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Endangered Species

At a recent forum on the Endangered Species Act, several speakers presented "ethical" ideas for the Act. Many of these ideas, however, were quite unethical.

When the Endangered Species Act (ESA) became effective, it provided a model for the rest of the world to follow; a model of environmental legislation. Many nations have legislation to protect, to some means, endangered and threatened species. Like many acts passed by Congress, the ESA requires reauthorization periodically. This reauthorization process allows lawmakers to alter a wide sweeping act to more closely reflect the "will of the people." The panel, and indeed the whole forum, centered on reasons the act should exist, if it should be reauthorized and what, if any, amendments should be made.

Dr. James Deacon led the forum with an introduction and short, but thorough lecture on the history and function of the ESA. He outlined the act's successes (41% of all species listed are improving, seven have been taken off the list), and its problems (the act focuses on individual species and not on ecosystems).

The Nevada Director of the Nature Conservancy, Steve Hobbs, presented the opening arguments on reauthorization. Citing human based value after human based value, he patiently explained why saving species would benefit us. It is important to note, however, that he finished his talk by marveling at the evolutionary effort required to make a mouse.

The topic of the next segment, "Economic Value of a Strong ESA," speaks for itself. John Hiatt, from the Redrock Audubon Society pointed out several specific examples of why we should save wild crop species. The potato blight in Ireland last century, a corn blight in the US within the last decade, Pacific salmon fished to extinction, these and other events are costly, economically and in terms of human life. Monoculture farming and unsustainable fishing practices are especially susceptible to disastrous failures. But there are other human based values that benefit from biodiversity.

About 40% of useful medicines are derived from some plant. Botanists estimate that only 5% of all plant species are cataloged. It would seem a wise idea to preserve as many of the remaining 95% as we can. Dr. Robert Kessler, MD, presented a very valid and solid case for such preservation. "The next miracle drug is out there," was his closing line.

The next topic on the agenda was "The Moral Arguments." I find the choice of speakers, Rabbi Mel Hecht, questionable. I found his habit of pacing back and forth across the front of the room distracting. I prefer dynamic speakers, but there is a fine line between dynamic and frenetic. Many environmental

ethicists see the Judeo-Christian idea of "man's dominion over nature" to be a large part of today's environmental problems. Rabbi Hecht chose to suggest that these very same ideas were the reason we should save nature. (To paraphrase the speaker, "Man shouldn't disrespect those that we've subjugated. Man has lost the interconnectedness of nature.") The transgressions of behavior based on such philosophies are many and need not be listed here. Suffice to say that justifying our actions as the "Will of God," and failing to acknowledge our past mistakes are not likely to move us any closer to sustainability.

The next speaker, Dr. Paul Ritchett, brought the forum back to productive ground by investigating legal "taking." (The US Constitution prevents the Federal Government from arbitrarily "taking" private property without due compensation, except in certain circumstances.) When a species is "listed" by the ESA, specific behaviors or actions, which might harm the species or its habitat, are prohibited. In some cases, preventing a private land owner from using his land in the profitable manner of his choice may constitute a takings. If every action prevented by the ESA were considered a takings, the total compensation required from the US Government would bankrupt several small planets.

Rounding out the forum, Hermie Hiatt presented specific bills, currently being considered by Congress, that would either weaken or strengthen the ESA. Political differences are drawn along the usual Conservative/Liberal party lines. Anyone recognizing that healthy ecosystems need biodiversity and that humans need ecosystems would support the various amendments that would strengthen current laws. The other side values human and individual rights over those of the planet. They only see the immediate gain and not the long run need. By weakening the ESA, more short term gains can be had.

All in all, the forum was positive and forward thinking, but it lacked a strong emphasis on ethics. Since we can't quantitatively measure intrinsic value, isn't it better to measure what we can? If a South American farmer has to choose between clear cutting the forest or feeding his children, won't he cut the trees? The problem with making decisions this way is that when the choice is between two species and only one of them is beneficial to man, the other is out. Valuing only the economic or helpful species is not good enough. A better measuring stick is the intrinsic value of the species, but until more people understand this value, it is an inaccurate measure.

As ever, Apa-tizer is brought to you by
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