the rain or savor the taste of its wild huckleberries does not seem a threat to aesthetic protectionism. In fact, it might be supposed to support it, especially if this multiplicity of acceptable ways of appreciating nature are all positive aesthetically.<sup>3</sup> Further, that there are a multiplicity of acceptable ways to frame and appreciate nature is compatible with there also being a multiplicity of incorrect ways to do this (and Fisher, at least, gives us some grounds for making such judgments).

Nonetheless, certain kinds of pluralism in environmental aesthetic response can be a serious problem for aesthetic protectionism. Let us start with framing relativity: Just how arbitrary is the framing choice suppose to be?

Specifically, does framing freedom apply to whether or not one should include human-made sounds or other human effects into one's appreciation of a natural environment? Is there no better or worse choice here, no more or less appropriate way to frame this aesthetic experience? If so, we have a problem for using nature's sounds (and environmental beauty more generally) to protect the environment.

Consider the following environmental policy disputes: Should helicopter flights be allowed over the Grand Canyon? Is snowmobiling in Yellowstone in the winter appropriate and is it a compatible use with cross country skiing? Should a developer be allowed to put an automobile racetrack next to a cypress-swamp nature-preserve? In each of these cases environmentalists have argued that the sounds of engines degrade the natural beauty and aesthetic appreciation of these areas. If framing of sounds is arbitrary, then why can't environmentalists be asked to simply frame out these intrusive human sounds? The developer can ask those on a night owl walk to ignore the sounds of the nearby Friday night races. Yellowstone skiers can be asked to frame out the stench and whine of snowmobiles. Hikers in the Grand Canyon can be trained to ignore the buzz of overhead aircraft.

One response is to claim that we may be unable to frame out these human intrusions, at least not without special psychological training. But the deeper claim is that we should not frame them out, at least in our overall assessment of the aesthetic value of these environments. There is something inappropriate about an aesthetic response to and evaluation of these environments that suppresses these sounds. In these cases, it is fitting and natural to hear and focus on these human sonic intrusions as one assess the overall aesthetic value of these environments. To ignore them is like standing in the Snake River Valley of Wyoming and refusing to look up to the West. This would not be a serious attempt to aesthetically appreciate Grand Teton National Park, and it is a distorted aesthetic response to such environments that simply frames out human sonic intrusions. Similarly, the developer who insists that putting a sky scraper in the Snake River Valley will not detract from the aesthetic beauty of the valley and neighboring Teton Park because "one can simply frame it out" is relying on a mistaken conception of how free framing choices in environmental appreciation can legitimately be. Do Fisher's and Budd's accounts of framing relativity justify such a response? I hope not.

What accounts for the intuitively plausible judgment that such a framing choice is not legitimate? One possibility is to appeal to the idea of "natural framing." Noel Carroll uses this notion to explain how "being moved by nature" (i.e., an aesthetic emotional arousal to nature) can solve the problem of aesthetic focus.<sup>4</sup>

Certain natural expanses have natural frames or what I prefer to call nature closure: caves, coves, grottoes, clearings, arbors, valleys, etc. And other natural expanses, though lacking frames have features that are naturally salient for human organisms -- i.e., they have features such as moving water, bright illumination, etc., that draw our attention instinctually toward them (p. 251).

The loud roar of engines or a towering skyscraper rising from a flat plain and blocking the view of a mountain will naturally draw out aesthetic attention and it is awkward and forced to appreciate these environments while trying to ignore these human intrusions, or to leave them out of our overall aesthetic assessments. The suggestion to frame them out is similar to someone at a concert saying: "Don't worry about that foul smell or the dynamiting going on outside, just listen to the music."

