Environmental Aesthetics


Environmental aesthetics, a subfield of both aesthetics and environmental philosophy, emerged in the late 1960s and has steadily grown in importance since then. Although discussions of the aesthetics of nature have had a place in philosophy for a much longer time, twentieth-century environmental movements provided the context and conditions within which the discipline of aesthetics began to recognize problems connected to the aesthetic value of the environment and its role in weighing environmental issues.

Environmental aesthetics brings philosophical attention to issues in aesthetics as they relate to environments, natural objects within environments, and natural phenomena and processes (as opposed to artworks). The field has attended mainly to natural environments, but its scope has gradually widened to include mixed environments: those that have been modified or influenced by humans, such as gardens, as well as the human environments of everyday life, such as aspects of the built environment.

HISTORY

The genealogy of environmental aesthetics is traceable to at least three different areas: philosophical discussions of aesthetic appreciation of nature, theoretical and practical discussions of landscape design and landscape tastes (including romantic literature and poetry), and early conservation thought and nature writing. Although significant philosophical discussions of aesthetics of nature emerged only in the eighteenth century, the aesthetic appreciation of nature and landscape would probably have played an important role across cultures throughout human history.

Philosophical Aesthetics. Although philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas were concerned with the relation of beauty and the arts, the inception of the modern discipline of aesthetics is usually traced back to philosophical and literary discussions conducted in the early 1700s by figures such as Anthony Ashley Cooper (Lord Shaftesbury) (1801–1885), Joseph Addison (1672–1719), and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762). Treatises by these philosophers widened the scope of aesthetics in important ways. They theorized about nature as an object of aesthetic experience and appreciation in its own right, in contrast to earlier discussions, which gave little attention to nature apart from its representation in the arts. At the same time they widened the categories of aesthetic value beyond the beautiful to include the sublime and the picturesque, which created new contexts within which to discuss nature. Many scholars point to a “subjective turn” in aesthetic theory. Attention turned from understanding beauty as an objective quality to grasping the relationship between the aesthetic object and the appreciator; hence the character of aesthetic experience and appreciation became more important.

Before the eighteenth century, at least in North America and Europe and probably in other cultures as well, wild nature was often feared rather than appreciated for aesthetic qualities such
as beauty or sublimity. It was more common to appreciate humanly modified nature or nature as represented through art, music, and literature. Gardens have held an important place in history since ancient times, but, as Marjorie Hope Nicolson has shown in *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* (1959), wilder-ness and the rugged, great mountains of the world were not formally aesthetically appreciated until, roughly, the late seventeenth century, when many well-to-do travelers took part in the Grand Tour, a new form of tourism that included the great mountains of Europe (and to some extent eastern North America). The Grand Tour is often referred to in the literature as a form of nature connoisseurship that reflected philosophical discussions of the time, and it provided an important impetus for the appreciation of the beautiful and the sublime in practice. This change in landscape tastes opened up a greater potential for valuing wild nature.

Philosophers in the eighteenth century argued that disinterested pleasure lay at the root of the appreciation of aesthetic qualities such as the beautiful and sublime in nature; the concept of “disinterestedness” migrated from moral philosophy into aesthetics. It was Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who conferred enduring importance on this concept through his analysis of aesthetic judgments in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). In his work the term *disinterestedness* pertains to aesthetic experience and valuing that are noninstrumental, directed at the perceptual qualities of an object apart from any personal or utilitarian interests of the perceiver. Some more recent theories in environmental aesthetics recognize the importance of this concept, whereas others object that disinterested appreciation distances the appreciator and blocks full engagement with environments.

Kant’s aesthetic theory is especially important to the history of environmental aesthetics because it makes nature the paradigm of aesthetic experience and judgment. More than other writers of his time, Kant privileges nature over art, and interpretations of his aesthetic theory show that the aesthetic appreciation of nature was more significant— even more edifying morally— to human life than the appreciation of the arts. For Kant this superiority of nature applies to both the beautiful and sublime. His theory of the beautiful, like others of the period, argues that beauty is associated with delightful, pleasing perceptual qualities and tranquil contemplation, whereas the sublime is associated with a “negative pleasure” of feeling overwhelmed by the massive, powerful, and seemingly infinite qualities of natural objects and phenomena such as towering cliffs, raging seas, and vast deserts. An experience of the sublime, which Kant believed arises only in the contemplation of nature, induces feelings of human insignificance in the face of natural forces; yet, at the same time, we recognize our place as free, moral, and rational beings in the world.

