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Conserving natural heritage; shifting positions of culture and nature

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Introduction (B)

In this chapter we give an overview of the changing social perceptions of society's relationship with natural resources. We begin within a medieval setting, and whilst this is essentially an arbitrary starting point, it does highlight the long held belief in an external influence being responsible for the creation and maintenance of all elements of the natural world. At this point in time religious thought views society as external to a non-human natural world; a position of theism is maintained. In contrast this review ends at a time of an increasingly secular and utilitarian society, a time in which the dominate view of the natural world is communicated using the economic language of commodification and monetisation.

The process of social change is presented as discrete and simplistic steps, however, history does not exist as a series of themed events conveniently grouped in time and space. With thoughts of the natural world in mind, boundaries between paradigms should be seen as fuzzy, permeable and overlapping, similar to the idea of a social [eco]tone. Landscape, when described as a time and place in which we live, can be seen as the contingent and historically variable result of an interconnected relationship between socio-economic and bio-physical forces. The landscape of our natural heritage is both shaped and defined by culture and its relationship with nature. This position reflects a respect for the capacity of nature to reproduce the earth's life support systems. In this sense the ethical

perspective is holistic; culture and nature occupy the same space. Nature is seen as a necessity for the existence of human culture, where all human understanding, experiences and activities are played out in the same biophysical processes as are the activities of all other organisms.

Adopting a linear, temporal and comparable view of the prevailing paradigms experienced over time, we explore the nature of this relationship. This approach sees society's relationship with the natural world move from an Aristotelian teleological position, where religious thought views society as external to a non-human natural world (Hamilton 2002), to the placing of a secular society firmly within a social-ecological system (Pickett *et al* 2005). Here society occupies a place within the natural world, a reflexive component of a complex adaptive social-ecological system (Pickett *et al* 2005). Culture, in this context, can be thought of as elements created by mankind, such as society, economy, religion, state, technology, art, poetry, science and philosophy.

Reason replaces revelation (B)

The medieval philosophy of nature, pre 1600, was characterised by Aristotelian principals, an empirical view of the world governed by an explanation of 'substance and essence' based on observation and experience, ultimately all under the governance of God (Clarke & Wilson 2011). During this period, as typified by the writings of Aquinas, Bacon, Buridan, Grosseteste and others, theology was seen as the pinnacle of understanding. Scientific and natural philosophical thought not only relied

upon biblical revelation but, also, provided assistance in interpretation of the divine word (Killeen & Forshaw 2007).

A belief in God's existence and his creation of the world, places a divine creator as the source of the laws of nature with absolute power, a world built for the continued benefit of man under God's economy (Padgett 2003). Every major scientist from the 13th century up to and including Newton operated from a position that placed God as the source of the laws of nature, his power was absolute and able to alter the laws of nature at will (Padgett 2003). This orthodox Christian view placed man at the apex of creation, in the position of trustee or steward, with a detached, external view of the natural world (Derr 1975). A non-human natural world was denied a soul or innate spirit which, when combined with the idea of a world created for man to shape, separated man from nature.

However, this perception of a detached relationship with a natural world must also be considered alongside the fact that the population of 16th century England was essentially rural (Lowry 2004). Between 70% - 90% of the population lived on the land, with approximately 94% working in agriculture (Lowry 2004). Land ownership was characterised by a feudal society, vassals held land from lords in exchange for military service. Europe was a vast community consisting of 'territories', not 'nations', which were loosely connected by the cultural and ideological ties of Christianity (Chengdan 2010). Here, notwithstanding thoughts of detachment, knowledge of the natural world existed through a 'stewardship' approach to the landscape that guaranteed the future survival of communities.