

Environmental and cross-cultural ethics are areas of development within Bioethics. The following commentary is the first published in the Otago Bioethics Report on these themes. We hope to publish more material on these topics, and we invite our readers to comment on this essay.

Cross-cultural Negotiation on Environmental Issues



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The process of negotiation, when successful, results in establishing normative behaviour supported by a legal framework, such as an agreement or a treaty. However, such an undertaking becomes more complicated and highly questionable in a multicultural setting where standards and values significantly differ from each other and compromise is frequently considered national defeat. In the case of environmental issues, cultural diversity can complicate already temperamental relationships between parties. Consequently, the majority of environmental treaties and agreements remain largely the province of paper and fail to influence government behaviour. The reason for this can be found in the subject itself: What is generally referred to as environmentalism is not a concept that enjoys worldwide acceptance; moreover, the concept of cultural pluralism, which allows for alternative interpretations of behaviour, persists as an excuse for eco-unfriendly conduct.

I will attempt to illustrate the dilemma that environmentalists face in cross-cultural negotiations by contrasting the concepts of nature in Japanese culture and philosophy with the "Western" concept of environmentalism. As a possible means to resolve this issue, I suggest a redirection of attention from negotiation to education and taking into account the possibility that force is used.

The notion that one should think about and behave toward the environment in some particular way that is morally acceptable to all presupposes the existence of a single world view that all human beings share. Indeed, in a world of shrinking distances dissimilar national attitudes toward regional environmental issues can have grave consequences for the health of the global environment. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster has effectively demonstrated this point. Radioactive material from the dysfunctional nuclear reactor destroyed livestock and harvests throughout Europe. It is therefore in the interest of all governments to develop international guidelines to preserve species and ecosystems, to manage renewable resources and to prevent environmental disasters.

In the past decades the trend to care for and administer the natural world around us has been labelled "environmentalism". To further the expansion of this green ideology many "Western" developed countries have taken the lead in pursuing strong international environmental agreements.¹ It is obvious that global and regional catastrophes such as nuclear reactor disasters or fish stock depletions can potentially generate dangerous conflicts between countries. However, when it comes to implementing environmentally sound rules and regulations, many governments prefer to ignore agreements. For example, Japan has in the past two decades become infamous for its policies on whale hunting, driftnet fishing, and clear-cutting. Being relative latecomers to the exploitation of the world's natural resources, Japan has found itself largely held responsible for their final exhaustion. Given the fact that until recently, the United States, Britain and the Netherlands were active whaling nations, Japan found it hard to accept a moratorium on whale hunting sponsored by precisely these nations which have contributed to the near extinction of the species. The bad press Japan received over the whale issue has resulted in strong counter-comments.

Visiting Fellow in Maori Health Care Ethics



In May the Centre welcomed Irihapeti Ramsden as the first Visiting Fellow in Maori Health Care Ethics. Following consultation with John Broughton and the late Eru Pomare the Centre invited Irihapeti to work with us to develop our commitment to Maori health care ethics and biculturalism. Irihapeti is a mokopuna of Ngai Tahupotiki and Rangitane through her mother, Henrietta Merenia Meteherangi Manawatu.

She spent three weeks with the Centre, and will be returning for another three week period in September.

In addition to working with Centre staff and being involved with all our regular teaching programmes, Irihapeti gave a public lecture entitled "Cultural Safety and Health Care" and a presentation at the Grand Round. She led workshops on cultural safety with nurses, and worked with Centre staff to help us develop a clear direction of how we should proceed in developing our commitment to Maori and biculturalism. We look forward to her return in September.

The Americans demand that we stop eating whale meat and, instead, consume American beef... here we have the opinion of one race [sic] forcing its ideas on the traditional eating habits of another (Nihon Keizai Shimbun, Sept 2, 1984).

Clearly, two distinct value systems are clashing. The ethical question here is concerned with the belief system of Buddhism versus the traditional western concept of "Man over nature". Buddhism has taught the Japanese that all life has the same value. This makes it difficult for them to grasp why it should be more morally wrong to kill a whale for food than to kill a cow or a pig for the same purpose. Indeed, most Japanese think it is worse to kill a domesticated animal than a wild one. How can people kill an animal they have taken great care to feed and raise? Of course, Westerners

will reply that the difference lies in the fact that in the case of whaling and drift netting, the survival of one or more species is at stake and our environmental ethics demands the protection of endangered species.

