Our Limits Transgressed
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Published by University Press of Kansas

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Our Limits Transgressed: Environmental Political Thought in America.

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When Thoreau wrote, in the final passages of Walden, that “we need to witness our own limits transgressed,” he was ecstatic over the arrival of spring at Walden Pond. The earth was coming to life again, and nature was displaying its full majesty, creativity, beauty, and power. To witness this rebirth was humbling, but it was also invigorating—Thoreau greeted the experience of his own limits transgressed with joy and celebration, rather than fear, trembling, or humiliation. There is a moral lesson to be learned, Thoreau believed, by witnessing nature as he did. If men and women appreciate nature as the true measure of things, they will presumably discover a more authentic and morally satisfying conception of themselves than they do when they take their own power and will as the standard of value and progress.

Even if we are skeptical of Thoreau’s claims about the moral significance of nature, we can no longer doubt that the environmental problems we face today are teaching us a hard lesson about our limited ability to control and exploit nature for our own purposes. The thoughtless pillaging of the environment obviously continues to be an enormous problem. But it is perhaps equally disturbing to witness the degree to which the careful, scientific management of nature has failed to fully understand and protect the natural world in all its complexity and fragility. This in turn raises the possibility that ecological and natural resource constraints may limit the freedom with which our civilization can exploit nature to provide us with the liberties, security, wealth, and ease to which we aspire.

At no other time in American history have there been more people who share not only Thoreau’s love of nature, but also his belief that nature can provide answers to some of our deepest moral questions. There has also been no time in American history when so many have
been alarmed about the socially generated deterioration of the environment. These concerns reflect the central themes of this book, in which I discuss the problems confronting American environmental political thought today. I have divided this thought into two traditions—the "pastoral" and the "progressive"—in order to illuminate these problems. The pastoral tradition, which I trace from Thoreau to contemporary deep ecology and biocentric philosophy, invokes the moral lessons that nature may possibly teach us. The progressive tradition, which I trace from Gifford Pinchot to today's most important liberal environmental theorists, appeals to the role that nature plays as a support for a liberal democratic society.

These traditions, with their significantly different emphases and perspectives on the role and importance of nature, continue to shape contemporary debates among environmentalists. And it is not surprising that these theorists have, in many ways, become much more sophisticated than their forebears. Thoreau's poetic appeals to the moral significance of nature have been given a great deal more rigor in the hands of contemporary thinkers, who have at their disposal not only the tools of academic philosophy, but also the science of ecology as it has developed over the course of this century. Theorists in the progressive conservation tradition have rightly rejected Pinchot's somewhat crude utilitarianism and have attempted to explain and develop a deeper moral understanding of the natural world while retaining a commitment to basic liberal values and institutions. Our understanding of and appreciation for the importance of the natural environment and the role it might play in our moral life have thus been greatly expanded and sharpened by the modern representatives of these two traditions.

Nevertheless, these gains have not been without a cost—potentially a very serious one. For both Thoreau and Pinchot, thinking about nature and the environment was intimately related to thinking about social and political life. Whatever their differences, they both understood their political views and their conceptions of the value of the natural world to be deeply and intimately connected with one another. It is just this sense of connection, however, that has been significantly weakened or lost altogether in much contemporary environmental ethics and philosophy. As I hope to demonstrate, current environmental thinking has been unable to maintain and develop this
relationship between our political values and the ways in which we do or should value the environment. But this relationship must be established and clearly understood, since our political and environmental values are necessarily connected; just as environmental values potentially limit our political options, so our political commitments serve to define and limit the options available to us in solving environmental problems.

In this book, I identify and discuss many shortcomings in the works of both the progressive and the pastoral traditions. Despite their problems, however, I have become convinced that future environmental political theory must learn from both viewpoints and aim at synthesizing and incorporating the best of each. This will happen only when environmental philosophy begins to self-consciously retrieve, scrutinize, and develop the political commitments that originally inspired both Pinchot and Thoreau. It is this project of retrieval, by first identifying and understanding these commitments and then tracing the manner in which we have strayed from them in our contemporary thinking, to which this book contributes.

In what follows, then, I do not attempt to provide a thorough review or intellectual history of the literature of the environmental movement. My focus has been more selective than exhaustive, and I hope that it has not been arbitrary or capricious. My intention has been to choose from the contemporary literature representative works that are intellectually sophisticated and have been influential in environmentalist circles. For each of the positions I investigate, the literature I discuss has been widely read and debated, or contains the highest level of intellectual merit among literatures with similar views, or (in most cases) both.

I would like to thank my colleagues Frank Bryan, Jan Feldman, and Chris Klyza for reading and commenting on early bits and pieces of the manuscript. Special thanks must go to Lance Banning, Wilson Carey McWilliams, Pat Neal, and Fran Pepperman Taylor for reading the entire manuscript with such care and providing me with helpful suggestions and interesting conversation about the ideas.
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