Kant’s ideas influenced romanticism and the “nature worship” expressed through the literature, poetry, music, and visual arts of the nineteenth century. The poetry of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) is especially notable for showing vividly how a deep aesthetic engagement with nature can shape and invigorate human imagination and lived experience. John Ruskin (1819-1900), the artist and art critic, holds a key place in postromantic thought for his criticisms of classical landscape painters, who, he argued, lacked a true understanding of nature. Many scholars and critics admire the aesthetic, scientific, and spiritual sensitivity shown for nature in his major work *Modern Painters* (1873).
Romanticism’s reverence for nature influenced writers and artistic movements in nineteenth-century North America, including the transcendentalists and the Hudson River school of landscape painters. These figures lie outside of philosophical aesthetics, but they become relevant to discussions of conservation that arise in the history of environmental aesthetics.

Despite the strong interest in nature in romanticism and its offshoots, the philosophical concern with the aesthetics of nature tailed off in the nineteenth century as the philosophy of art gained a foothold. This trend was precipitated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s (1770-1831) influential insistence on the primacy of art over nature. For Hegel nature’s aesthetic value is realized only when fashioned by the human spirit through the production of art. His ideas signalled a gradual move away from a conception of art as a representation of nature and toward art as the expression of the human imagination.

The move away from nature was also evident in developments in the art world as the influence of romanticism waned; art moved toward expression and abstraction rather than representational or naturalistic depictions of the world. Twentieth-century avant garde movements provided still greater inspiration for philosophers to devote their attention to art rather than nature. In the face of Marcel Duchamp’s (1887-1968) Fountain (the provocative dadaist artwork that consisted of a urinal turned upside down), and other works that charged past the traditional boundaries of art, philosophy was presented with a formidable challenge: redefining art.
**Landscape Theory and Practice.** Alongside philosophical work on aesthetics of nature, there have been important movements in theory and practice related to landscape that indicate appreciation of nature in one form or another. These movements have raised problems and issues now taken up in contemporary debates in environmental aesthetics.

Interest in nature through classical landscape paintings was brought into the real-world context of gardens and landscape design through theories of the picturesque. The picturesque was developed mainly by William Gilpin (1724-1804), Sir Uvedale Price (1747-1829), and Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824) in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. The movement prized qualities associated with landscape gardening and the paintings of Claude Lorrain (1600-1682) and Salvator Rosa (1615-1673).

The picturesque is sometimes linked to Humphry Repton (1752-1818), who was critical of Lancelot “Capability” Brown’s (1716-1783) grand designs for the great manor houses of England, which involved moving earth and trees to create classical landscapes with extensive prospects across lawns, lakes, and constructed features such as classical temples. Its enthusiasts were keen to mark out a new aesthetic category lying somewhere between the beautiful and the sublime. Among the aesthetic qualities prized by proponents of the picturesque were roughness, sudden variation, mystery, irregularity, and weathering.

Although the picturesque spurred interest in a greater range of natural qualities than previous theories, it has been criticized for promoting an appreciation of nature only as it appears through the lens of art. The theory originated in the idea that the nature lover most deeply apprehends the beauty of landscapes by looking at them in paintings: standing back and beholding the design, forms, and colors of the picture. Connoisseurs of the picturesque in the eighteenth century used a special device through which they viewed natural landscapes: the “Claude Glass,” a tinted convex mirror that framed and reflected the view, transforming it into something like a miniature painting (in the manner of Claude Lorrain). Gilpin was among the theorists who believed that art improves upon nature—hence the grand designs of picturesque gardens and the use of the Claude Glass. Theories of the picturesque—and the “scenery model” of aesthetic appreciation of nature they engendered—presented aesthetic and moral challenges to the pioneers of environmental aesthetics as the field emerged in the 1960s.

