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Empire

MAGAZINE OF THE WEST



Natural Thinker

Thirty years after he laid the foundation of environmental ethics, Holmes Rolston continues to wrestle with one of the West's most contentious issues. Story by Steve Lipsher

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Holmes Rolston melded theology, philosophy and a love of nature into the field of environmental ethics.

Special to The Denver Post / Jill Mott

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On the cover: *Holmes Rolston bikes near Dixon Reservoir outside Fort Collins.* Photo by Jill Mott

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Equally comfortable in the classroom at Colorado State University and in the open spaces he first relished as a child, Holmes Rolston attempts to bridge the human world and the natural world.





Holmes Rolston is virtually unknown in Colorado. But those who do know him recognize him as one of the driving forces behind a movement dear to the hearts of many Westerners: environmentalism.

Story by Steve Lipsher
Photos by Jill Mott

Natural Thinker

C O V E R S T O R Y

FORT COLLINS - Flicking its white-tipped tail, an eastern kingbird settles on a barbed-wire fence near the boulder where Holmes Rolston has chosen to perch.

A stray species in the Rocky Mountain foothills, the flashy black-and-white bird in some ways mimics the "philosopher gone wild," as Rolston calls himself when venturing outside the ivory towers of academia and into the wilderness he cherishes.

"He's not supposed to be here," he said.

The same could be said about Rolston, an internationally renowned thinker at Colorado State University, where his ideas have formed the foundation for some of the nation's strongest environmental laws.

Rolston is considered the father of environmental ethics, a school of thought that proposes that the natural world has intrinsic value and humans should learn to respect it. In other words, applying ethics - doing what's right - in the natural world as well as in human endeavors.

"He gives us both a way to think about nature and a language to use when talking about the value of the natural world," said Dan Luecke, an attorney with the Environmental Defense Fund.

Beginning in the 1960s, Rolston and others on the cusp of the green movement helped usher in a sea change: Ecology evolved into environmentalism, and our consciousness of the natural world flowered, since becoming ingrained in our collective psyche.

When he started pondering human duties to the natural world, the pervasive attitude was that we should protect wild areas merely for our grandchildren to see and use.

Now, the unquestioned prevailing sentiment is that the natural world has a value all of its own: A squirrel has a right to its habitat; swamps are biologically rich wetlands and not just quagmires; lightning-sparked fire has an important role in the forest. This is Rolston encapsulated.

So revolutionary has Rolston's work been over the past 30 years that this spring he won an invitation to

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Scotland to present the prestigious Gifford Lectures, a 112-year-old lecture series that has featured some of the world's most creative and influential philosophers and scholars.

Consider this company:

French philosopher Henri Bergson, who won the Nobel Prize in literature; Danish atomic physicist Niels Bohr, who won the Nobel Prize in physics; American philosopher John Dewey; German physicist Werner Heisenberg, a founder of quantum theory and winner of the Nobel Prize in physics; philosopher William James, known as the most influential American thinker of his day; Alsatian theologian, musician and medical missionary Albert Schweitzer; American astronomer Carl Sagan; English historian Arnold Toynbee; and Sir Alfred North Whitehead, an English mathematician and philosopher.

"If you had asked me what honor I would most have liked, it would have been the Gifford Lectures," Rolston said. "But if you asked me, 'Did I think I would be asked?' It came to me as a considerable surprise. I didn't think I was really in that league."

But for all his celebration in academic circles for his environmental thought, Rolston is scarcely known in his own backyard, in a state loaded with environmentalists.

"Who is Holmes Rolston?" asked Jasper Carlton, head of the Biodiversity Legal Foundation in Boulder and the country's most aggressive legal crusader for protecting endangered species. "I'm afraid we're practitioners, not philosophers."

So who is Holmes Rolston? For starters, he is the 64-year-old son of a

Presbyterian pastor, the grandson of a Presbyterian pastor and an ordained Presbyterian minister himself who served as a pastor for nine years.

