My Ecological “Ten Commandments”

As we indicated early in the semester, those concerned with environmental ethics are often thought to be focused upon “consequentialist ethics” (reasoning from observed consequences of choices made) rather than “deontological ethics” (reasoning from received “first principles”). While this dichotomy may be useful as a preliminary means of understanding differences in approaches to ethics, ultimately it is too limiting.

In reality, environmental ethicists – especially those who are interested in the ethics of sustainability – really represent a combination of these two approaches. In effect we are ethical consequentialists in search of a deontology. That is, we seek to affirm some important, general principles of ethical behavior for humans in the environment, but we feel it is important to establish these principles empirically from the observation of the way sustainable ecosystems function over time. This is initially an inductive approach to establishing ethical norms, rather than a deontological -- or purely deductive – one. In stating this, however, it is important to affirm that consequentialists also seek to establish general rules or guidelines of “proper” human behavior in an ecosystem.

In this respect, it should be possible for us all to state – at least provisionally – our own form of what we might best label our “Ecological Ten Commandments.”

You should think of this as an “exercise” – not a full dissertation. You needn’t spend more time on it this week than you have in your other weekly blog posts. But the effort here is a bit more general and up to your own initiative in many respects. In the course we hope you have learned something about the way humans behave individually and collectively in the ecosystem and what impact this behavior has had upon the sustainability of the ecosystems we inhabit.

From what you now know, how would you state your list of key rules – your “Thou Shalts” and “Thou Shalt Nots…”? There is nothing sacrosanct about the number 10, so don’t feel constrained by that. Do, please, make an effort to list your key principles in order of their importance in your current thinking – that is, the first being the most important, the second the next important, etc…We will discuss these “Ecological Ten Commandments” in the class session via Elluminate next Tuesday.

In a way our efforts are vaguely analogous to the very perceptive thinking of Bernd Heinrich, in his book “Bumblebee Economics,” where he seeks to distill several general principles about how the “economy” of the bumblebee is structured, based on observing regular patterns in their behavior. We, too, wish to understand what principles of human behavior ought generally to apply if we wish to survive within a functioning ecosystem over time – as the bumblebee has done so successfully for so long. In short, how should we behave according to the “ethics of sustainability?” What are your “ten commandments?”

Looking forward to class with you online on Tuesday!