

Environmental Aesthetics: The Significance of ‘Aesthetics’ for Environmental Appreciation and Preservation.

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Abstract

Philosophical discussions for environmental protection have often been conceived as a moral or ethical responsibility; however, viewing it as an aesthetic liability is vital in issues pertaining to nature’s conservation, preservation, and restoration. This paper is an overview of ‘Environmental Aesthetics,’ a recent subfield within ‘Aesthetics,’ which, for the most part, has been understood as the philosophy of art. Unlike a work of art, which is “framed,” the environment provides no frames and offers no formally complete objects intended for appreciation. This paper aims to unravel the importance of aesthetic appreciation of nature and reflect upon the complex function that aesthetics can play in environment conservation and the challenges of conserving animals that are often judged to be aesthetically unappealing. Environmental aesthetics plays a vital role in ecoethics by fostering a deeper understanding of the environment and emphasizing a stronger sense of responsibility for its protection. The importance of emotional and aesthetic connections to nature can inspire ethical actions, such as sustainable living practices and conservation efforts. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates the importance of aesthetics: how people understand, relate to, experience, and value environments and nature, unraveling how aesthetic appreciation is central to protecting nature.

Keywords : aesthetics, environment, experience, art, nature.

With the pressing environmental challenges we face today, attention to the subject of environment demands a broad field of earnest study encompassing a plethora of subjects such as geography, anthropology, law, sociology, architecture, political science, and environmental design, among many others. Studies are being conducted on many levels; the goal is typically oriented on the severe importance of environmental issues and matters pertaining to their protection and instilling value awareness in people’s attitudes. While questions on the environment are informed by science, data, and empirical studies, many require conceptual inquiry. This would bring us to look into the environment through the lens of philosophy by asking questions of various claims that help induce critical thinking and reflect upon perceived knowledge. Understanding nature and human relationships rooted in philosophy may contribute to deepening our connection with the environment, which would allow us to build moral attitudes in dealing with the serious environmental concerns that we are currently experiencing. Much of the ecological problems we face today stem from

the loss of traditional knowledge, ethical human behavior, and social values. This paper, therefore, seeks to understand nature and its value from an aesthetic point of view to reflect on environmental challenges.

So, what role could 'aesthetics' play in environmental protection and preservation? The word aesthetics (αισθητική) is derived from the Greek word aisthētikos, from aisthēta, meaning things perceptible by the senses. Aesthetics comes under the branch of Philosophy, and the entire field of study is huge; however, it can be narrowly defined as the study of beauty and taste.

It was in the eighteenth century that a significant contemplation of the concept of 'beauty' and inquiry on what is beautiful first occurred as a philosophical inquiry. As a consequence, the idea of the picturesque or picture-like experience achieved the most considerable prominence in the study of aesthetics, where the natural world was experienced as art scenes. Nature was hence appreciated and valued with an interest when it resembled works of art only, especially landscape paintings. Since then, philosophers have had an increasing tendency to explain the aesthetic in terms of art only, making aesthetics solely associated with the philosophy of art. Many thinkers and artists alike attached aesthetics exclusively to art, as British art critic Clive Bell alleged that we see nature with the 'eye of an artist.' This domination of the arts in aesthetic appreciation and the lack and neglect of actual <nature appreciation> in aesthetics led to a revival to revamp the aesthetic appreciation of nature, which gave birth to the emergence of a new sub-field within aesthetics, which is known today by the term Environmental aesthetics.

Environmental aesthetics, hence, is a branch of philosophy (within Aesthetics) that explores the profound connection between aesthetics—the study of beauty and appreciation—and the environment.

It focuses on appreciating natural environments in its own right without laying it only as a model for art. Our aesthetic responses include reactions both of the ugly and the beautiful, and by delving into how our aesthetic perceptions and judgments shape our appreciation of the natural world, this paper will attempt to elucidate the significance of aesthetics in influencing human attitude toward the environment.

As recognizable in its name, environmental aesthetics examines how we perceive, evaluate, judge, and derive meaning from human-constructed and natural environments. Our conscious aesthetic choices and attitude could be a necessary tool for environmental change, for it challenges us to consider how the world is shaped by our aesthetic judgments and how our sense of beauty and meaning influences our perceptions of nature. It forces us to consider the ethical implications of our aesthetic attitudes, raising the debate about how humans are more likely to protect and preserve nature if it is found to be beautiful.