**Conservation.** The influence of the picturesque was confined mostly to Western Europe, notwithstanding its undeniable impact on landscape practices and tastes in North America, most notably in the work of the great American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903). In North America attitudes toward nature in theoretical discussions, the arts, and in practice leaned much more toward a wilderness aesthetic that influenced the ethos of the conservation movement that developed in the United States in the late nineteenth century.

The transcendentalist aesthetic of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was steeped in a reverence for wilderness; his major work, *Walden* (1854), recounts his experiment of living close to nature at Walden Pond. The growing receptivity to untamed landscapes crested in the wilderness worship of transcendentalism, which was a compound of aesthetic and philosophical notions that echoed the spirit of romanticism. Transcendentalists shared the romantic revulsion at the dehumanizing effects of technology and urban civilization; they prized wild nature as a source of spiritual regeneration, a messenger of profound moral truths. The wilderness paintings of
Thomas Cole (1801–1848) and Frederick Church (1826-1900) (both Hudson River School artists) depict mountain and river landscapes with little or no human presence. Their canvases dramatically express the wild, sublime, and divine forces of nature.

This wilderness aesthetic is central to the environmental awareness conveyed in John Muir’s (1838-1914) classic essay, “A Near View of the High Sierra” (1894). Muir’s exploration of the Sierra Nevada mountain range reflects both his deep interest in natural history and his aesthetic and spiritual values. In contrast to the visual artists he meets on his journey, Muir appreciates nature not merely as an aesthete savoring distant scenery as an object but as an engaged environmentalist, an intimate participant in the beauty and sublimity of the mountains who understands them from within. This environmental aesthetic also found expression in the work of the great conservationist and forerunner of environmental ethics Aldo Leopold (1887-1948). In A Sand County Almanac (1949) he combines ecological knowledge with aesthetic sensitivity in evoking environments from the typically beautiful to the “unscenic.” Leopold’s “land ethic” is, perhaps, the first conservationist philosophy that joins ethical and aesthetic concerns in valuing environments.

Another key aesthetic theme running through conservation and nature writing is the idea that all of the natural world is beautiful, that nature untouched by humans is inherently good and aesthetically edifying. The thesis of “positive aesthetics,” as articulated by Allen Carlson (2000), is traceable to figures such as John Constable (1776-1837), John Ruskin, George Marsh (1801-1882), William Morris (1834-1896), and John Muir. This outlook, although not without its critics, is a key component of contemporary environmental aesthetics.

**CONTEMPORARY DEBATES**

Discussions in philosophical aesthetics, landscape theory and practice, and early conservation literature together form the historical foundation of environmental aesthetics. After Hegel aesthetics evolved into the philosophy of art. Apart from some interesting attempts to extend aesthetics beyond art by analytic aestheticians such as Frank Sibley in the 1950s, philosophers focused on art to the exclusion of natural environments. Ronald Hepburn’s seminal 1966 article, “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty”—widely viewed as marking the emergence of environmental aesthetics as a distinct field—asks why aestheticians should be less interested in natural beauty and the environment than in art. Hepburn sets out to develop an understanding of what an aesthetic appreciation of natural beauty might look like, thus posing a key issue: How does an aesthetic appreciation of nature differ from an appreciation of artworks? This question leads to others: What is distinctive about environments as compared to artworks? What guides aesthetic appreciation of nature in the absence of art history, knowledge of artistic intention, and the conventions that govern the judgment of artworks?

Hepburn’s main task is to show the novel perspectives opened up by an aesthetic grasp of nature. Natural aesthetic appreciation can center on discrete objects viewed up close or as part of a scène; more typically, however, the observer is immersed in environments—for example, walking through a forest or standing in the middle of a plain. Hepburn argues that nature, unlike traditional works of art, affords the observer more freedom to explore the range of qualities that are possible in a truly environmental experience. It is not just the position of the observer that is different; environments are not framed or bounded in the way that many forms of art are. These
distinctive features of immersion in the environment offer opportunities for an aesthetic experience that draws on a broader range of senses than is commonly used in responding to artworks.

