

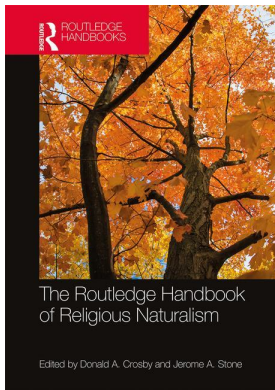
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THE SOCIETY OF NATURE AND THE RELIGION OF NATURE

Bruce M. Hannon

I will begin with some personal history. In the midst of graduate studies in the late 1960s, I learned the Army Corps of Engineers was planning a dam and reservoir that would flood a local park, one of the few remaining places of nature relatively untouched by humans in the endless central Illinois corn and soybean fields. I had grown up visiting this park from my nearby small hometown, and I had developed an attachment to it.

I resolved to stop this proposal. I set about doing so in spite of great resistance from the established culture of a major city nearby, strong bureaucratic support for the dam, and the endorsement for the dam from a local congressman. Opposing the dam was a full-time job for eight years, and with the help of many across the state, we stopped the planned dam and legislatively removed all reference to it from the Corps' bureaucratic memory.

There were many times during this exhausting effort that it seemed we would lose the park. There were times when the array of pro-dam forces was so discouraging there was talk of quitting. But an hour or two of walking in the natural beauty of the park restored my will to continue.

It was on those restorative walks that I realized the depth of power the nature in this park held for me. Its deep stillness, its great diversity with all of the interconnections and interrelatedness among its diverse parts, its cycle of the seasons ... all of this contributed to my strong sense of what can only be called a spiritual connection to nature. I was protecting this unique natural area, and in a way, it was including me in its dynamic, mysterious pulse. This was one of my first experiences of religious naturalism.

I developed in late 1960s what is now called the Iron Triangle, the view that these dam plans were the result of a collaboration of three agents: the bureaucratic (Corps of Engineers), the vested interests (construction contractors, local banks, and real estate developers), and the elected officials (Congressmen, Governors). The object of the local environmental organization was to break these connections. It was an excellent teaching device. We expanded our organization to help others across the United States who also had a proposed reservoir impinging on their place. In a few years, all the proposed Corps reservoirs were stopped.

I came to understand a great deal about what is needed to develop and sustain successful organizations. Certainly this includes the ability to identify and resolve environmental threats; however, no group of citizens can succeed in nature discovery, protection, and restoration without competent leaders. Successful volunteer groups are not wholly democratic.

Leadership requires a host of personal characteristics: a sense of fairness, persistence, humor, and humility; the ability to understand natural and social interactions and motivations; the ability to teach others to develop their sense of place; the formulation of an action plan with a strong sense of efficient delegation and management; the ability to inspire others to join the plan of action; the ability to recognize leadership potential in others; the ability to secure and then celebrate successes; the ability to ensure that everyone involved is recognized for their contributions; and the ability to sustain the growth and activities of this community. In the 1970s I proposed a plan for leadership development and called it the Society of Nature. It is the resulting collection of my many environmental organizational efforts and is elaborated as follows.

I made another discovery, and this was also my biggest disappointment. Groups that formed to oppose particular dams or to protect natural areas frequently dissolved once they were successful. I now believe that including the ideas of religious naturalism among our organizing tools would have helped to solve this problem. Religious naturalism would have provided a center of gravity that could have held the group together as a community of environmentalists.

Developing the leadership, forming the Society of Nature

Love and respect for all life and for inanimate nature—past, present, and future—is the basic mission of the Society. Our environmental problem is in our hearts, not in the woods; in our perceptions, not in the air; in our spirit, not in the sea. Through carelessness, we destroy our most fundamental life support in nature. We struggle to prosper, yet we are unwilling to give our descendants the natural resources for their well-being. We do not respect our natural and cultural heritage, and we have provided a poor example, with the result that our children will not respect theirs. Our attempt to avoid the situation either leaves us alone and impotent with shame and guilt, or we seek consumption as a curative as a distraction from facing the reality of the environmental problem.