When environment aesthetics emerged as a new subfield in the 1960s, philosophers were zealous to show what was distinctive about environmental, aesthetic appreciation contrary to humanly modified environments. Works of R.G Collingwood, George Santayana, and John Dewey have significantly influenced this subject matter. Significant interest and change in perspective also occurred after Ronald Hepburn's canonical essay "Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty," which renewed the interest in the aesthetics of nature. He made a distinction between the aesthetic appreciation of nature and the appreciation of works of art; this concept was further developed by Allen Carlson, who introduced the idea of Environmental Aesthetics. (Carlson, *Appreciation and the Natural Environment*, 1979) Aldo Leopold, the leading environmentalist also incorporated aesthetics into

his holistic ecological approach in promoting his Land Ethic. Yuriko Saito proposed a similar case in her book *Everyday Aesthetics*, where she highlights the social ramifications of aesthetic judgments, which she claims exert astounding 'power'. In her book, Saito notes, "Whether we are aware or not, there are many aesthetic issues involved in our dealings with everyday things, some of which have serious ramifications: moral, social, political, or environmental." (Saito, 2007, p. 2) Saito's position has a significant influence from the twentieth-century pragmatic philosopher John Dewey, who contended that aesthetic experiences arise from an active engagement between the self and the environment, including both practical and intellectual pursuits. (Dewey, 2005)

When we encounter a breathtaking sunset, a serene forest, or the rhythmic crashing of ocean waves, we often experience awe, wonder, and a sense of transcendence. These moments of aesthetic engagement with the environment have the potential to deepen our connection with nature, fostering a sense of belonging and interconnectedness. The sublime, as experienced in nature, often involves feelings of astonishment and even fear in response to the vastness, grandeur, or power of natural phenomena. Don't these aesthetic experiences prompt us to acknowledge the limits of human understanding and control? Does recognizing beauty in nature encourage us to appreciate and cherish the natural world, cultivating humility and respect for nature? If an environment, ecosystem, landscape, or part of nature is beautiful, will it lead one to care for and protect it? (Brady & Jonathan, *Environmental aesthetics: A synthetic review*, 2020) There seems to be an underlying attitude or judgment of aesthetics that becomes inevitable while confronting the world; hence, there have been fruitful approaches to the aesthetic appreciation of nature backed up by the fact that we are generally visual creatures. This evident attitude suggests that aesthetic experience is influential and

pervasive, something not to be trivialized. Aesthetic appreciation of our environment is not merely an abstract intellectual exercise; it has practical implications for our relationship with the natural world. As the aesthetic dimensions of nature are being explored, we gain a deeper appreciation of the environment's intrinsic value and the need for its preservation.

Beauty has always been valued across many cultures, and it is general agreement that beauty is used to justify the protection of architecture, artworks, and natural environments. As Roger Scruton put it, "The judgment of beauty is not merely a statement of preference; it demands an act of attention." (Scruton, 2011, p. 13) While 'beauty' is an essential aspect of aesthetics, it is also considered superficial and frequently argued to be a setback because it can also be a criterion or a decisive factor for ecological harm. For instance, the degradation of forests and landfills for creating attractive parks and the biased attitude towards the perceived ugliness of certain animal species which despite their crucial roles in ecosystems, leads to their neglect of conservation. It is noteworthy to mention that the domain of aesthetic experience encompasses a broader range of considerations related to sensory experiences, perceptions, and judgments, including not just beauty but ugliness as well. This illustrates the tension within aesthetics, demonstrating the power of the aesthetic and how people's aesthetic reaction to something important affects their attitude and action toward it. If the reaction is positive, there is an effort toward protection, preservation, and promotion; if negative, the movement is toward indifference, neglect, change, abandonment, or rejection. (Saito, 2007, p. 246)

Sheila Lintott asserts that animals that are 'aesthetically unappealing or aesthetically unimpressive, such as bats and snakes, do not garner the same level of public interest or support compared to more charismatic species regarding

conservation efforts on their behalf. (Lintott, 2008) It describes the vulnerability of species that overtly display characteristics human beings find unpleasant. These human concepts of beauty are shaping conservation efforts, protecting good-looking animals and plants over ugly or conventionally considered unattractive ones. Thus, by selectively protecting species according to the human notion of what is pretty, aesthetic standards have become one of the primary determinants of which species are deemed worthy of conservation. These experiences in nature serve as a gateway for a deeper ethical concern and consideration of our aesthetic judgments and actions.

