

## FORUM

### Biodiversity and Kentucky's Heritage

ROSS C. CLARK

Department of Biological Sciences, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Kentucky 40475

It is crucial to the future of our mental and physical health, and that of our species, that we decide what we think about biodiversity and what we will try to do about preserving or destroying it. Human progress has never been shaped by those who are comfortable with quick, simple answers, and it should not be otherwise today in Kentucky. Those who are willing to address the issue thoughtfully are those who should call the tune for the future.

Before European settlement, Kentucky was a place where resources were shared by all Indian tribes close enough to benefit—not the domain of any single tribe. The current status of Kentucky as a commonwealth implies the same thing: Kentucky's natural resources should benefit all its citizens. Even though our heritage of English common law permits us to hold title to land and its resources and to do largely what we please with them, it is ecologically impossible to own anything in this world. From a functional viewpoint, we simply use what is in this world to survive and reproduce, and then pass out of the picture. We do not own the world. It owns us.

Money is an artificial and very incomplete currency. Leaving aside societal values, the only real currency in the world—the only things of fundamental value—are the energy and nutrients that support the metabolism of organisms, including ourselves. Modern civilization uses money to value the extraction and circulation of resources, but does not use money to value the end products of resources. If we were consistent about how we use money, we would use it to value all aspects of resource extraction and use, including the integrity of the atmosphere, water resources and habitat alteration and loss.

But we do not live in a world where the use of natural resources is valued completely. Our species is raping the world, and every one of us is participating. All of us use more than we

need. None of us recycles our waste products so that all of them can be reused by someone or something else.

What does this have to do with biodiversity? Biodiversity is an issue because the activities of our species threaten it. What does it matter? Why should we care? There are two fundamental reasons why we should care. One reason is practical and one is ethical.

The practical reason why we should care about preserving biodiversity is that we are the product of diverse ecosystems. A couple of years ago, I asked students in one of my classes to write down where they would live and what their surroundings would be like, if they could live anywhere in the world they desired. Every person wrote that he or she wanted to live simply in the country, with trees, wild animals, clean air and clean water.

Those students didn't choose their preferred surroundings by accident. For more than 99% of humans' existence on earth, we lived in general equilibrium with the ecosystems we inhabited. We have practiced agriculture and lived in large settlements for only 15,000 years out of the 2+ million years our genus has existed. The makeup of our brains was not shaped in cities. It was shaped in nature. Biologically, our real home is nature, not towns and cities. It is not coincidental that we need diversity of landscape, diversity of habitat, diversity of plants and animals around us to be mentally healthy individuals and cultures. The main values to us of tropical rainforest or mixed mesophytic forest are not the economic products or medicines they may contain. *The most fundamental value of intact ecosystems and their organisms is that without them, we do not know who we are.* Without a connection to nature we cannot actually feel, we are strangers in a strange land. We should not have to lose our connection with nature to discover the obvious truth.

The second main reason we should care



about biodiversity is ethical. Ethics is the property of being positively influenced by the needs of others, of keeping the welfare of others in mind. Whether one is ethical or not is not as fundamental as where our natural home is. We cannot choose, and no one can choose for us, whether or not we are children of nature; we just are, because it happened that way. One *can* choose whether or not to be ethical; or, whether we feel responsibility toward others may be determined by how we are raised, or by what happens to us during our lives. Ethical people and societies will feel some responsibility toward the needs of other species that share the earth. If we are conscientious, we will try to live lightly on the earth, so that other species also will experience a decent quality of life. They did not choose to be here with us. They are at our mercy. If we are ethical, we will save them a share of a decent living. If we are not, we will not care whether they exist or not, or will always place what we want above their well-being. If we are ethical, we will actively preserve diversity in ecosystems which all organisms require to get their food and raise their young.

What does all this mean to people who say "no one has the right to tell me what I can do with my land?" What does it mean to the corporation claiming a right to pollute with impunity because it gives people jobs, or the corporation claiming the right to destroy thousands of acres of diverse forest to make chipboard or run a biomass electrical generating station?