This idea of natural framing is also a possible avenue of response to a worrying argument for relativity in the aesthetic appreciation of nature developed by Stan Godlovitch.<sup>5</sup> Godlovitch argues that traditional human aesthetic responses to nature are sensorially parochial and that the temporal and spacial scale dependence of our aesthetic responses to nature are arbitrary. Godlovitch would have us aesthetically appreciate (equally?) all of nature, great and small, and all natural processes, long and short. Thus he argues that smashing ice blocks heaved up by a river should be seen as no less aesthetically offensive than bulldozing the Navaho Sandstone Castles of Monument Valley, Arizona. True, the ice melts each spring and comes back the following winter, but those monuments will also crumble and rise up again. “If we were giants, crushing a rock monument . . . would be no more aesthetically offensive than is flattening the odd sand castle is to us now. If our lives were measured in seconds, then shattering ice blocks would count as momentarily coarse as using Bryce Canyon as a landfill” (p. 18).

Such a view seem clearly problematic for aesthetic protectionism. If environmental aesthetics is to be useful in environmental policy it must be able to help us distinguish between more or less aesthetically positive environments or natural objects,<sup>6</sup> and it certainly can’t sanction the idea that as much aesthetic value is lost by crushing ice blocks as destroying thousand-foot-tall sandstone monuments. Clearcuts are a paradigm of environmental aesthetic disvalue, but if one scales up, they are temporary blips in an ongoing and aesthetically exciting process of forest recovery. The response to Godlovitch is that given the kind of creatures humans beings are and the temporal and spacial scales on which we operate, some dimensions of our framing choices are not arbitrary and certain scales are more or less natural and appropriate. That “the mountain that we appreciate for its majesty and stability is, on a different time-scale, as fluid as the ripples on the lake at its foot”<sup>7</sup> should not make us think that the aesthetic qualities we enjoy in the mountain are not appropriately appreciable. Simply because aesthetic qualities can be made to vanish and aesthetic judgments undermined by taking a different perspective, does not mean that they are inappropriate given the perspective we are taking. And given the kinds of beings we are and the purposes we have in acts of aesthetic appreciations, some perspectives, scales, and framing choices—including Godlovitch’s “any scale at all” and the anti-environmentalists demand to frame out human intrusions—are not appropriate.

I have claimed that certain framing decisions in environmental aesthetic appreciation are more natural and fitting given the human constitution and our legitimate purposes and these will serve to limit the multiplicity of appropriate appreciations of environment and help to distinguish better and worse responses. Additionally, cognitive factors, such as information about the objects of aesthetic attention and knowledge of appropriate categorization will serve a similar constraining task. This is an essential point in the cognitive accounts of the aesthetic appreciation of nature, such as that of Allen Carlson. Fisher seems to think that knowledge (at least of sounds) can’t play a significant constraining role. In response to Carlson’s suggestion that “knowledge of the nature of the particular environments yields the appropriate boundaries of appreciations, the particular foci of aesthetic significance and the relevant acts of aspection for that type of environment,”<sup>8</sup> Fisher says: “Knowledge will certainly affect our experience and bring out features otherwise missed, but I do not think it can dictate frame or significance”. In a similar vein, Budd argues that “categories of nature do not function to partially determine the real aesthetic properties of natural items as categories of art do those of works of art” (p. 155).

I believe that environmental knowledge, including knowledge about the types of environmental items we are attempting to appreciate and knowledge of environment more generally (including the extent of environmental degradation) does and should significantly influence appropriate frame and judgments of significance in many cases. Consider some examples: We are kayaking through a southern swamp and we have a choice between listening to a woodpecker or an alligator. Knowledge that it is an Ivory-Billed Woodpecker, a bird thought extinct and whose existence has not been documented for 40 years suggests our focus should be on the sound of tree hammering rather than gator bellowing. Here, both frame and significance are--if not "dictated"--at least highly suggested by this bit of knowledge. Carlson has persuasive examples that show correct categorization can--contrary to Budd's claims--determine appropriate aesthetic properties of natural items: Is that a cute woodchuck or a massive rat? An awkward deer or a graceful moose? Is that whale a clumsy fish or an impressive mammal? Which aesthetic adjectives are appropriate depends on placing the environmental object in its correct category. So too with perceptually identical environmental objects, one of which is a human made and the other natural: Is that the beautiful full moon rising over the hillside or an obnoxious satellite dish? Is that lime green creek an amazing work of nature or revolting mine runoff? Correct information and categorization does and should affect environmental aesthetic assessment.