"I never aspired to be a lifetime pastor," he said. "I was always more interested in the academic side of things."

Definition No. 1: Philosophy is distinguished from theology in that philosophy ignores dogma and deals with speculation rather than faith.

Rolston studied physics as an undergraduate in the 1950s, seeking to learn the "science of fundamental nature."

"We were in the Atomic Age. . . . It seemed like physics was the science that held the prospects to find out how the world was made. It seemed to have to do with creation, which I was interested in."

Definition No. 2: Philosophy differs from science in that science bases its theories wholly on established fact whereas philosophy covers the area of inquiry where no facts as such are available.

Foremost, Rolston was a wilderness explorer, leading a Huckleberry Finn childhood in Virginia's southern Appalachian mountains.

"I grew up barefoot, roaming the woods, the rural countryside," he said. "I always had a kind of interest in the natural world that came from . . . having spent a lot of time with the ground under my feet and the sky over my head."

It was from those back-grounds that Rolston blended his love for the natural world with theology and science into a philosophy that has been the hallmark of his career.

"I'm sometimes called the father of environmental ethics. I think I could take credit for spawning an environmental turn in philosophy . . . that we ought



Associated Press

Controversy over the endangered northern spotted owl caused a ban on logging in some areas of the Northwest. The debate over the owl is a prime example of how environmental ethics affects public policy.

to be thinking of nature as having value."

Rolston is the first to concede he is not an intellectual trailblazer in the field of environmental thinking. His predecessors include Thoreau and Sierra Club founder John Muir, and their modern-day counterparts such as author Edward Abbey and environmental evangelist David Brower. But his work, embodied in books such as "Environmental Ethics" and "Philosophy Gone Wild," crystallized streams of thought into a concrete, academically defensible code of ethics.

"David Brower, who is far more influential than I am, believes these kind of things, but

David Brower never had time, energy or effort . . . to formulate these things the way I have. John Muir believed the same kind of things that I believe . . . (but) did not give such a philosophical and academic analysis to these kinds of things."

Rolston's philosophy can be seen played out in the Endangered Species Act and the Wilderness Act, among other landmark environmental laws that aim to preserve species and their habitats and protect wild places from human endeavors.

"Those acts and other pieces of environmental legislation represent a working out in environmental policy of the kind of

ethic that I've been advocating over the decades," he said.

But in the latter part of the 1990s, environmentalism in general and those laws in particular have taken a beating politically, demonstrating the sometimes irreconcilable differences between philosophical theory and pragmatic concerns.

"Nobody disagrees with the objective of the act, but a lot of people disagree with the absolutism of the act," said Bob Szabo, a Washington, D.C., attorney with the National Endangered Species Act Reform Coalition.

Szabo, who is backed by development and farm interests, doesn't know Rolston but is intimately familiar with his philosophy, the very philosophy he battles in lobbying Congress to rewrite the 20-year-old law.

"I think that most of us would say these modern environmental laws which we've enacted in the last 20 years are very important to this country," he said. "Exactly how they operate is the question we're dealing with today."

The Endangered Species Act, for example, favors animals over humans, critics say, pointing to issues such as the controversy over the spotted owl that prevented logging in the Pacific Northwest.

"The act itself has ended up putting thousands of Americans out of work, prevented development, closed schools, eliminated the timber harvest in entire states (and) threatened livestock grazing, oil and natural-gas production, all natural resource development," said Jeff Harris, executive director of People for the West, a Pueblo-based property-rights group.

"Absolutely we agree with the philosophy behind the Endangered Species Act. But . . . a lot of extremes have been

taken," he said.

Stepping out of his role as an uncompromising philosopher, Rolston doesn't disagree with the idea that the law could be rewritten to take into account the need for human endeavors.

But that puts the philosopher squarely in the middle of the political debate, with his biggest critics ironically being the environmentalists, who fear compromise will dilute their goals.