There is an alternative behavior that promotes happiness based on consistent accomplishment. It requires a gradual withdrawal from unnecessary material consumption, and limiting the population to a truly sustainable one. It requires an unending curiosity leading to a particular sort of education—learning the significance of our natural and cultural heritage and learning how to preserve, enhance, create, and pass on these gifts to an infinite future. It is our responsibility to learn the way all species communicate and then learn to understand and speak that language (Tonino 2016).

The most obvious first step is to begin a process of regular and open communication.

First we learn to talk to each other from a common base of understanding. Therefore, education is a central theme of the Society of Nature. We need to help each other learn environmentally sound ways to carry out a continuing revision of our personal and professional lifestyles. We must learn and teach the connections between our acts of consumption and their environmental and social consequences. Then we should compare the consequences of our lifestyles with those of other lifestyles. Also, we need to study the connections between our actions in the workplace and their environmental consequences and consider alternatives. We should not wear one hat in our personal lives and another conflicting hat in our workplace. A lifestyle that is inconsistent at this fundamental level likely cannot lead to long-term happiness.

Another part of the solution is action. We must continually involve our community in carrying out projects that lead directly and indirectly (locally and globally) to environmental improvement. Indeed, action is also essential to a complete understanding of the connections between consumption and degradation. Action is integral to converting others to necessary

lifestyle changes: without such conversion, we may conclude that it is hopeless to sacrifice personally. Conversion of the public is imperative so that individual sacrifices do not lead to increased consumption by others. Thus, the solution requires a community where we learn we are not alone, where we learn together how much consumption is actually enough. The Society of Nature would be committed to changing beliefs in the hope that appropriate behavioral changes will follow.

All of this planning and action should be based on the dynamics of the natural system. We must study nature and derive the basic operating principles of the ecosystem, and then we have to translate this understanding into guidelines for living sustainably. We need to adopt a belief in the natural system and center our lives and community cohesion on that belief.

To help us accomplish all this, we require community organizers, individuals who are totally dedicated to communication, education, and action. The training and education requires broad schooling in the professional and social arts. Modern society is both technically and economically complex, and the organizers should be skilled in these arenas. Economics, engineering, and ecology cannot be overlooked. History, sociology, political science, and psychology are necessary tools of the organizers. A deep understanding of religious naturalism is useful. The educational process should also involve community action projects to bring practical realism to the classroom. Obviously, the preparation of the organizers is long and difficult and will require the most skillful minds and teaching abilities. Attracting and holding the right people in this process has to be a primary aim of the Society.

To begin, the Society must establish a formal training program to attract students in the late high school years and probably by the second year of college. They should live together, bonding for the struggles ahead. The program should help students to find access to the broad range of courses and other activities required by the Society. This process of education can mainly be fashioned out of the course selection of any major university.

Graduates would associate with one of a variety of communities to form local groups dedicated to communication, education, and action. As the Society matures, these communities will become the main source of candidates for the formal training process. To keep the Society vital, graduates would return regularly to their source of education for renewal and reassignment.

The idea of fairness is central to the Society. This includes fairness between members of the current generation and between members of present and future generations. Fairness to the present compels us to include environmental costs in the production processes that produce environmental damage. Fairness in the public sector requires cost sharing in proportion to benefits. Fairness between generations requires that we preserve options for future generations by conserving natural and cultural resources to an ever-increasing degree, well beyond the levels dictated by current economic practice. We must give the future all the necessary technology, population controls, and remaining resources so the next generation can have the same options as we had (Page: 1977). This process requires that we strive to not discount the future and that we do not dictate how future generations will live, though it would be reasonable for us to expect future generations to plan for the generations after them.

Principles for the organizers

The goal of a good environmental organizer is to make all people “combatants” in the struggle for a desirable environment. Good organizers are humble, kind, and clear-headed. They seek to frame the local environmental problem in a way that reflects already established environmental ethics and values. Good organizers respect those in the community group.

There are four stages through which the organizer should progress for a most successful and effective life. The organizer needs to master these levels, and they should form the basis of the educational process. The levels in question range from the most personal to those that involve interaction with the community at large.