Several environmental philosophers suggest that aesthetics could be a sufficient foundation for environmental ethics; Ned Hettinger suggests such an observation in his paper *Defending Aesthetic Protectionism*. Hettinger argues that *valuing* natural *beauty* can be essential for protecting the environment claiming that nature is worth preserving and protecting from harm on an aesthetic level rather than on moral grounds. (Hettinger, *Defending Aesthetic Protectionism*, 2017) For him, the importance of aesthetics for environmental protection is underscored by the fact that aesthetics is often a more powerful motivator than moral obligation. In his words, "In the conservation and resource management arena, natural aesthetics has been much more important historically than environmental ethics. Many conservation and management decisions have been motivated by aesthetic rather than ethical values, by beauty instead of duty." (Hettinger, Allen Carlson's *Environmental Aesthetics and the Protection of the Environment*, 2005) He sums up his investigation by maintaining that environmental ethics would benefit from taking environmental aesthetics more seriously. Based on this proposition, it is worth emphasizing the inquiry of whether an individual's capacity to appreciate beauty, harmony, and proportion in nature can enhance their ability

to recognize *moral* values and make *ethical* judgments: a) Will some environment or landscape which is found to be beautiful prompt humans to care for and protect it? b) Will humans be inclined to act ethically because of aesthetic appreciation and value nature in which we meaningfully interact with the environment, leading to environmental action and responsibility? c) Does our *valuing* of the environment aesthetically support an ethical attitude toward the environment?

Western Philosophy has a history of firmly separating ethics and the aesthetic. This constraint relationship goes back to Plato, who recognized that some objects of aesthetic appreciation, most notably works of art, have moral implications; he implied that art is mimetic by nature and, therefore, must be banned. Plato's challenge has led to the Western philosophical and literary debate on whether ethics and aesthetics are distinct or if there is a connection between aesthetic experiences and moral sensibility. This foregoing line of thought could be seen concerning the possible link between environmental aesthetics and ethics. However, in most cases, it is frequently advised to take precedence of ethical considerations over aesthetics when making a decision. This predicament occurs because aesthetic responses seem to conflict with rather than support environmental ethics. In an article called *The Noah's Ark: Beautiful and Useful Species Only*, Ernie Small argues that the world's biodiversity is being beautified by selective conservation. He emphasizes the contested view that our aesthetic responses to the ugly have an impact on conservation plans. As judged by the human eyes, our aesthetic responses to ugly animals are far more likely to be left aside when drawing up conservation plans. Most amphibians and reptiles are not considered conventionally attractive animals; thus, besides being the world's most endangered groups of animals, they garner limited attention when it comes to preservation and protection policies. (Small, 2012)

Hence, in making ethical decisions, the role of aesthetics is not always positive, and this stands as a problem for establishing a link between aesthetics and ethics. This point is emphasized by Allen Carlson, who posits that no connection between environmental aesthetics and ethics can be established. (Carlson, *Environmental Aesthetics, Ethics, and Ecoethics*, 2018) To her, “moral obligation does not follow from the aesthetic appreciation or the aesthetic value of nature” (Carlson., 2018,p.403). The question remains whether our aesthetic responses conflict rather than support environmental ethics. *Ethics* means a moral obligation to justify moral responsibilities, and to claim that the environment and its various chains of constituents have moral value would mean that nature has an intrinsic value. However, valuing and appreciating nature for its *beauty* alone would be an impoverished and narrow way to understand the environment. The environment must be valued in general, and humans should refrain from cherry-picking only particular kinds of features of the environment for protection. However, it appears that the foundation for environmental protection depends on valuing nature with a division. Hence, it involves *the disvalue* of the ugly, disgusting, threatening, and frightening and valuing what is considered beautiful.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the principle of *art for art's sake* from the French *l'art pour l'art* had largely been supplanted in aesthetics. Art for art's sake as a movement proclaimed that individual works of art should be valued for their own sake regardless of whether they appealed to the masses. The argument was that if a work of art is valued *for its own sake*, it must be valued for its intrinsic properties. Should the same line of thought be applied to the environment by appreciating nature *for its own sake*? This intrinsic value would assert that nature has inherent worth or value independent of its usefulness or utility to humans. Immanuel Kant presented a seminal

perspective; for him, aesthetic judgments involve a ‘disinterested’ contemplation of beauty, freeing the mind from narrow interests. (Kant, 2008) According to Kant, adopting a disinterested stance allows us to grasp the “free play” of our mental faculties, where we distance ourselves from any pragmatic concerns and allow the perceived object to be contemplated for its own sake, leading to a purer aesthetic experience.