Both Noel Carroll and Stan Godlovitch reject the idea that aesthetic appreciation necessarily becomes inappropriate when it is based on false belief or mistaken scientific information. Godlovitch says: "Suppose your appreciation of some natural phenomenon rested upon what turned out to be a false scientific theory. What do you suppose would happen? Would your appreciation be dimmed? Would you marvel the less? I certainly hope not" (p. 22). Carroll gives an example of what he takes as an appropriate aesthetic responses to nature even when one has false beliefs about it: "I may be excited by the grandeur of a blue whale. I may be moved by its size, its force, and the amount of water it displaces, etc., but I may think that it is a fish. Nevertheless my being moved by the grandeur of the blue whale is not inappropriate" (p. 258). I accept Carroll's example as an appropriate aesthetic response, but I think the response remains appropriate only because the false belief does not influence the aesthetic response. Were it to have a bearing on the aesthetic response, I think we would and should view it as an inappropriate response, at least to the extent the two are related. Thus knowledge and correct categorization of environmental objects will constrain the plurality of appropriate aesthetic responses.

Perhaps the kind of aesthetic relativity that is most worrying to aesthetic protectionism is not simply framing relativity, or the relativity of aesthetic properties, but a relativity that affects evaluation or judgments of aesthetic value. Perhaps it is inappropriate to suppress the whine of the snowmobile, the buzz of the helicopter, and the Teton Valley ski scraper from one's environmental aesthetic evaluation. But motor enthusiasts might simply claim that they find these sounds appealing and developers might claim to enjoy the sight of a large building silhouetted against the Grand Teton and argue that environmentalists' intuitions about the negative aesthetic character of these humanizations are just one aesthetic response, no more or less appropriate than those who enjoy these human effects.

Fisher gives an example that suggests he might find such relativity correct: "One person finds the "coo coo" sounds of a flock of doves to be extremely harmonious and to express a soothing calm; a friend may find the same sound to be insistently obtrusive" (p. 171). His assertion (quoted above) that there is no better or worse to the claim

that the Grand Teton is noble/strong or comical/agonized suggests the same.

There are clearly differences in circumstances, contexts, and perspectives that would motivate and perhaps justify conflicting judgments of aesthetic properties and value. Perhaps the Grand Teton will appear dumpy rather than majestic if one has been traveling in the Himalayas or visiting some other planet with 100,000 foot mountains rising from a level plain—or comical if one thinks about the meaning of the French word “teton.” The sound of an approaching snow mobile may well be soothing (rather than obnoxious) if one is lying hypothermic in the snow waiting for help or if one is the owner of a snowmobile rental business that is threatened by a proposed ban on snowmobiles in national parks. Clear cuts may not appear to be eyesores to those who hunt the deer feeding off the new growth.

I suspect that the right course here is to accept some plurality in environmental aesthetic evaluations as acceptable. Perhaps even some conflicting evaluations should even be seen as appropriate. Nonetheless, I also think we should resist “anything goes relativity” about such evaluative responses. Finding room for Hepburn’s serious and trivial spectrum and the idea of more or less appropriate responses should be our goal. We also should embrace along with the plurality of appropriate environmental aesthetic responses, a multiplicity of inappropriate responses. For example, it is not a serious aesthetic response to the Grand Tetons to stand before them for the first time and be amused by the thought that they look like breasts. This is a far more trivial and less serious response that is a focus on their soaring height from the valley floor and imagining the geologic pressure necessary to squeeze them up. The negative aesthetic response to swamps as bug-infested, wastelands is a stereotyped and ignorant aesthetic response that would be rejected by the informed swamp connoisseur (who knows—among other things—the ecological services wetlands provide and that because of moving water, the bugs are not bad at all). The developer whose stereotyped view of swamps leads him to think a racetrack is a compatible use next to a swamp nature preserve need not be taken seriously. Roadside litter, spewing sewage pipes, and fish belly-up in the creeks are not such that we should expect any plausible account that would justify a positive aesthetic response to these environment objects.