The health of your body must be the first priority for environmental improvement. Let us call it the “Spartan Level.” You cannot expect others to believe you are genuinely concerned about the quality of the environment if you are not concerned about the health of your body. Also, the body provides a means to prove, in the clearest possible terms, the consequences of a poisoned environment for each of us. Appropriate food, exercise, rest, and daily rhythm are the principal means to a healthy body. One cannot place too much emphasis on this. Repeatedly overstressing the body by lack of sleep (even if caused by work on an environmental action) should be avoided because it reduces the long-term staying power of the organizer. Long-term overstress leads to “burnout,” which makes the organizer ineffective. Healthy weight maintenance is essential.

The second level is the life of the mind. Call it the “Scholar Level.” By “mind” I mean not only those mental processes that are commonly called “rational” but also those called “spiritual.” The organizer should appreciate the importance of the broad educational process already described and the need for some specialized training, for example on the latest in ecological system function. It is more difficult to appreciate the need to constantly reaffirm the intrinsic value (in contrast to mere human value) of the natural world and our cultural heritage. It is this space beyond the human-centered values, which I call *sacred*, upon which our mind must be regularly refocused. The scholar should not only master but fuse the long-standing distinction between theory and practice (Marglin 1996).

Besides the usual educational process, the good organizer must master learning through the cycle of action and reflection, an educational rhythm for which there is no formal schoolroom. Learning what is the best time to intervene requires a lifetime of practice but the rewards can be noticed from the start.

The third level, the “Ecolate Level,” is life as a consumer and worker. At this stage, the organizer is prepared for the most difficult of the preparatory tasks. You have to examine in detail the results, both direct and indirect, of your own consumption. Even more difficult is the evaluation of the consequences of your professional activity. For example, if you are employed in production of throwaway beverage containers, is it possible to reconcile this activity with your environmental values? Would someone else just continue to make these containers if you stopped? These are among the most difficult questions we can ask ourselves. They have no clear-cut answers. Organizers answer such questions in their own minds, but the community and fellow ecolates will influence the form of that answer. The answer hinges on which solution builds the community.

The ultimate aim of the ecolate is to reduce disorder created by his or her existence by minimizing his or her own consumption and by helping others learn how to minimize environmental disruption. Deep cultivation of a sense of place should be one of the higher aspirations of the ecolate. Only by establishing a true sense of place can the organizer take action with sufficient seriousness. When our territory is threatened or degraded, we are most aroused. The ecolates fully know how to develop, how to clarify sense of place in the community they are organizing.

The final stage is life with others, the “Instructor Level.” This is the pinnacle of the organizer’s life. By contributing to the happiness of others through building community in a lasting and consistent way, one achieves a kind of immortality reached by few. Organizers begin as they

themselves were educated: first on the personal level and later on the community level. They provide the role model for leadership, and they cultivate leadership in others. Their main duty is to prepare appropriate members of the community for the long struggle on their road to the Instructor Level.

Instructors lead ever-increasing numbers of the local community from the level of mere personal connection to a broad understanding of the more general environmental problem. They seek out those with the strongest sense of place and then aid in the development of that sense in others. They act to ensure that all segments of the community are involved in the organization. Instructors prevent environmental problems from becoming a class struggle, for they recognize that everyone causes such problems. No class is excused; no individual is irredeemable. Instructors realize that people do not always stay in the same "class" and that polluters also may be victims of environmental pollution.

Instructors should establish regular community talks to build habit and expectation. They must understand that community ties are based on love, understanding, communication, common experience, common problems, and a strong sense of place. Instructors recognize that community groups require a series of standards of achievement, beginning with the minimum conditions for entry, the conditions for acceptance of leadership, and the conditions for exclusion. Membership in the organization must bring benefits that are not available to nonmembers. It is important to reduce the "free rider" problem of people who benefit from the actions of others without making a contribution. The problem is a classic one among environmentalists working toward clean air and water.

The organizer's long-range plan is to establish a strong sense of the sacredness of nature in the local group by continuously acquainting people with local nature and identifying ever more details of this nature. Ultimately, the organizer introduces the concepts of religious naturalism and stresses how adopting such awareness is not only compatible with the local group's newfound understanding of nature but can also be shown to be compatible with their existing religious views.