Moral values burden our actual aesthetic reactions and the amalgamation of ethics and the aesthetic as suggested by Chinese aesthetician Cheng Xiangzhan should be taken with a revised ecological awareness. Xiangzhan observes, “With basic knowledge of ecology and ecological awareness, and with an aesthetic perspective toward the world and a certain kind of concentration, we can experience anything both ecologically and aesthetically.” (Xiangzhan, 2010) With this line of thought, supplementing an ecological, aesthetic awareness could help us to overcome our biases. Friedrich Schiller, the German Philosopher, noted in his treatise on the ‘Aesthetic Education of Man’ that aesthetic experiences awaken the free play of our faculties, fostering a harmonious integration of the sensual and rational aspects of human nature. He argued that human nature is divided into two fundamental faculties: sensibility and reason, and aesthetic education harmonize these two faculties, creating a balanced individual. (Schiller, 2016) Our aesthetic appreciation can be shaped and changed through aesthetic education; in consequence, it is crucial to understand that aesthetic education is not a career that belongs solely to philosophers and aestheticians but to society and people. It is more than the mere appreciation of beauty; it is a profound journey of the human spirit, transcending the boundaries of conventional knowledge.

In the history of aesthetics, beauty and ugliness are juxtaposed where they are treated as complete opposite worth; philosophers discuss beauty surrounding it with the qualities of order,

harmony, balance, and symmetry, which are satisfying and pleasurable, contrary to ugliness, which is distinguished by disorder, decay, beastliness, and evil. In the natural world, such a rigid dichotomy can nestle a range of responses in us, making it difficult not to separate them. This would bring us back to the earlier argument on how our perception of things generates a response in us to either value or disvalue the thing that is experienced. Aesthetic situations reveal that aesthetic valuing incorporates a variety of prior knowledge, values, personal experiences, and biases. According to Emily Brady, “Because aesthetic judgments are anchored in perception, we may find it difficult to accept the ugliness or perhaps terrible beauty (Brady, *Conversations with landscape The sublime, ugliness and “terrible beauty” in Icelandic landscapes.*, 2011) By divorcing ourselves from personal desires and preferences and not overtly humanizing how we view the environment, we attain a state of objectivity and open ourselves to a deeper appreciation of nature. There is no doubt that the natural world is beautiful, but nature can also be horrifying, ugly, and scary. Aesthetic education reminds us that beauty exists not only in the pretty and visually pleasing but also in the frightening insects, the swampy forests, the toads, the mudflats, and the grating sights and sounds of the charred forests. Hence, a heightened sensitivity to the aesthetic experience of nature cultivates emotional responses, serving as a foundation for developing ethical considerations by encouraging individuals to appreciate nature for its own sake, leading to a sense of moral duty to protect it.

Appreciation of nature theoretically is often sidelined because values underpinned by

scientific or quantitative support are often taken more seriously. (Brady & Jonathan, *Environmental aesthetics: A synthetic review*, 2020) Nonetheless, studies have shown that countries we consider and appreciate as beautiful “make a huge difference when deciding which places to save, which to restore or enhance, and which to allocate to other uses.” (Sandra Shapshay, 2018) Appreciating the qualities of nature with an active consciousness cultivates emotional intelligence, empathy, and moral sensibilities. The anthropocentric thought that nature exists exclusively for us and our pleasures dominate our aesthetic response that perverts our aesthetic experiences; however, decentralizing the human may help us to draw a step back from hubris, which can ultimately have a colossal impact on making us better humans.

In an age marked by utilitarian pressures, aesthetic education provides sanctuary for open-minded exploration and reflection. It encourages individuals to seek meaning beyond the superficial. It is important to note that understanding the environment differs from appreciating it; understanding requires knowledge, and appreciation focuses on attention. By expanding our capacity to appreciate and respect the world’s inherent value, environmental aesthetics challenges us to find meaning in our surroundings. In doing so, it offers us a power that can determine the quality of life. Everyday aesthetics is instrumental in navigating more profound and holistic ways to appreciate, protect, and preserve the environment. Ultimately, it calls upon us to appreciate nature for its aesthetic value and actively engage in its preservation and conservation.

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