In a world where human dominance over nature was not so extensive, perhaps the sounds of human motors in wild areas need not be seen as negative. But in today’s world, at least for those informed and properly appreciative of the massive human impact on the planet, the appropriate response to the sound of human intrusions in nature should not be positive. Much as it is inappropriate to find it humorous when a dog is hit by a car, so to it is inappropriate to positively respond to human intrusions into wild nature. Such a response is likely to manifest ignorance about the human impact on the planet, a skewed emotional constitution, or such strong self-interest as to blind one’s aesthetic responses (or to disqualify them).<sup>9</sup>

#### **IV. Objectivism and Aesthetic Protectionism**

From the perspective of aesthetic protectionism, there are reasons to worry about the environmental aesthetic relativism/pluralism of philosophers such as Fisher, Budd, and Godlovitch. However, many diverse thinkers working in the field of environmental aesthetics provide for significant dimensions of objectivity. One expects accounts of objectivity from cognitivists like Allen Carlson who bases appropriate nature appreciation on the understanding of natural history.<sup>10</sup> But one finds it as well in the work of Noel Carroll who sees emotional response as key to an

important type of nature appreciation, and in Emily Brady, for whom imagination, not knowledge, is central to the appreciation of nature. Carlson and Brady are very much concerned to provide a role for environmental aesthetics in the development of environmental policy and perhaps this is an important motivator what motivates their attempts to build dimensions of objectivity into environmental aesthetics. I now consider whether those environmental aestheticians who strive for dimensions of objectivity fare better from the perspective of aesthetic protectionism.

Although Noel Carroll thinks Carlson's scientific-knowledge based environmental aesthetics is one type of appropriate appreciation of nature, he criticizes Carlson for claiming it is the only type and offers his "being moved by nature" as an additional and distinct mode of legitimate appreciation.<sup>11</sup> Carroll argues that the visceral, minimally intellectual, emotional arousal of standing under a waterfall and being excited by its grandeur is an important and appropriate type of aesthetic response to nature that is not based on knowledge of natural-history or science. Carroll acknowledges strong objectivity in Carlson's environmental aesthetics and desires it for his own view: "Any competing picture of nature appreciation, if it is to be taken seriously, must have a comparable means to those of the natural environmental model for solving the problem of the objectivity of nature appreciation" (p. 257).

Carroll argues that emotional arousal can be objective. On his account, emotional states are appropriate or not, and appropriateness is the truth (objectivity) of emotions. Emotions are cognitive in the sense that they are underpinned by beliefs, thoughts, and patterns of attention and they are directed at objects. Emotions are appropriately directed at some objects and not toward others: Fear of oncoming tank is appropriate while fear of chicken soup is not (unless one thinks it dangerous). Emotions that are objective are those where the emotion is appropriate for its object and the beliefs underlying the emotion are ones reasonable for others to share. So, for example, being excited by the grandeur of something (e.g., the Tetons) that one believes is of large scale is appropriate, and if this belief in its large scale is reasonable for others to hold, it is an objective emotional arousal (and not subjective, distorted, or wayward). The person who is not excited by the grandeur of the Tetons—but who acknowledges they are large scale—has an inappropriate emotional response. If the person denies the Tetons are of a large scale because they are tiny compared to the Galaxy, then this person has the wrong comparison class. Thus, Carroll argues that objectivity in environmental aesthetics is possible with an emotional arousal account of environmental aesthetics as well as with a scientific-knowledge based account.<sup>12</sup>