The Society of Nature at work

What keeps humans from more environmentally sound ways of living? There are many obstacles. In a 2005 article, I attempted to summarize the main ones (Hannon 2005). The leaders of the Society of Nature will eventually learn how to overcome these impediments through close work with the local community. The first impediment is the concept of cognitive dissonance. If we have worked long and hard to achieve a certain goal and then discover to our dismay that progress toward that goal has overwhelmingly negative aspects, our tendency is to dismiss these aspects and forget them. We cannot face the fact that our efforts were misdirected. When the Corps of Engineers learned of large opposition to dams it had planned for years to build, it dismissed this opposition as ravings of a few misguided people. It cannot admit that its work and sacrifices were actually harmful and unneeded. When farmers who for generations have worked to improve crop production face criticisms of their intense chemical use, they dismiss the criticisms. They cannot believe that all of that intergenerational thought and work was misdirected. When people are told that climate change is the result of their ever-increasing use of fossil energy, they refuse to admit that their beloved lifestyle has caused global disaster. This response is ingrained behavior. The problem is finding a way around this dissonance. The principal way is to point out that knowing what they knew, their past behavior was intelligently and rightfully pursued. Now, however, the situation has changed. The creativity of everyone must be enlisted to find the appropriate manner of living.

A second obstacle to environmental change is based on the *de minimis* argument. My automobile, one of millions of autos on the road today, uses such a relatively small amount of fuel that I am consuming an infinitesimal amount of nonrenewable resource supply. Were I to stop using this fuel, the price would decline due to a slight drop in demand, causing other consumers to use a bit more ... my former share. So I decide to continue my present use. This obstacle can be overcome by taxing critical resource use to the point where all consumers are motivated to reduce their use. Such resource taxes have been proposed at the highest levels of U. S. government but have been defeated by the energy industries. Someday, when the Society of Nature is mature and widespread, such resource use taxes can be enacted.

A third obstacle revolves around the concept of memetic behavior. We envy the looks of the neighbor's car, a sign of their superior cultural status. We buy, perhaps extending beyond our means, a similar or even better car. This process of conspicuous consumption is rampant in a consumption-based economy and routinely encouraged by advertising. It certainly produces a level of consumption greater than is necessary. Tying consumption to the definition of economic growth builds on this human tendency. The idea is that greater consumption provides jobs somewhere in the economy. But the demand for jobs has everything to do with the level of automation in society, the choice of industrial and commercial technology, and the types of international trade agreements. A reduction in consumption, if not drastic, may have little connection with reducing employment in an economy.

A fourth obstacle is discounting. We favor the present over the future. This is time discounting. To cause people to postpone consumption, we must compensate them. We also discount on the basis of distance. The farther from my home the nuclear power plant is, the less concern I have about it. I discount others by their genetic or income difference. Racism is a form of this behavior. We are quite willing to ignore a landfill or polluting incinerator placed sufficiently far from us, even if it is placed in an area of poor people of another ethnic group. All these forms of discounting are really means of postponement. Active participation in the local community, where we regularly meet and interact with others whose interests we may otherwise be inclined to discount, will diminish the tendency to discount and promote a more rational and sound environmental lifestyle.

A fifth obstacle is our inability to use ostracism as nonviolent, highly efficient means to discourage wanton resource use. By way of example, ostracism in Tokugawa Japan (1600–1860) helped to control the population (Hannon 1985). The Shogun, the feudal lords, and the village mayors exacted a heavy quota of rice and cotton from the peasant population. The resulting scarcity caused the peasants to ostracize any family with more than two children because the extra child's consumption would eventually inhibit that family's contribution to the quota. As a result the population was nearly steady from about 1700 to the opening of Japan by American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853.

One can imagine this approach being used to reduce gasoline use in the United States. Each state would have a quota, and states would break that quota down for each city, county, and so on. Then imagine the ostracism laid on a family with three cars or with a car that got mileage much less than the community average. Certainly the country could come to equilibrium with this nonrenewable, climate change-causing resource. Ostracism is a powerful force, but because of the way the country is organized, each person deals directly with distant national and state governments for important policies such as taxes. Ostracism can only operate when the main personal types of consumption are mediated through local government where need can be more truly established. The ways in which resources are distributed in a nation could change to bring about actual environmental improvement.

