

A Place at the Table for Nature: Ways of Representing the Nonhuman Natural World in Community Participation in Planning

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In most participatory planning contexts, the environment is “taken into account” but the voice of Nature is not heard. This paper asks how might we give Nature—the nonhuman world—a seat at the negotiating table. Two practical examples suggest one way that our limited role as “stewards” may be redeemed.

Beginning with a hard-hitting look at the “end of oil” and implications for global and local sustainability, the paper then explains the background to the inquiry, the author’s ground-breaking research into environmental ethics and planning education and the “prescription” that emerged from the research. Two case studies illuminate some of the principles that emerged. A note of hopefulness is sounded at the end of the presentation.

The presentation, illustrated with images from participatory processes undertaken by the speaker, explains how two projects -- the *Reconnecting Ceremony* in Eagleby and the team development workshop for the Aurora planning team in Melbourne, grounded in a contextual ethic of caring for Nature, sought to address complex environmental ethics issues. The presentation offers practical suggestions for enriching participatory planning to offer an authentic role for Nature and those who speak on behalf of Nature.

Defining the problem

This presentation addresses the contentious question, “How can we prepare a place at the table for nonhuman Nature in participatory planning?” In Australia, as in other countries, the current approach of participatory planning is to “take the environment into account”. Environmental impact assessment processes supposedly ensure that environmental issues are considered. However, things are becoming more difficult. Community participation and consultation in Australia currently involve brownfield sites and complex ecological issues that challenge everyone’s ingenuity. Experts are often not confident of their responses, communities feel beleaguered and distrustful and proponents and their agents often disregard or cannot come to grips with the ecological complexity and sensitivity of projects. Those with whom we consult (who do have a place at the planning, consultation and negotiation table) include influential people, stakeholders, stakeholders’ representatives, the wider, heterogeneous and culturally diverse community, children, older people, people from Indigenous backgrounds, people from culturally diverse backgrounds and young people. Issues are conceived primarily in relation to their use value in primarily (human-centred) anthropocentric terms. While all projects raise ethical issues (and environmental ethics issues in particular), these are rarely discussed within the project brief, by the consultants or project staff or as part of the consultation or participation process.

Valuing Nonhuman “Nature”

Environmental ethics overview and concepts:

The real question is: Where does ‘the environment’ fit into the equation? This raises critical moral and ethical questions. Part of the problem is the language we use. The *environment* is atomistic, inert matter, a lifeless material world, nothing more than a mere backdrop for the human drama. *Nature*, by contrast, is alive, sacred. It can be personified as a being, capable of self-organising activities and communication. Nature, in this conception, is much more than simply a resource to be managed by humans for human benefit or backdrop or setting for human activity. It’s hard to break Nature into atomistic bits. Nature demands a holistic understanding.

Definitions of Nature in planning

Some planners employ the stewardship notion but that is fraught with difficulties, philosophically as well as practically. Are we the enlightened beings at the top of the evolutionary tree whose responsibility is to "manage" Nature? More liberal interpretations of stewardship offer hope for reconciliation with more ecocentric perspectives. Some offer direction for "the role of redeemed humanity," advocating the precautionary principle and intergenerational equity, while emphasising the relationship between care and stewardship:

Defining one possible "solution"

This paper tackles the conception of these relationships and suggests some preliminary approaches. First, we must "say what's true," to acknowledge what is really happening in terms of who is or is not seated at the table. Issues of denial and collusion loom large here. It is important to acknowledge that in most participatory planning contexts, the voice of Nature is not heard, or not heard directly. We could consider the rights of non-human life and ask, "Should trees have standing?" We could examine our participatory processes from the perspective of non-human life (ecocentrism). We could even consider the equality of all life, human and non-human (biocentric equality) and ask ourselves how this perspective would change how we undertake our planning processes.

Case Study 1: an example of good practice

How might we give Nature a seat at the table? The paper offers one example from the speaker's practice in Eagleby, Queensland, where as part of a major community-based planning process, the consultants devised a dramatic *Reconnecting Ceremony* based on the Deep Ecology ritual, *A Council of All Beings* developed by Australian environmental activist John Seed, with Arne Naess, Pat Fleming and Joanna Macy. The highly successful process asked twenty participants to consider public open space planning in a low income residential community from the perspective of nonhuman Nature, rather than exclusively from a human perspective. This case study might lead us to ask, as does Timothy Beatley in *Ethical Land Use* (1994), how we define the extent of the moral community to which ethical consideration in planning is due. We could ask, what are the extent and nature of ethical obligations owed to members of this moral community? Further, what are the moral grounds or bases on which to defend or justify these positions?

Case Study 2: an example of good practice in team development

An innovative approach to team development in Melbourne involved members of the 18-person consultant planning team for a huge suburban development creating a representation of nonhuman Nature as a member of their team for the next ten years and welcoming that "Being" into their consulting team in a welcoming ritual.

Conclusions

The presentation ends with a plea for advice and further investigation and the following questions:

- > How "ecological" are people willing to be in community engagement processes?
- > How "spiritual" are they willing to be in these processes?
- > How can this type of community engagement and team-development work be analysed and reported?
- > How can we modify approaches such as these for use in other participatory planning contexts?