For Kentucky, the answer should be clear. Has Kentucky forgotten how the timber barons from the northeast gave its citizens poorly paid temporary jobs and shipped its magnificent forests (and most of the money) somewhere else? Has Kentucky forgotten how the coal barons did the same thing with its coal, leaving the State with a legacy of black lung, dead streams, ruined property and poor people? How many times must we see the process repeated to know that people "doing whatever they want to with their land" is an idea that doesn't benefit the Commonwealth in the long run?

This Commonwealth is responsible for the welfare of its people. Public officials are elected and appointed to serve that welfare, not to serve their own interests. We don't live as is-

lands; we live together. When the common good must be served, private property "rights" must give way. Those "rights" are not inalienable. They were invented by humans. For the common good, traditional rights are often limited by humans for the benefit and future of all, including other species. If individuals are ecologically unethical, then state regulations can help to impose ethics. Bad habits are hard to break, but for the good of all, Kentucky must change.

Independence, an admirable quality, is the only thing some Kentuckians have left to be proud of. What would help persuade people that it is in their own best interest to give up some of that independence? Perhaps more people would be willing to give up some independence if they could feel worthwhile some other way, if they could see the hope of a better future, of assured, sustainable jobs that did not require the destruction of the landscape which they value. Kentuckians say they are proud of their state. They love the mountains, lakes and rivers. What if they could sell that pride to outsiders and make a decent living doing it? What if Kentucky once again got serious about attracting tourists by repairing and upgrading its state park facilities? What if people could work in secondary timber industries, exporting finished products instead of sawlogs and chipboard? What if they could retrofit houses for energy conservation and solar assisted heating instead of burning whole forests to generate more electricity? What if state government could work very hard to attract nonpolluting industries, instead of plowing the same old eroded resource extraction-ecosystem destruction furrow?

But what about unskilled people who cannot handle sophisticated jobs? Consider South Carolina. About 30 years ago, South Carolina built a system of technical schools to give its citizens access to the real jobs of the future. When a major corporation considers locating to South Carolina, the tech schools sit down with company management and work carefully with the industry to design a special curriculum to train workers to work in that industry. The state and the people pay the training costs. By the time the industry has built its facility, there are plenty of well-trained workers available for the specific jobs the industry offers. That's how Spartanburg came to have



the highest concentration of foreign companies doing business of any location in the Southeast. It's also how South Carolina landed several Michelin facilities and Mercedes Benz. It's also how my stepson, without a college education, learned how to be a technical draftsman and worked his way up to being project manager in a major construction firm, making more money than I do. He loves his work. It's rewarding. He's proud of himself. He should be. South Carolina's vision made his success possible. The same thing could happen in Kentucky.

There were only two prerequisites for the South Carolina success story: people who are willing to work, and a government dedicated to their future. It took vision and serious investment in education on all levels.

With the constructive insistence of its enlightened citizens, more Kentuckians could someday be proud of something more than just being Kentuckians. Proud of a better, more livable environment; proud of better

jobs; proud of healthy ecosystems that remind visitors where all of us came from. Proud of a progressive government which anticipates the future. All these things are intertwined. You can't separate them from each other. To produce a success story, all these factors must be addressed at the same time for a sustained period. The reason we should work to create better jobs and lives in the midst of resolutely preserved biodiversity is because it is the right thing to do for ourselves and our children.

Does Kentucky have the vision and the guts to do what is right for the future of the people of this Commonwealth, or must we remain an increasingly degraded resource extraction colony for the rest of the nation? Will timber tide us over so coal can tide us over so Maxie Flats can tide us over so oil can tide us over so biomass and chipboard plants can tide us over so chicken processors can tide us over, or is there a better way?

*Think, Kentucky. Think Kentucky.* Long-term independence and pride come from having it all together and keeping it that way.



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