Hepburn’s starting point is a comparison of art and nature, whereas Arnold Berleant, another important contemporary environmental aesthetician, argues that aesthetics ought to use the environment rather than art as its starting point and main context. In The Aesthetics of Environment (1992) and other works, Berleant argues that aesthetic experience begins with the environment (both natural and humanly modified environments) and extends to art. Berleant is critical of the traditional aesthetic virtue of “disinterestedness” for him this approach distances the subject from aesthetic object. In its place he reconceives the aesthetic response as an “aesthetics of engagement” that collapses the dichotomy between subject and object through participation in the environment.

These ideas emphasize important distinctions between environmental aesthetics and the philosophy of art. They also signify an important move away from the “scenery model” that dominated earlier nature aesthetics. Many writers have argued that scenic appreciation is narrow, static, and two-dimensional, ignoring the richness of three-dimensional environmental qualities that envelop the observer in dynamic and shifting milieus with the variations of the time of day, tides, weather conditions, and seasons. These critics fault the scenery model for prizing conventionally beautiful landscapes over environments traditionally viewed as “unscenic,” such as marshlands, even though the latter may have great aesthetic value (Saito 1998b, Callicott 1983, Carlson 2000). On ethical grounds some have argued that the scenery model’s roots in the picturesque make it anthropocentric, viewing nature as if it were a work of art rather than an organic, living, evolving environment.

Cognitive and Noncognitive Theories. Environmental aesthetics seeks to understand what makes an environment natural rather than something produced by human intentions and actions. In art, experience is shaped by qualities such as harmony, style, and form. Aesthetic judgments consider such qualities in gauging the success or failure of an artwork. Hepburn and others have noted that the freedom of natural environments distinguishes them from works of art, but how does this difference alter experience and judgment?

Answers to this question fall into two camps: cognitivism and noncognitivism. These terms reflect the role of knowledge in theories of the aesthetic appreciation of the environment. Cognitivists argue that ecology, geology, and other natural sciences structure and guide “appropriate” aesthetic reactions—that is, those that are not shallow or superficial. They advance a standard for determining correct and incorrect aesthetic judgments. Carlson’s “natural environmental model,” developed in a series influential of papers beginning in the 1970s and culminating in his collected essays (published in 2000), has served as a foil for the many non cognitivists who have written critiques of it. Some cognitivists—as well as noncognitivists—attend to modified as well as natural environments

Carlson seeks the most suitable framework for valuing natural environments as natural. Just as an informed evaluation of art objects relies on an investigation of the categories of art history, so, Carlson argues, by analogy an aesthetic grasp of the environment ought to mine the knowledge provided by the natural sciences. Science, he contends, aids in the discovery of aesthetic qualities
and deepens appreciation, and without it we are unlikely to make aesthetic judgments that are true. Carlson uses the example of a whale: If viewed under the category of “fish,” it might appear awkward and clumsy, but regarded under the correct category of “mammal,” it is likely to appear to be magnificent and graceful.

Carlson claims that a reliance on scientific knowledge not only enlightens aesthetic perceptions of nature but also endows them with a measure of objectivity. Leavening aesthetic perceptions with scientific knowledge helps to ensure that judgments are not arbitrary or subjective. This last point, Carlson believes, is especially important in incorporating aesthetic value into environmental decision-making and policy, processes that are often criticized for a reliance on unreliable, individualistic criteria.

Other cognitivists share Carlson’s emphasis on the essential role of knowledge in natural aesthetics. Marcia Mueeder Eaton, Holmes Rolston, and Glenn Parsons all agree that the natural sciences provide the most reliable framework for appreciation, although they elaborate their positions in different ways. Rolston and Parsons have developed approaches to positive aesthetics, which Carlson makes a central feature of his cognitivist account. Parts of nature that might otherwise seem ugly—such as a rotting animal carcass, for example—can be regarded as beautiful if viewed as a necessary component of a healthy ecosystem.

