

Ecologists and environmentalism

Environmentalism needs serious discussion by ecologists. I was primed on this topic by recent statements made by colleagues to the effect that, “I’m no environmentalist, but... (insert an eminently reasonable environmentalist proposition of your choice here)”, as well as by a plaintive comment in a recent student evaluation, “The instructor is an environmentalist”. Denied the opportunity to reply to the student, I do so here. “This is an ecology course; by necessity, its subject matter deals with the environment. We use science to study the environment, and science provides the rationale and avenue for its preservation.”

The last place that I would have expected to hear negative branding of environmentalism is at an ESA function, so imagine the jolt when, at the Society’s Annual Meeting in Milwaukee this past August, we were told by a prominent ecologist that we are scientists and therefore should eschew environmentalism. There was, of course, ample refutation of the notion of any wall between ecological science and environmentalism throughout the rest of the meeting. Thomas Lovejoy’s opening plenary address demonstrated artful interweaving of science with environmentalism and how the study of biodiverse nature is an essential part of advocacy for its preservation. He finished with a story about Ben Bradlee, the former Executive Editor of the *Washington Post*, who steered his newspaper toward progressive reporting on the environment despite only a modest appreciation of science, and how his publisher, Katherine Graham, had complained that environmentalists are self-righteous. This was a warning to us not to be shrill, and reinforced the wisdom of doing our science with an eye on the political and social milieu.

Whereas ecology is science and environmentalism sometimes is and sometimes isn’t, the latter is necessary for the former. We ecologists have the same relationship to the subject of our studies as do art historians and archeologists to theirs. There is no opprobrium upon artists and archeologists advocating for the preservation of art and antiquities. Protection of the environment – environmentalism – is advocacy of what we study. Why should we not advocate for protection of the environment in our professional capacity?

The negative branding of environmentalism comes from groups that are part and parcel of the notorious war on science. They are dedicated to denying the environmental degradation that ecologists are documenting every day. Some of the most prominent of these groups are discussed by Jaques *et al.* in a review entitled, *The organization of denial: conservative think tanks and environmental skepticism* (*Environ Pol* 2008; 17: 349–85). The authors document the concerted anti-environmentalism and complete disregard of these groups for anything connected with the environment. Jaques *et al.* describe the substantial financial backing, broad reach, and scores of authors that have been encouraged to spread disinformation regarding scientific findings – particularly about global warming – by conservative think tanks. The authors argue that these powerful entities seek to interfere with the scientific communication that is the basis of society’s understanding of environmental issues.

Graduate students with whom I raised these issues at the ESA Annual Meeting had little trouble in recognizing the essential, functional connection between basic ecological science and environmentalism for understanding and preserving the objects of study to which they are dedicating their lives. Several pointed out that a substantial number of sessions at the meeting represented scientific environmentalism, including such topics as conservation, biodiversity, environmental justice, and sustainability.

Any accounting of our scientific values should include objectivity and rationality, which ecologists have used to yield facts about the environment. A few of many such facts produced by ecological science are that humans are responsible for global warming, the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, and profound ecosystem and food-web changes in the Great Lakes through the introduction of invasive species. These are the sorts of facts that anti-environmental forces seek to deny. Defending these facts as the products of science makes you an environmentalist. To separate ecological science from environmentalism to avoid potential negative connotations of the latter affords anti-environmentalists the power of demagoguery; with rhetoric and false claims, they will have achieved prejudice against the subject of our studies.

In short, it is precious and self-damaging to claim a separation between our science and environmentalism. It should be a tenet of our ethics as ecologists to reject and counter the defamation of environmentalism.



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