A sixth obstacle to environmental sustainability is what I call the “many hats” problem. Most of us wear several imaginary hats—parent, employee, citizen, etc. We have a different decision-making process for each hat. We may decide our business success depends on not installing the best pollution controls at our factory. As a parent, we realize air and water pollution are harming the family health. Our future action has two possibilities: Put on our civic hat and organize the community to deal with the factory pollution. This would likely cost us our job, the hard way to reduce the number of our hats. Or we could forget the problem and try to move our home to a less polluted zone of the city, likely breaking up any sense of place we might have developed. The development of a Society of Nature community would provide efficient pathways for busy people to become effective agents of change.

Free-rider thinking is a seventh block to environmental improvement. I am depressed as I read of the decline of world fisheries. Local fishermen are going out of business. Deep dragnets are scraping the ocean floor in an ever more drastic effort to maintain catch size. Reading further, I see that scientists and Greenpeace are working on the problem. I become a free rider, assuming that these agencies will take care of the problem. This same process goes on in hundreds of ways every day. I think that I am too busy to become involved; my family, my workplace need all of my time. Again, the development of a sense of community brings about pressure on free riders to become involved.

Real loss versus theoretical gain is the eighth obstacle. Reducing energy resource use in commerce and industry would most likely cause an increase in employment. The decision makers in this issue—the pertinent industry, unions, and government agencies—all realize this is true. But employment growth causes a shift in available jobs. It is easy to point out the names of people who will lose their jobs but not which individuals will get the greater number of new jobs. The decision makers will respond to the identifiable endangered people rather than those who cannot be identified—even if there are more of the latter—and the conservation issue will be scuttled. A strong community would care for those who become unemployed by the change and work to find them new jobs. The shift in product use from a petroleum refinery to making and installing wind turbines and electric mass transit is an example.

The final obstacle example is people’s loss of a sense of connection to the ultimate source of the inputs to their lifestyle. Where does electricity really come from? From the two little holes in the outlet plate on the wall? Where does our drinking water come from? The faucet at the sink? Where does our waste go when we flush the toilet and when the trash hauler drives away? Urban and suburban settings severely mask these connections; however, understanding these local connections sets the stage for larger, more complex ones. Consider the difficulty in understanding the complex system of feedback in the socio-ecological system, using climate change as an example. The global temperature rises mainly because of increasing emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂), largely from fossil fuel electric power plants. As the temperature rises, we use more air conditioning, which needs more electricity, thus more fossil fuel use and more CO₂ emissions, followed by another rise in global temperature ... a positive feedback. The community developed by the Society of Nature would provide such a continuing education of these connections, particularly for the youth. Just the process of establishing connections reveals the jobs, resource uses, and environmental costs of an individual’s lifestyle. Such awareness is the first step toward real behavioral change and action.

This is just a summary of the main obstacles that face the leaders of the Society of Nature. To become effective leaders in the community they must master the ways of overcoming these problems. It is an extraordinarily difficult process, perhaps the most difficult of any occupation. With a spiritual connection to nature, leaders and their followers would have the background strength to persist, to create the solutions that win the hearts and minds of the community.

The sense of place

Ultimately, our sense of the sacredness of nature is inseparably tied to a deep sense of place. We all have such a sense, whether we think of our place as an urban area, a medium-sized suburb, a small town, or a farm. Most of us do not have a deep connection with the prairie, the woods, the mountains, or the ocean's edge because we live where we can earn a living, near to large agencies of commerce or government. My contention is that each of us has an inherent desire to belong to a place, a "home." We can cherish the nearby park, the yard, the farm fields, but none of these is nearly as complex as the ecosystems we find in nature. I contend that it is this complexity we seek and find that can compel our interest and involvement. As we become more familiar with an ecosystem—the more we realize the meaning of providence—a sacredness begins to appear, to have profound meaning for. This is not a pantheistic view of nature but one that celebrates the dynamic wholeness of its ecosystems. This is definition by experience. And the definition deepens as our understanding increases. The experience is so exhilarating that it binds us firmly to preserving nearby nature, to dedicating our lives to nature protection and restoration, and ultimately to helping others gain this same understanding.