I think Carroll is right that emotional reactions to nature can be more or less appropriate, perceptive, or wayward, and sometimes even downright inappropriate. As was suggested above, those well-informed about the human onslaught on the planet's relatively natural areas and who have the welfare of humans or nonhumans at heart, will react to environmental degradation with dismay. They won't find the hum of snowmobiles as soothing. The sounds of chainsaws will alarm them. Belching smokestacks will disgust them. And pollution sunsets will not appear beautiful. In general, environmental degradation will strike them as aesthetically unappealing. I think Carroll's account provides us with some of the tools needed to justify the claim that such aesthetic responses are more appropriate and serious than their opposites. To bolster this case further we may also need some account of the interpenetration of aesthetic and ethics.<sup>13</sup>

Emily Brady has developed an imagination-based environmental aesthetic that she believes is conducive to

the goal of aesthetic protectionism.<sup>14</sup> She provides many examples of the power of imagination in aesthetic appreciation of nature and its use for aesthetic protectionism, including this one:

In contemplating the bark of a locust tree, visually, I see the deep clefts between the thick ridges of the bark. Images of mountains and valleys come to mind, and I think of the age of the tree given the thickness of the ridges and how they are spaced apart. I walk around the tree, feeling the wide circumferences of the bark. The image of a seasoned old man comes to mind, with deep wrinkles from age. These imaginings lead to an aesthetic judgment of the tree as stalwart, and I respect it as I might a wise old sage (p. 143).

Brady criticizes Carlson's scientific knowledge based approach to environmental aesthetics because she thinks it excessively restricts legitimate aesthetic responses to nature and because it is elitist: Many who appreciate nature aesthetically lack significant scientific knowledge about what they are appreciating and on Carlson's account their responses would be dismissed as shallow. Brady also thinks Carlson's approach is not really a mode of *aesthetic* appreciation of nature, because Carlson turns the aesthetic appreciation of nature into a species of natural history and thus leaves no distinctive role for aesthetics in environmental policy disputes.

Brady is worried about imagination's reputation of being subjective and arbitrary. Many will think that "imagination inevitably leads to an experience that is too unpredictable, arbitrary and prone to fantasy to guide appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature" (p. 144). For Brady, not every imaginative response to nature is appropriate and she attempts to "clip the wings of imagination" in hopes of retaining sufficient objectivity for environmental aesthetics to be useful in policy disputes. She wants to prevent shallow, naive, sentimental imagining responses that impoverish rather than enrich appreciation. Imagining a lamb dressed up in baby clothes might underline the aesthetic truth of innocence, but it is sentimental and shallow and thus fails to direct appropriate appreciation. She rules out other imaginings because they are irrelevant: One is awe struck by dramatic sheer drop to sea of an English high cliff and this aesthetic response can be intensified by imagining the feeling of jumping off the cliff and the fear of someone contemplating jumping. Imagining the possible motives for that jump, such as financial difficulties, is irrelevant to the aesthetic appreciation of that cliff, and hence is not appropriate to its appreciation. Brady also counsels us to avoid imagination that instrumentalizes nature, as when one strays from an aesthetic focus in appreciation of the seascape by fantasizing about how many sea shells one could collect if the waves were not so big. An aesthetic response frees the mind from self-interested and instrumental concerns, and thus imaginings and other thoughts that instrumentalize nature are not aesthetically appropriate as they violate the disinterestedness requirement of aesthetic response (p. 145).

