

Environmental stewardship: “Where there’s a will, is there a way?”

Mary Maher

Abstract

Environmental management or stewardship is one area of environmental philosophy which has achieved a degree of acceptability in development decision-making. Its success is a product of its characteristics, e.g. that of taking a generally moderate approach to what causes an environmental problem, and of working for change through traditional channels. However, even stewardship is not without internal divisions, divisions which reflect differing views about the *degree* of change needed to avoid ecological disaster. Stewardship may be a useful environmental philosophy at a time when the development ethos (jobs, income, growth, productivity) predominates. But this paper poses the question, is it the best philosophy possible at this time? Finally, the impact of this philosophy on education is considered, highlighting the two aspects of what stewardship sees in environmental education and what environmental education could do about stewardship.

Charman in 1982 published an article with the title “Managing Australia’s soils for future profit” What’s your reaction to such a title? For instance do you think that soil management should treat profit as its first priority? Do you feel that too much emphasis has been placed on the problems of soil in the Australian environment? Or does the title appeal to you because it makes plain good sense to manage our soils today to safeguard future productivity?

Your reaction to the article’s title is probably a good indicator of the philosophical position you hold about the environment. While it may be possible to categorise the environmental philosophy of the industrial world view as being that of *exploitation*, generalising about alternative environmental philosophies is more difficult. There is a plethora of them and they can be arranged on various continua — from radical to reformist, from Utopian to practical, from being concerned about individual environmental problems to a more holistic approach which emphasises the interconnectedness of all life and therefore all environmental problems. Some believe that nature should determine human endeavour while others assert that without fundamental change in social conditions then environmental degradation will continue unabated.

The variety of philosophies seems endless. Analysts researching this field cannot agree about the values which make up the very substance of environmentalism. Environmental values it seems may include a startling range of viewpoints about such things as materialism, nature, market forces, authority and hierarchy, decision-making, technological intervention and scientific pursuits (Routley, 1983). With such points of difference surfacing it is obvious that a singular

coherent environmental ethic is a long way from materialising.

Which environmentalists then are espousing the most accurate assessment about our ecological dilemma? Or is it more functional to ask, which environmentalists have the message most likely to direct us away from ecological disaster?

Within the maelstrom of environmental philosophy an area of convergence has occurred, a convergence of viewpoints with a strong chance of influencing present society. The environmental philosophy known variously as *environmental stewardship*, *environmental management*, *resource conservation* or *conservatism* has exhibited the most success of any of the environmental philosophies. For the purposes of this article the term *stewardship* will be used to refer to this convergence of several environmental philosophies.

What is stewardship?

On a continuum between radical and more conservative approaches, environmental stewardship would be located in a central, liberal, position; similarly on a continuum between Utopian and pragmatic. However, it is probably the form of environmentalism which is most often practised in environment-related decision-making precisely because it is moderate, and, it would seem, relatively reformist. As a general statement it could be said that stewardship does not necessarily reject the core values of industrial society but rather seeks to modify them. Another feature of this form of environmentalism is the way in which it is operationalised. Stewardship works through existing or adjunctive agencies of the government, the market and the community to achieve improvements in environmental management. Examples of these agencies might include:

- Government departments, for example, Energy Conservation Bureaux, Soil Conservation Authorities, Noise Abatement Services and National Parks and Wildlife Services;
- Private Consultancies, for example, Services for Environmental Impact Statements, Energy Advisory Groups;
- Lobby Groups, for example, the Australian Conservation Foundation, State or local lobby groups;
- Community Groups, for example, Keep Australia Beautiful, Greening Australia, moderate local issue groups;
- Professional Associations, for example, Engineers for Social Responsibility, Environmental Education Associations.

These groups fulfil stewardship functions by working ‘up the correct channels’, for example, through research, education, legislation and perhaps by modified forms of direct action such as product boycotts, to stimulate the desired changes.

Mary Maher is based at the Kelvin Grove Campus of the Brisbane College of Advanced Education.