Those who stand still, who stay in place—farmers, for example—grow to love their place, though it may be entirely devoid of trees, grass, and other visually tangible signs of deep nature. What is it that binds them to that place? Perhaps they live in the home of their ancestors, maybe they look closely at the soil and see the microorganisms that aid crop growth, or perhaps they have no sense of place but have no alternative place to live (Mullendore et al. 2015). When a farmer advises his son to take up farming, we know he has a true sense of his place.

The study of natural and human history with access to natural areas gives us the basis for continual development of a sense of place within nature. Without such a sense we are incomplete, unfulfilled humans, and we are unable to recognize the ways in which our life habits are undermining the sustainability of nature. Without a sense of place, we have no foundation to support the many protracted battles that are needed to preserve nature. A sense of place provides a fundamental source of patience. It requires us to slow down, to pay attention to what we are doing to nature and ourselves, and to learn why we are doing it. In this way we personally become a part of nature. The leaders of the Society of Nature have a mission to develop a deep and abiding sense of place in a community.

So instead of a materialistic lifestyle we seek work that we can master and devote to purposely acquiring a connection to our place. We can slowly disengage from work we find meaningless and begin this journey by committing to a place and to resolving local environmental problems. Moving from city to city in pursuit of career or even moving about within a city prevents development of a sense of place. Fortunately, in the United States at least, internal migration has been declining since the mid-1970s (Partridge et al. 2010).

We can learn why our ancestors did what they did and if they understood the implications for nature of their actions. Restoring nature has common ground with restoring the works of man. Restoring the works of an earlier people is a show of respect, a tribute to those people. It is therefore a constant reminder to do works in both society and nature that we hope will be continued. By combining a sense of our human history with the natural history of a place, we take the first steps to bring the whole of society into coherence with the rhythms of nature. It is a process of sustainability, of survival.

Developing a sense of place is clearly an ongoing educational process. Learning the natural and social history of a place begins to endear that place to you. It requires you to sharpen your observational abilities, to look carefully for signs of the past. You note the descendants of those who came before. You read archives of the community history. You visit nearby parks and

countryside (at sunrise and sunset, in winter and summer), power plants, water treatment plants, city councils, police stations, industries ... a list without a clear end. You never pass someone digging without asking why and noticing the soil layers, asking if they have found any early street car tracks, old piping, sign of landfill, etc. You are constantly building a memory of the place, its people and how it came to be what it is today. You are developing the sense of connection both with past and present and between the living elements before you. This intensive noticing—curiosity really—will slowly lead you toward a full sense of your place. It has much in common with prayer.

Certainly this process has its own rewards. It is gratifying to begin to understand a place and its dynamics. But a greater personal reward awaits those who have the sense of place and then use this gift to protect and restore works of nature and of man. Stopping the migration to a better job, finding a fascination with where you are, stabilizing your lifestyle and of those close to you, gaining time for the learning process, increasingly recognizing the sacredness of nature ... I think of all of these as part of the sense of place that I have in mind.

The religion of nature

Ultimately, we realize that to witness nature is to have gained the key to its salvation and to ours. To ignore nature in the face of what humanity is doing is to kill nature and all of its living elements. To witness nature's dynamic is to acknowledge it, to learn to respect, restore, and protect it. Being a witness paves the intergenerational pathway to humanity's future and puts us on the path to religious naturalism. It is the ultimate achievement in the quest for place.

Yi-Fu Tuan (2009) notes most religions work on dissolving our focus on place. They consider such concern as tribal and direct us toward a mystical heaven. Church buildings break our connection with nature and local community through, for example, the use of stained glass windows, which filter and transform light into a message of faith. This dissolving of a sense of local place ultimately leads to an abandonment of concern for nature in a local and widespread sense. How can someone learn to truly respect nature when he or she believes his or her true home is ethereal, is heaven?

This is a two-way problem. The true home of the most popular religions is not the earth and its biosphere but another imaginary place, painted with a beckoning infinite goodness. Followers depreciate their earthly home by comparison. Some Christians, for example, take the attitude of (so-called) wise-use stewardship of nature and indicate we should quickly use up God-given resources before Christ comes to earth the second time. This attitude, of course, creates the tendency to ignore or even abuse our earthly home while focusing on our heavenly home. It is likely one of the strongest, though often unstated, environmentally destructive forces.