I think Brady does a reasonable job of rebutting the presumption that an imagination based aesthetics of nature will be purely subjective and arbitrary. She goes some of the way toward rebutting Marcia Eaton's objection that there no way of distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate imaginings "without relying on the kind of cognitive model that Carlson insists upon."<sup>15</sup> Brady's point that self-interested responses to nature violate the disinterestedness requirement of aesthetics and thus are inappropriate aesthetically seems to me to have significant import for aesthetic protectionism. Many of the positive aesthetic responses to environmental degradation are likely to be based on an instrumental and self-interested view of nature and thus on Brady's interpretation of

disinterestedness, will not count as properly aesthetic.

Allen Carlson's environmental aesthetic provides significant dimensions of objectivity and his views overall are quite promising for aesthetic protectionism.<sup>16</sup> Carlson's defense of positive aesthetics for pristine nature--"each natural thing, either with appropriate appreciation or at many, if not almost all, levels and conditions of observation, has *substantial* positive aesthetic value and little, if any negative aesthetic value"<sup>17</sup>--provides strong grounds for aesthetic protectionism assuming that we reject a positive aesthetics thesis for the human shaped environment. Carlson's reliance on functionality for the aesthetic assessment of humanized environments suggests that unsustainable environments will have negative aesthetic value.

Marcia Eaton thinks that if one's goal for environmental aesthetics is "environmental sustainability," then Carlson's theory is what is needed: "The philosopher Allen Carlson has suggested a model of nature appreciation that is, in my opinion, the best so far presented if one's goal is to produce, protect or preserve environments that are both beautiful and healthy."<sup>18</sup> Eaton seems to have an instrumental view of environmental aesthetic appreciation that justifies environmental aesthetic response depending on its implications for environmental protection. Eaton clearly thinks that environmental aesthetics is crucial to environmental protection. She argues: "Ecologists internationally recognize that in the absence of a change in aesthetic preferences, sound environmental practices have little chance of being widely adopted."<sup>19</sup> She provides the following example: "As long as people want large, green, closely mowed yards no matter what the climate or soil or water conditions, they will continue to use polluting gasoline mowers and a toxic cocktail of fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides."<sup>20</sup> Positive aesthetic responses to environments lead to care for them, but, Eaton argues, unless those responses are guided by environmental knowledge, the care may not be of the right sort. For example, she thinks it is partly because blackened forests strike people as ugly that we have had a policy to protect forests from fires, and this has led to a decrease in--even marginalization of--fire-adapted species and a tinder box in our national forests.

She criticizes Emily Brady's reliance on imagination as the key to environmental aesthetics, because, unless such imagination (and the fiction that results from it) are informed and guided by environmental knowledge, the effect of such an environmental aesthetic on nature can be devastating: She the cites the Disney classic *Bambi* for encouraging a sentimental image of all deer as sweet, innocent and gentle, and argues that this image has made it hard for forest managers to convince the public of the need to reduce deer populations. Stories about monsters in swamps have contributed to our negative aesthetic response to them and consequently to the massive loss of wetlands in this country. "As we have seen, fiction can sentimentalize and demonize with serious harm. If sustainable environments are our goal, then fiction must be at the service of fact."<sup>21</sup> "For only with knowledge will sustainable practices develop."<sup>22</sup> Thus for Eaton, an account of environmental aesthetics like Carlson's--one solidly based on scientific knowledge--is what we must seek if environmental aesthetics is to ground aesthetic protectionism.

Now while I agree there are significantly positive resources in Carlson's environmental aesthetic for aesthetic protectionism, I think Eaton is too quick in her assessment that we must embrace Carlson's view. We have found resources for objectivity in environmental aesthetics that are useful for aesthetic protectionism not only in Carlson's knowledge-based account, but also in Carroll's emotion-based account and in Brady's imagination-based