Cultural Pluralism

Concepts about nature and the natural world surrounding human beings are

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fundamental to all cultures. While Buddhism view human existence as being in harmony with nature, Christian tradition has tended to emphasize and reinforce the separation of humanity from nature: "Humanity was distinguished from the rest of nature by its possession of reason or mind and was eventually seen as categorically distinct from and superior to the natural world." (Yencken 1994:219).

To explain/teach, then, the meaning of "environmentalism" to the Japanese who have been taught by their religion to believe in a unique relationship between their "race" and nature is therefore a delicate, sensitive and long term undertaking. Normally, when engaging in negotiations, the interlocutors will seek close understanding of their opponents' expectations and hopes. However, if the persons involved do not share the same cultural background, matters are likely to become more complicated. As Cohen (1991) points out, "for a message to be correctly understood there must be sufficient similarity, if not identity, between the intention of the sender and the meaning attributed by the receiver." It can be argued that there is no time for a deeper understanding to take place - during negotiations regarding the antarctic whale sanctuary Norway and Iceland, in addition to Japan (Russia might follow next) resumed the hunt for whales. Evidently, the environment cannot rely on protection by agreement only. Lacking a strong international law to deter defection from agreements, the responsibility falls back into the hands of national governments.

Possible Solutions?

Since negotiations and the slow process of teaching and learning are long term

solutions some countries see themselves as being forced to take a stand against perceived intruders. This was the case in the recent fishing dispute off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. A Canadian Coast Guard ship took control over a Spanish fishing vessel citing illegal presence and fishing in Canadian Waters. A United States Coast Guard ship seized two Japanese fishing vessels off the

northern Mariana Islands on May 14 and charged the masters of the vessels with illegal fishing in US waters. The latter incident is too recent to have attracted comments in the press; reaction to the former, however, has ranged from applause to condemnation. The European Commissioner responsible for Fisheries, Emma Bonino, said on March 30 that

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Canada should not seek to mask shortcomings of its own fish conservation regime by blaming the EU...The real way forward towards a solution can only be found through negotiations with the political will to succeed (European Union News, vol 3, No 3)

Unfortunately, neither the Greenland halibut nor some of the other species on the endangered list might be around to hear the decision.

Organizations such as Greenpeace and Earthtrust have long maintained that negotiations succeed only when backed by action. Having raised environmental awareness in the voters, these organizations act as watchdogs over government policies and operations. However, although these associations are vital to the due process of environment protection,

they have as of yet no seat at international negotiation tables. In all these cases, the use of force was perceived as ethically justified by the actor because a resolution through negotiation seemed out of reach.

Conclusion

Negotiating environmental protection can be an extended undertaking with doubtful outcomes unless the very process of negotiation itself can facilitate intercultural cooperation between the parties. The growing threat to certain species and ecosystems has reached a point where negotiation needs to be complemented and augmented by other measures. The use of force, though regrettable, has become a practiced option. Education and cross-cultural communication need to be emphasized and made more effective. In addition, non-governmental organizations must become participants in the negotiations. Furthermore, international law will have to be strengthened to facilitate monitoring and a means to enforce the legislation will have to be developed. If those non-violent options are not pursued in the near future, and there are grounds for doubt, nation-states will seek creative ways to implement their own policies -

for or against the environment, and serious diplomatic crises will become inevitable.

Cohen, Raymond. *Negotiating across Cultures: Communication Obstacles in International Diplomacy* Washington D.C. United States Institute of Peace Press 1991

Yencken, David. Conclusion: "Environmental values, Knowledge and Action" in *Restoring the land: Environmental values, Knowledge and Action* Cosgrove, L. Evans, D. Yencken, D. Nelsonne, Melbourne University Press 1994

¹The Montreal Convention to halt the destruction of the ozone layer by CFCs; CITES, the Convention that bans International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES); the Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the international convention for the prevention of pollution from ships, are just a few of the 170 treaties and agreements which have been drafted over the past 20 years.