"I think we are facing a very severe biological crisis in this country," said Carlton, the endangered species legal crusader.

"Ethics is important in this. We're not making the hard decisions in terms of preserving the habitats, in terms of preserving the environment." Despite his efforts to make sure the Endangered Species Act is enforced for every endangered species - cuddly or not - Carlton said the environmental battle is being lost.

"I think all we're doing now is documenting the demise of wildlife in America," he said.

"What worries me is the social and political climate. This is where Holmes Rolston and other writers can be of great service."

Rolston remains buoyed, however, by an increased environmental awareness.

"When I started doing this in the '50s, we didn't have any environmental laws to speak of," he said. "Now, we've got the Wilderness Act, which is well-nigh a miracle from my perspective. . . . We didn't have the Environmental Protection Agency back then. Now there isn't a businessman in the United States who doesn't conduct business with some attention to environmental regulations."

Although politically conscious, Rolston isn't an activist and doesn't take credit for the political force behind the legislation.



Special to The Denver Post / Jill Mott

Rolston leads a discussion with CSU students pondering the question: Are humans a part of nature or apart from nature?

"I'm not Rachel Carson. I'm not Aldo Leopold. I'm not Bob Marshall. I'm not Paul Ehrlich," he said, ticking off the names of the environmental movement's kingpins. "In terms of making a splash politically, or influencing Congress, I'm not going to make those claims, although I have been on commissions and worked for Congress. Among my students are several thousand people, many in decision-making contexts dealing with natural resources - supervisors in national parks and so forth. So I like to think I have some influence in those quarters."

dozen graduate students taking Rolston's course, "Concepts in Natural Value," trickle into a wood-paneled room in a 1960s-era cinderblock building on the CSU campus. It is the last class of the semester, and they are rambunctious and enthusiastic to discuss and defend their final papers.

A Holmes Rolston reader

In addition to lecturing on five continents, Holmes Rolston has written prodigiously throughout his career, including more than 70 articles for philosophy and science journals and chapters in more than three dozen books. He is founder of the 17-year-old journal, "Environmental Ethics," and his books include:

- "Science and Religion: A Critical Survey" (Random House and McGraw Hill).
- "Philosophy Gone Wild" (Prometheus Books).
- "Environmental Ethics" (Temple University Press).
- "Conserving Natural Value" (Columbia University Press)

Rolston, in an open-collar shirt as usual, starts the informal discussion after a few minutes of socializing.

"Are humans apart from

nature, or are they a part of nature?" he asked.

It is a profound question that gets at the very heart of the debate over the environment. If humans are fully a part of nature, one argument goes, laws protecting the environment from human activity are illogical and unnecessary.

"Scientists would say humans

evolved from nature, but would they say they evolved out of nature? If you asked a scientist if humans are just as natural as everything else on Earth, my guess is not all of them would say yes," Rolston said.

Student Jennifer Corwin noted that other animals have territories, and perhaps it can be considered humans have territories, too - in the domesticated areas.

For the sake of argument, Joe Hansen suggested the contrary, that humans and nature are one: "You could say Chicago is no less natural than the coral reef." It is a premise that sits well with Rolston, who later wrestled over the issue out loud, in a soft, age-worn voice.

"I tend to find that humans are more apart from nature," he said. "I have this idea that

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nature and culture are pretty distinct realms. . . . Though I recognize these realms are different, I've got to keep them together on the same planet. So the kind of ethic I tried to work out recognizes irreducible differences between nature and culture and yet recognizes there needs to be a way for humans to build their cultures while keeping an appropriate respect for nature on the landscape."