account. Eaton's view that only an environmental aesthetic informed by environmental knowledge will lead to sustainable care is insufficiently appreciative of the value for aesthetic protectionism of these alternative accounts. It also ignores that ecological ignorance can sometimes be environmentally beneficial rather than environmentally harmful. Many accept popular ecological ideas about the delicate balance of nature, the tight integration of natural systems, and the dependence of stability on biodiversity. These ideas have been seriously challenged by contemporary ecological research and are likely false to a significant extent.<sup>23</sup> Such mistaken scientific beliefs seem beneficial for environmental protection and policy. If one believes that driving a species extinct will lead to ecological collapse, then one will preserve species. If nature is seen to be a delicate balance easily upset by human intrusion, then human will be inclined to keep their disruptions out of nature. Aesthetic responses based on ecological ignorance and myth may sometimes be the best for aesthetic protectionism. Thus insuring that one's aesthetic responses to nature are informed by scientific facts will not necessarily contribute to aesthetic protectionism.

## V. Conclusions

Environmental aesthetics should play an important role in environmental protection. Clarifying the issues at stake in the debate between relativity and objectivity in environmental aesthetics is important for such aesthetic protectionism. Certain types of pluralism and relativity in environmental aesthetics do present legitimate worries for aesthetic protectionism. We need to develop and justify an account of better and worse aesthetic responses to the environment and avoid anything goes relativism and the idea that only one type of environmental aesthetic response is correct. There are a variety of positions in environmental aesthetics that provide dimensions of objectivity useful for aesthetic protectionism. A knowledge-based environmental aesthetic can be useful for aesthetic protectionism, but it is not the only such useful environmental aesthetic and it does not guarantee beneficial environmental results.

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent broadside, see J. Robert Loftis, "Three Problems for the Aesthetic Foundations of Environmental Ethics," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 10 (no. 2, Fall-Winter 2003):41-50.

<sup>2</sup> Janna Thompson, "Aesthetics and the Value of Nature" *Environmental Ethics* 17 (1995), p. 293.

<sup>3</sup> Philosophers who take this view include Malcolm Budd, "The Aesthetics of Nature," *The Aristotelian Society* 100,2 (2000): 137-157, John Fisher "What The Hills Are Alive With--In Defense of the Sounds of Nature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, 2 (1998), pp. 167-179, and Kendall Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 1970, pp. 334-67.

<sup>4</sup> John Fisher, *Reflecting on Art* (1993), p. 338-39.

<sup>5</sup> Marcia Eaton, "The Beauty that Requires Health," in J. Nassauer, ed., *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology* (Island Press, 1997): pp. 86-106 and "Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature" in A. Berleant and A. Carlson (eds.), Special Issue: Environmental Aesthetics, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 149-56.

<sup>6</sup> Even Thom Heyd—who Carlson characterizes as a "post modernist" about aesthetic appreciation, a position that puts no limits on aesthetic relevance—does in fact accept some limits: Information is relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of nature only if it sustains aesthetic attention and does not thwart it. See Thomas Heyd "Aesthetic Appreciation and the Many Stories about Nature," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 41, 2 (2001): 125-137.

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald Hepburn, "Trivial and Serious in Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell eds., *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 65-80. Like Carlson, Brady, and Eaton, Hepburn sees the need to distinguish the trivial from the serious in order to allow aesthetics a role in environmental policy. "When we seek to defend areas of 'outstanding natural beauty' against depredations, it matters greatly what account we can give of the appreciation of that beauty. . . . we must be able to show that more is involved in such appreciation than the pleasant, unfocused enjoyment of a picnic place or a fleeting and distanced impression of countryside through a touring-coach window, or the obligatory visits to standard . . . snapshot-points" (p. 65).

<sup>8</sup> Carlson has used the phrase "easy beauty" to describe some of the less serious aesthetic responses to nature.

<sup>9</sup> John Fisher, "What The Hills Are Alive With." Fisher argues that nature's sounds "merit serious aesthetic attention both theoretically and experientially" (p. 177). He says little if anything about the implications of his views for aesthetic protectionism. Fisher's main concern in this paper is to show that judgments about natural sounds can be aesthetic even though they do not satisfy the agreement requirement (discussed below).