Many religions promise a heavenly home after death. A religion of nature suggests no existence after death, except through the remembrance of our acts of goodness by others, our writings, and the artifacts we made during our lives. Adopting a religion of nature will let us come to peace with thoughts of our own death and endure the grief and loneliness when a loved one dies. We are alive through no choice of our own, and we have about as much reason to be mystified about why we are alive, as have the wolf and deer. The best path for us is to add to human understanding of the world around us and to learn to respect all life on earth. This is our earthly providence, and it is as close to heaven as we can or need to come.

Though science continues to provide greater understanding of nature, it tells us little about how to live sustainably. This we must learn by establishing a belief system based on nature—not

the worshiping of nature but its veneration, with deepest respect and ever-widening understanding of how we are an interdependent part of it. To be willing to let nature influence our aesthetics, ethics and religion is to know our place and to act constantly to recognize, restore, and revere this source of all life. Such is an act of faith and thus the adoption of religious naturalism.

The complex and well-defended definition of a religion of nature appears in Donald Crosby's book (2002). He recognizes that nature fulfills all the things people have sought throughout the long history of religious belief in a consistent manner. Religious naturalism cannot make the lame walk nor the blind see. It is not the source of supernatural miracles. But it is the source of restoration, inspiration, and sustainability. Nature records everything that happens. Its natural power to heal itself from the blows of human society is a form of forgiveness and inspiration for knowledgeable and devoted responsibility. Nature is there, through storm and sunshine, through winter and summer, day and night, all the time. It is a source of revelation, genesis, and evolution. Studying it carefully can help us to understand the dynamics of complex systems that involve feedback, resilience, and reliability, and how such systems cope with and require disturbance to maintain diversity. It is a source of how real reincarnation is accomplished, with the end of life being the beginning of new life, a kind of eternal vibrancy. It is the model, the source of personal rejuvenation and of community coherence and strength. It enables the individual to endure and the group to cohere, to grow its numbers and effectiveness. It keeps a comprehensive record of human impacts. It beckons us to join. It will require the local environmental group to recruit, to educate, and to continuously expand its mission to protect and restore nature.

Nature's problem is there are too few environmentalists. There should be more of them, and they need to be trained and effective. We need to cultivate more of them from the great mass of consumers, and we need to know that we have done so. We must not lull ourselves into believing a movie on forest destruction, a newsletter on the effects of the latest chemical pesticide, an editorial in the *New York Times*, or mention on the evening TV news will change people's behavior in any permanent way. We know we are winning the environmental war only when we can look people in the eye, hold onto their hand, and hear them tell us that we have changed their life—nothing else is enough reward to support us through a lifetime of true environmentalism. This is how the Society of Nature would work.

My ideas reflect a long history of successful environmental organizing. For the past 50 years, a group that takes this hands-on approach to environmentalism has existed in the Midwest. Although the group's name changed over the years—from the Committee on Allerton Park, eventually to the Prairie Rivers Network—it has maintained its focus on making environmentalists out of otherwise innocent citizens. The past and present leaders of this group are the founding members of the Society of Nature.

The central problem with the history of such organizing is this: the local organization will dissolve unless it is united by a belief in the appropriateness of direct, continuous connection to nature, and the examination of nature as guide to sustainable living. This is what the religion of nature can provide. Without continuously expanding understanding of nature and growing respect for it, even a successful local group will disappear. Faith in having nature guide our behavior is the only way the group—and all of us humans—will survive. This concept of a nature religion is a path to finding personal restoration, a process that builds a cohesive and ever-expanding community of members who seek to mimic the processes nature has derived for sustainability.

We share this planet with many other forms of life. We humans obviously need and sustain one another, yet the present collective human behavior disrespects other life forms. We consider ourselves so much more important than other life forms, and yet in harming

them we harm ourselves. This is why the Society is based on a religion of nature. It insists that the ecosystem, in all of its complex and mysterious beauty, is a necessary and sufficient focus of faith and commitment to build a new structure of consistent belief. Through the Society of Nature we will gather respect for all life, and only then can ecological justice and ecological peace prevail.

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