Stewardship and wetlands

With reference to the wetlands conflict, stewardship might work on a number of fronts, from those working to define the actual wetlands problem, to finding possible solutions, and designing tactics for their achievement. Examples here may include:

(i) **Defining the problem itself**

The wetland problem may be viewed variously as a lack of ecological knowledge about wetlands; as a community conflict of economic versus ecological values; as part of the general process of world-wide depletion of wilderness areas by ambitious human activity; or as the absence of a suitable management plan for wetlands.

(ii) **Promoting a solution**

Solutions to the wetlands problem may range from establishment of an inventory of wetlands' ecological resources; to support for the most economically productive yet ecologically 'sustainable' uses; development of a better definition of the actual resources of wetlands; development of a multiple use plan; and stipulation of the requirements for an Environmental Impact Statement.

(iii) **Designing strategies to achieve the desired solutions**

Methods used by stewardship supporters often include those of pressing for a government inquiry, to advise the appropriate minister; formation of a committee of all interest groups to make recommendations; educating the public; orchestration of a variety of submissions; appeals for more funds for research; media involvement and appeals for support from local groups and influential people.

Yet there are problems with such conventional approaches to the wetlands dilemma. For example, more research does not necessarily mean that it is actually used in the rag-tag of finding solutions to environmental conflicts. Also, Environmental Impact Statements can be 'bought', and then overlooked at the crucial moment of decision-making. Public participation is never simply a matter of ascertaining the people's view, yes or no, about an environmental project. And, the media can be both selective and sensational in its coverage.

Divisions within stewardship

The approach and methods encapsulated by stewardship are a reflection of its generally moderate stance as an environmental philosophy. Yet to give emphasis to its moderation and reformism is to infer that there is absolute agreement as to the ideals and strategies of stewardship. Such an agreement is non-existent. Stewardship as a zone of some convergence in environmental philosophy also experiences internal philosophical rifts. It would seem there is rivalry of world views even within this so-called middleground of environmental philosophy. To elaborate on this aspect, consider the example of *conservatism*, a controversial form of stewardship.

Pausacker and Andrews are two idealists working from the perspective of the need to develop a conserver society in response to social and ecological imperatives which they identify in *Living Better With Less* (1981). It is difficult to classify these thinkers as merely a couple of environmental managers. Yet in their document analysing Australia's economy and its policy machine they make very specific recommendations about

changes needed in Australia to achieve a conserver orientation in society. An indication of the breadth of their environmentalism is found in subheadings of their chapter on the political economy of conservatism wherein they discuss: *depletion quotas for non-renewable resources; optimal resource usage; minimising environmental harm; selective economic development; more equal distribution of wealth and income; altered patterns of private expenditure; full and fulfilling employment; and tactical levers for change.*

Even with this breadth of vision Pausacker and Andrews strive to have their recommendations accepted as 'manageable', as constituting an evolution rather than a revolution in the dominant values and practices of society. As such they are adopting a stewardship role, one which does not deny the need for some economic growth, some government authority and some technological ingenuity. Their form of stewardship is optimistic, radical and pragmatic, yet it is also Utopian in part. Their work is a good example of practical recommendations stemming from particular environmental ideals — the pity is that it is almost unique in its efforts in the Australian context.

As a workable program for change this masterpiece has its critics — from the more middle-of-the-road stewards who see it as too grand and remote from everyday market-place environmentalism, or on the other hand see it as resorting to eco-fascism. Criticism also emanates from the more radical environmentalists who find its optimism and recipes of practical solutions to be counterproductive, merely acting to postpone the inevitable crisis.

Since stewardship has become the most accepted and operative environmental philosophy it has attracted supporters who may in fact differ about the actual degree of change needed to avert ecological disaster. Some attempt to distinguish between the positions making up that of stewardship is required. One such analysis by the author provided three basic types of stewardship:

1. **Development or market-place stewardship**

Stewardship may be expressed and promoted by groups intent upon economic development. For them, the stewardship image is a useful one. The task for developers is then seen to be the tailoring of the ecology to fit in with the land use changes of the development. This form of stewardship is best represented by the view expressed by the present Lord Mayor of Brisbane in her announcement about the development of the Boondall wetlands.

"The land at Boondall offers the Brisbane City Council and the people of Brisbane a unique opportunity for sensitive urban development in co-existence with nature ... an opportunity to open up some of the best that Moreton Bay has to offer to people from all parts of the city."