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Budd, "The Aesthetics of Nature."

<sup>1</sup> Glenn Parsons, "Is the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature Objective?" p. 4, spring 2005 draft manuscript from the author.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher relativism is also manifest in his endorsement of John Cage's claim that "What is more angry than the flash of lightening and the sound of thunder. These responses to nature are mine and will not necessarily correspond to another's" (p. 178). Note that Fisher is not a pure relativist. That he accepts the guidance by object requirement is one way Fisher moves away from an anything goes relativism. Presumably ways of listening to nature's sounds that are not guided by the object are inappropriate on his account. (It is not clear, however, what such a requirement rules out. For example, would it rule out listening to bird sounds while playing loud rock music, or listen to the sounds of a stream only when one has a pounding headache?) Another constraint Fisher accepts is that we should not listen to nature in the same way we listen to music, for music is an intentional object and Fisher thinks that should have a dramatic impact on how we appreciate it. He also states that although aesthetic objects (whether art or nature) underdetermine judgments about them, "this does not mean that any critical or interpretive judgment is property assertable" (p. 172). He concludes his article by claiming that although "there are few constraints on appreciation of such sounds" (i.e., environmental sounds), this does not "make responsible criticism and discourse about the objects of appreciation impossible" (p. 177). Fisher needs to do more to explain how and why his pluralism/relativism does not undermine criticism, and specifically why it does not undermine aesthetic protectionism.

<sup>3</sup> If it could be successfully argued that they are of greater value than most sounds that would replace them after environmental degradation, then such a plurality would not compromise aesthetic protectionism at all.

<sup>4</sup> Noel Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature: Between Religion and Natural History," in Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, eds., *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 244-266. Carroll argues this framing happens without using the type of scientific information that Carlson claims is needed to fix aesthetic focus.

<sup>5</sup> Stan Godlovitch, "Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 11, 1 (1994): 15-30.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the "equal beauty thesis" (all of nature is equally beautiful)—though it is an objectivist claim—is a problem from the perspective of aesthetic protectionism.

<sup>7</sup> Hepburn, "The Trivial and The Serious," p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in Fisher, "What The Hills Are Alive With," p. 179, fn 32.

<sup>9</sup> Below I discuss Emily Brady's suggestion that self-interested aesthetic responses violate the disinterestedness

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requirement of aesthetics and thus can be ruled out on that account as not properly aesthetic.

<sup>10</sup> Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* (Routledge, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Noel Carroll, "On Being Moved by Nature."

<sup>12</sup> This account of Carroll's views comes from pp. 254-260 of "On Being Moved by Nature."

<sup>13</sup> An account of this interpenetration of aesthetics and ethics and its relevance for environmental protectionism can be found in Ned Hettinger, "Allen Carlson's Environmental Aesthetics and the Protection of the Environment," *Environmental Ethics* 27, 1 (Spring 2005), especially pp. 71-76.

<sup>14</sup> Emily Brady, "Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature."

<sup>15</sup> Marcia Eaton, "Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature," p. 152.

<sup>16</sup> See Ned Hettinger, "Allen Carlson's Environmental Aesthetics."

<sup>17</sup> Allen Carlson, "Hargrove, Positive Aesthetics, and Indifferent Creativity," *Philosophy and Geography* 5, 2 (2002): 233, note 27 (*my emphasis*).

<sup>18</sup> Marcia Eaton, "The Beauty that Requires Health," p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Marcia Eaton, "Professional Aesthetics and Environmental Reform," *Aesthetics online*, <http://www.aesthetics-online.org/ideas/eaton.html>, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Marcia Eaton, "Fact and Fiction," p. 154.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>23</sup> See Donald Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," *Environmental History Review* 14 (1990): 1-18. Ned Hettinger and William Throop. 1999. "Refocusing Ecocentrism: De-emphasizing Stability and Defending Wildness," *Environmental Ethics* 21: 3-21.