

# A Review of 'How Nature Matters'

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Simon P. James

*How Nature Matters: Culture, Identity, and Environmental Value*

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Short though it is, *How Nature Matters* is the most detailed and carefully argued work among recent, and welcome, attempts to give the notion of nature's *meanings* a prominent place in environmental philosophy. Its author's aim is to 'buck the trend' of myopically focusing on nature's values by switching the focus to meanings (p. 49). This does not entail ignoring environmental values since, James argues, the fact that a mountain or forest has meaning for people is a powerful reason, other things being equal, for it to have value for them.

References to nature's meanings are especially sparse in the literature of the currently dominant 'cultural ecosystem services' model of nature's value to us. Writing in 2013, the then Prince of Wales may have been right to applaud a shift away from viewing nature as a resource for economic growth to seeing it as 'a provider of ... vital services' (p. 20). But James demonstrates that the services model shares the same basic structure, and limitations, as a crudely economic one: it remains 'instrumental', and construes the relation between the 'provider' and the benefit it brings as a means-end, cause-and-effect one. For example, the so-called 'existence value' that a natural entity - the blue whale, say - may have because knowledge of its existence produces pleasure or satisfaction is a thoroughly instrumental one.

James's criticism of the cultural services model is not that, because it attends to what is of value 'for us', it is unacceptably anthropocentric, but that it is incapable of accommodating a crucial way in which, for millions of people, nature is valuable - namely through having meaning for them. That something matters to people cannot consist in a causal connection between it and them. Succinctly, deftly and with the help of some useful 'case studies', James identifies why this is so. The services model cannot 'capture the intimacy of the nature-human relations' described in these cases (p. 39). If Big Mountain, a place sacred to the Navajo people in north-eastern Arizona, were valued by them only as a means to their well-being, then it could be replaced by any other mountain conducive to that end. But, as the term 'sacred' suggests, this idea is absurd. Just as it is to propose that the integral role of reindeer in Saami tradition could be performed by some substitute animals.

In these cases, the value of an entity owes to the meaning that a place or a creature occupies in a people's form of life - one so central that it enters into their 'cultural identity', their sense of 'who they are' (p. 37). More generally, natural entities may be valuable because they have meanings 'in the context of a meaningful whole', such as a culture, a religion, or form of life (p. 55).

They are valuable, therefore, not as instruments, but as partly 'constitutive' of meaningful wholes. They don't provide services, but help to establish and preserve identities.

While the first half of *How Nature Matters* is devoted to criticism of the services model and an account of nature's meaning, the remaining chapters address some potential misunderstandings and objections. James's strategy with these is generally to deny that his account is committed to positions that might quite reasonably be rejected. These include Arne Naess's Ecosophy T and Warwick Fox's notion of 'transpersonal identification' (p. 88). That people's sense of who they are is shaped by a relation to nature does not entail that there is no distinction between self and nature. They include, as well, the positions of those, like Steven Vogel, who reject the very distinction between a human and a natural realm. Such views, James shows, rely on tendentious ways of understanding the concept of nature remote from his and the everyday one of 'those parts of the world that seem to have been largely unaffected by human actions' (p. 114).

In a similar vein, James argues that an emphasis on the value that accrues to natural entities in virtue of their meanings is compatible with these entities having 'intrinsic value'. That Big Mountain has value 'in itself' in no way contradicts the claim that a primary value of the mountain is the contribution it makes to the meaningful whole of Navajo culture. Enthusiasts for intrinsic value will, however, find James's defence of it less than full-blooded. For, in effect, it is only the *talk* of intrinsic value, not its reality, that he defends. Claims about natural entities as 'valuable for their own sakes play an important *expressive* role' (p. 132), as part of a strategy against narrowly instrumental attitudes towards nature. His defence, too, of invoking people's rights when resisting the despoliation of natural entities that matter to them also highlights the efficacy, the pragmatic 'force', of the rhetoric (p. 151).

*How Nature Matters*, in its 150 pages of text, covers a great deal of ground. Its succinctness, like the clarity and indeed elegance of the writing, is of course a virtue. Yet some critical readers may wish for a few extra pages that would have elaborated on certain themes. The most important of these is the pivotal notion of meaningful wholes. James hopes that the examples he describes - Navajo culture, Buddhist religion, Saami traditional life - will obviate the necessity to 'explain what *exactly* a meaningful whole is' (p. 55). But there is, I fear, a need to explain rather more than he is willing to do. For one thing, the very notion of the meaning of natural entities was defined in terms of contribution to meaningful wholes. Without a firmer grasp of these wholes, it remains uncertain what this contribution must be like.

The need for more to be said about meaningful wholes becomes especially pressing at two places. One is where James asks the important question of why it is often the *naturalness* of natural entities that is significant to people. His answer, following Don Maier, is that 'we need to retain a sense of a non-human realm' (p. 116), for there would be something terrible in seeing ourselves reflected back by *everything* around us. This may be right, but one wonders what the meaningful whole is towards which the experience of a non-human world of nature contributes. Human existence as such? But that doesn't sound like a meaningful whole on a par with, say, Saami or Navajo culture.

A similar worry arises when James asks whether, in emphatically non-traditional societies like our own, nature can still have meanings in the manner it does in traditional cultures. James is reluctant to answer 'No', for it would be depressing to conclude that our form of life is no longer one in which nature can have significance for us. But in lieu of a fuller account of meaningful wholes, it is hard to judge the cogency of this reluctance.

That *How Nature Matters* prompts us to reflect on such issues is, of course, among its many merits. So is the careful demolition of today's dominant, 'services' model of how nature matters. And so are its descriptions - sometimes poignant - of cultures and religions that are saturated by the significance that animals, mountains, trees and much else have for the people who belong to them. It is a book that deserves to attract lively discussion.

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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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