Noncognitive theories are more diverse, but they push the more subjective aspects of aesthetic experience to the forefront, often giving a backseat to scientific knowledge. Noncognitivists emphasize common features of the aesthetic response to the environment: for example, multisensory engagement, imagination, and emotion. Their typically pluralistic conception of knowledge includes folklore and other “nonscientific” modes of understanding. These positions grew largely out of objections to Carlson’s approach. These critics argue that, by making science a necessary condition of aesthetic appreciation, cognitivism (especially the natural environmental model) unreasonably restricts the range of aesthetic perceptions and judgments. On this view the problem stems from according legitimacy to only one epistemological framework—one grounded in scientific knowledge—and thereby stigmatizing nonscientific modes of apprehension because they presumably impose human values onto nature.

Berleant’s aesthetics of engagement, which stresses sensory immersion, active participation, and embodied appreciation, is perhaps the longest-standing noncognitivist approach. He takes to task the subject-object dualism he detects at the root of Kant’s account and the scenery and natural environmental models. Other noncognitivist approaches emphasize one component of appreciation or combine them. Through a robust account of emotions and their appropriateness, Noël Carroll’s “arousal model” (1993) seeks to show that emotional responses can play a legitimate role in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. One of Carroll’s aims is to include the subjective side of experience in ways that meet some common objections, such as the problem of sentimentalizing nature and the claim that our emotional responses are not communicable. The role of emotion meets a standard of objectivity, he argues, insofar as it can be shown to be sharable and not wayward or arbitrary.

Emily Brady’s “integrated aesthetic” (2003) gives a prominent role to various forms of imaginative engagement, but it also integrates other components of the aesthetic response, including the senses, emotion, disinterestedness, and a pluralistic approach to knowledge. For
example, imaginative engagement can involve both visualizing and taking conceptual leaps that open up new ways of perceiving natural objects. In contemplating the smoothness of a sea pebble, one might visualize the relendess surging of the ocean as it has shaped the pebble into its worn form. One might also imagine how it looked before it became so smooth, and this image might contribute to one’s wonder and delight in it. Hepburn’s theory (1996, 2001) gives a major role to the “metaphysical imagination”—discovery through aesthetic encounters with nature.

These approaches trace some of their roots back to Kant’s aesthetic theory, which places imagination rather than knowledge at the center of aesthetic experience. Kant’s influence is evident in the work of another important noncognitivist, Malcolm Budd (2002), who embraces aspects of Kant’s aesthetic theory, supplementing it with new work from environmental aesthetics, especially the idea of appreciating nature as nature.

Yuriko Saito’s work lies somewhere between cognitivism and noncognitivism. She supports the role of science but challenges its centrality, arguing for a plurality of appreciative frameworks, including other forms of knowledge such as folklore. On her account aesthetic appreciation can be enriched by a range of sources, but it must begin and end with the sensuous surface of aesthetic objects and environments. Saito emphasizes the importance of valuing a range of environments, from the beautiful to the “unscenic” to the everyday (2008). Saito’s ideas are informed by Japanese aesthetics, which values such qualities as imperfection, transience, change, and the effects of weathering. Thomas Heyd’s approach to environmental aesthetics stresses the relationship between environments and humans and the range of cultural resources they employ. Like Saito, he is interested in exploring a variety of environments, many of which occupy the middle range between wild nature and the urban (see Heyd 2007).

As environmental aesthetics has grown, it expanded its purview from natural environments to the modified environments of gardens (Ross 1998, Cooper 2006), environmental and land art (Brady 2007), and everyday environments (Light and Smith 2005, Saito 2008, Berleant and Carlson 2004). Given the prominence of non-human animals in environmental ethics, this topic was oddly neglected until it was addressed by Parsons (2007), who discusses aesthetic value in relation to animals.

AESTHETICS, ETHICS, AND ENVIRONMENT

Most environmental aestheticians consider their principal disciplinary home to be aesthetics rather than environmental ethics. Likewise, environmental ethicists tend to consider theirs to be ethics. Both orientations, however, are acutely aware of the productive and salutary overlaps and intersections between aesthetic and ethical value. For instance, Eugene Hargrove (1989) bases his approach to environmental ethics on the significance of the aesthetic valuing of nature.
Easedale, English Lake District. A rural landscape shaped by natural forms and agricultural practices. Prior to the eighteenth century, in Western nations, such as those in North America and Europe, nature and the wild was often feared rather than appreciated for its aesthetic aspects. PHOTO BY EMILY BRADY.