(Atkinson, 1985, p.2)

While the developer's dream is unfolding, methods for detecting the difference between stewardship in rhetoric and that in reality must be found by environmental advocates. Where there's a (developer's) will, there may not always be a way (for ecological stability)!

2. **Professional stewardship**

Professional stewardship asserts that development is possible as long as various studies are undertaken to ascertain and then manage any resulting environmental impacts. Within this approach there

seems to be a high level of tolerance of different definitions of the causes of human-environmental conflicts (as the 'crisis' is defined). They may include the Judeo-Christian ethic, the population explosion, unlimited economic growth, or the dominant form of productive technology. This piecemeal approach to the crisis is also reflected in a somewhat piecemeal definition of environmental problems, for example litter, pollution, erosion, eutrophication; and of solutions too, for example, use of environmental impact statements, formation of professional associations, scenario-building and perhaps establishment of such measures as permissible risk levels. Every confidence is placed in the conduct of appropriate research and the implementation of resulting recommendations to solve environmental problems.

3. Radical stewardship

Radical stewardship on the other hand has a more holistic approach to the environmental crisis and its solutions. By its questioning of such things as the nature of work, productive technologies, ecological sustainability, environmental quality and global inequity, it makes acceptance of one-off solutions to environmental problems an obviously superficial practice. Cock exemplifies this approach in his comments on one proposed solution to problems in Victoria's environment:

"The Victorian government's Conservation Strategy has evolved in a clear and articulate document that provides an insight into current departmental thinking. However, it fundamentally fails. It remains subservient to economic strategies committed to increases in per-capita income ... Until the growth in consumption per head is stopped and appropriate patterns of consumption are developed, any conservation strategy, however well intentioned, is unsustainable and contributes to the delusion of the public that what needs to be done is being done."

(Cock, 1986, p.22)

The environmental crisis is not seen as being discrete from the other crises facing Spaceship Earth. With such a perspective operating, radical stewardship closely approaches the environmental position held by the social ecologists. Yet, the distinguishing feature is probably the fact that radical stewardship works closely with the system, attempting to have its ideals accepted for incorporation, for example, by having its supporters chosen for representation work on important decision-making committees.

Education and stewardship

Education and stewardship are closely connected. Conservation and Resources Management stewardship have been the most popular forms of environmentalism taken up by curriculum innovations at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Yet, an unquestioning approach to this could give predominance to a form of environmental education which may challenge neither the role of schooling in maintaining the societal status quo nor the limitations inherent in an uncritical, solution-finding approach to environmental problems. The risk is that stewardship may gain dominance through school project materials published by mining and development groups interested in promoting a stewardship *image* for themselves. Syllabuses may simply add stewardship questions (about finite

resources, or conservation) as an afterthought to existing coverage of geography, science, economics — all of which have developed within a "growth-centred" philosophy. The ultimate outcome could be the marginalisation of Environmental Education.

So what should be the relationship between Environmental Education and Stewardship? How can Environmental Education be simultaneously "functional" and "challenging" within the existing school system? Should it work from concepts of doomsday or Utopia, from a search for "manageable solutions" to a more critical stance by students? There can be no doubt that the content incorporated in Environmental Education will vary greatly depending on the form of stewardship at its foundation. That form of stewardship will also influence other aspects of schooling for instance how that Environmental Education is learnt and ultimately how it is assessed (Maher, 1986). *Radical stewardship goals for Environmental Education will differ from those of marketplace stewardship or professional stewardship!* The essence is to decipher which approach is at the base of any program for Environmental Education and not to presume that all Environmental Education is the same or is working for the same outcomes.

While it may be concluded that stewardship is not problem-free, its popularity and influence cannot be denied by supporters of other environmental philosophies. The fact that it is comprised of rival factions may also be a healthy feature, enabling debate about the differing perspectives on our profound ecological dilemma and keeping the ground fertile for creative strategies for change. Yet there can be no doubt that stewardship is a position of great compromise at times, a result of its close association with the dominant ethos about environment. As such it is a long way from the establishment of a coherent environmental paradigm, one which will effectively displace that exploitative paradigm we are presently living in.

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