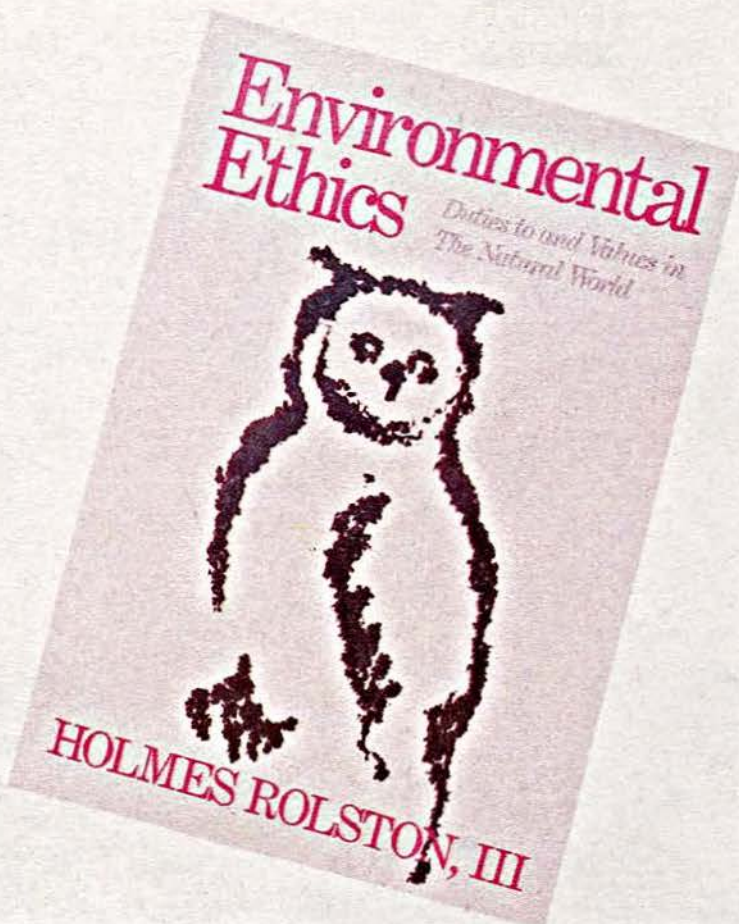
Rolston's easy manner in the classroom draws praise from students and helped him earn the title of University Distinguished Professor, CSU's highest teaching honor.

"He likes to express what he feels and believes, but he doesn't stuff it down anybody's throats," said David Gutsche. "I think that's one of the enjoyable things is he likes to discuss rather than argue. You never seem to be right or wrong on any issue. He only asks that you defend what you're saying. He'll question this, he'll question that. More than anything, it's to make sure you believe what you're saying."

Gutsche isn't even a philosophy student, having just received his master's degree in design merchandising and consumer science. "I just found it to be one of the most interesting classes I've taken."

Kathy Stepien, on the other hand, came to CSU from Juneau, Alaska, specifically for the Rolston-anchored graduate program in environmental philosophy, one of only three in the country.

"It's been pretty impressive to me to see how well respected he is in the field, how much he's done for the whole discipline," said



Stepien, a physical therapist. "But he's very accessible as a professor."

□

Sitting on a boulder - not unlike Rodin's "The Thinker" - Rolston harbors few pretenses in a battered, sweat-rimed felt hat the color of adobe, a turquoise flannel shirt and patched blue jeans.

The scene is a grassy hillside overlooking a small reservoir west of Fort Collins, where small groups of Canada geese honk overhead, a taste of nature on the edge of town.

"The things I talk about - preserving wilderness and value in nature - they can't stand up in the long run against economic pressures," Rolston conceded, basking in the sun. "My general line of reply is that we have been able to put aside economics

in many cases already to do what's right. We do lots of things in environmental policy where we constrain economics." Businesses are told they cannot pollute streams, for instance, or developers are not allowed to build in the habitat of endangered species. Rolston said that still leaves much of the landscape available for industry. "It's not like they're told they can't do anything. We're just saying we can't do it here." Then, the eastern kingbird arrived, distracting Rolston from the mental task at issue.

"I kind of had mountains and nature around me most of my life," he said, breathing deeply, "and I guess maybe that's improved my philosophy." □

Steve Lipsber is the staff writer for Empire Magazine.