In a 1998 article, “Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms,” Saito argues that natural aesthetics should incorporate a moral dimension that regards nature as nature and not merely as a work of art, a scene, or a cultural product (unless, of course, the environment in question is a humanly modified landscape). Hepburn, Eaton, and others also underline the importance of avoiding distorting, trivializing, and sentimentalizing aesthetic appreciation. Cognitivists claim to avoid such distortion by their reliance on scientific knowledge, whereas noncognitivists try to find various ways to strike a balance between overly serious and trivial appreciation (Hepburn 2001).

In response to worries about the potential distorting power of imagination, Brady shows how its activity can work appropriately, focused on the aesthetic phenomenon in question. She identifies relevant imaginative activity as that which is closely tied to perceptual qualities of the object, and this is bolstered by a disinterested standpoint where attention is directed to the aesthetic object rather than self-indulgent flights of fancy (Brady 2003, Moore 2008).

In an important article, “Icebreakers: Environmentalism and Natural Aesthetics” (1994), Stan Godlovitch takes the importance of appreciating nature on its own terms a step further, arguing for an “acentric” aesthetics that esteems nature as something mysterious and indefinable rather than as something culturally appropriated or determined by human imagination or science. This
approach attempts to subordinate human frameworks as much as possible, thereby allowing nature to be valued, as much as possible, as nature.

Environmental philosophers such as Rolston, Hargrove, J. Baird Callicott, Ned Hettinger, and Sheila Lintott have explored more deeply the intersection of aesthetics and ethics. They agree that ecological understanding can enable us to move beyond shallow and biased aesthetic valuing and that environmental education is important in both our moral and aesthetic lives. But this approach suggests that aesthetics and ethics come together only to promote a responsibility for well-informed aesthetic appreciation. The connection has been taken a step further in the view that aesthetic valuing may support a moral attitude toward nature (see Hargrove 1989). Aesthetic attention to nature, from the delicate qualities of an everyday buttercup to the rich diversity of a rainforest, has long been recognized as a way into valuing nature that is immediate, compelling, and pleasurable. The democratic opportunities of aesthetic experience, from young to old and across cultures, may help to encourage people to care for the environment. As Brady (2003) and Lintott (2006) have pointed out, however, aesthetic valuing alone may be an insufficient foundation for environmental ethics in the absence of other concepts such as justice.

Environmental aesthetics has had and will continue to have significance for environmental disciplines and practices. A principal aim of environmental aesthetics is to seek a philosophically informed understanding of aesthetic value and judgment. To this end there is strong agreement that aesthetic value is noninstrumental and therefore distinct from other instrumental environmental pleasures such as recreation. Criticisms of the scenery model have underscored the extent to which aesthetic valuing reaches beyond mere visual enjoyment to encompass a broad range of experiences—knowledge, emotion, imagination, and all the senses. This view presents a “thicker” concept of the aesthetic experience of landscape, which, in much empirical work on the topic, has been limited to aspects that can be objectified or quantified (e.g., visual or scenic value), thus leaving out key qualitative aspects of valuing nature. A thicker concept of aesthetic value may then come to have a more important role in environmental policy than it currently holds. For instance, the selection of areas to clean up (e.g., Superfund sites) can be made in part on aesthetic grounds. Also, given the surge in proposals for wind farms, with their promise of delivering green energy, a richer understanding of aesthetic appreciation and value can provide an informed way to judge the impact of these projects on the landscape (Briggle 2005, Saito 2004).

SEE ALSO Built Environment; Environmental Art; Hudson River School; Landscape Architecture, Design, and Preservation; Landscape Painters and Environmental Photography; Leopold, Aido; Muir, John; Romanticism; Ruskin, John; Thoreau, Henry David; Urban Environments; Wordsworth, William.
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