



Talking Conservation

Drie Valleyen

Our Position in the Ecological Ecosystem

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*On behalf of Sedgefield
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John Muir (1838-1914), a Scottish American, is viewed as one of the fathers of nature conservation in America. His most enduring contribution may be the philosophical framework he provided for environmentalism. He advocated a holistic view of nature, recognising that all living things are interconnected and interdependent. He strongly opposed the anthropocentric view that humans are separate from and superior to nature, advocating instead for a biocentric perspective that values all life.

Today, more so than ever, humans occupy a conflicting position in the ecological system. We are both integral participants in natural cycles and the dominant disruptors of them. Our role is distinctive because, unlike other species in the system, we actively reshape and wipe out ecosystems through our selfish desire for material wealth and exploitation of resources beyond what is necessary, or reasonable, and without consideration for the environment.

We are part of the Ecosystem because of the biological role we play as omnivores. We feed across multiple trophic levels. This places us not at the top of the food chain but as flexible participants in energy and nutrient flows. We are also dependent on ecosystems because we rely on ecosystems for clean air, water, fertile soil, food and medicines, biodiversity, cultural activities, and recreation. These services are essential for our survival, just as they are for other

species.

Furthermore, our health and prosperity are directly tied to ecological balance. For example, deforestation disrupts rainfall patterns, and invader species impact the flow of rivers and water quality, which in turn affects agriculture and food security.

We are Disruptors because industrialisation and urbanisation have led to exploitation of natural resources, habitat destruction, and pollution. Human activities are the primary driver of climate change, altering ecosystems at unprecedented tempos. We are also the primary cause of species extinction of which the rates are now hundreds of times higher than natural background rates. Extinction of a species is a recognised cause of a systems collapse with its concomitant negative ripple effect on other systems.

Muir famously wrote, *“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”*

We are also Stewards because of our awareness that we are not separate from nature but embedded within it. Recognising this, helps to bridge the gap between society and environment. Sustainable practices such as renewable energy, conservation, recycling, are examples of how we can function as stewards rather than exploiters. Our cultural dimension underlines that human development, is shaped by multiple layers of the environment. This means that our ecological role is not just biological but also social and cultural.

A system is a set of interrelated elements that makes a unified

whole. Individual things, like plants, animals, soil, and everything on and in it, watersheds, people and their infrastructure and economies, are systems and at the same time cannot be fully understood separately from the larger systems in which we exist. With any system, the whole is different and larger than the sum of the individual parts and the relationships between individual parts may be more important than the parts.

Muir had such a holistic view of nature, recognising that all living things are interconnected and interdependent. He challenged the prevailing utilitarian view that nature should be exploited solely for human benefit, arguing that it possessed intrinsic value worthy of protection.

Muir understood that ecosystems are complex, dynamic systems and that any disturbance to one part of the system can have cascading effects throughout the entire network. This understanding is crucial for addressing complex environmental challenges like climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss.

We focus on things that can be measured and quantified and it is often implied that phenomena that can be measured and quantified are more important, and even that what cannot be measured and quantified does not exist at all. However, some aspects of systems, like the relationships in a food web, cannot be measured or counted. Living systems develop and evolve. Understanding these systems requires a shift in focus from structure to processes such as evolution, renewal, and change.

If we want life to thrive, we must keep on asking the question: What conditions enhance life? And, more specifically, what specific conditions are the best for our environment? My view is that mutual accountability, knowledge, and an ethical approach to living in the environment are at least a good part of the answer.