

Exploitation through Small Decisions:  
How Quick Choices Destroy the Aesthetic World

Melissa Jennings, Lynchburg College

Every moment, the world has a new and wonderful aesthetic beauty to offer. From blades of grass to Redwood trees, the world offers people immaculate images. However, most humans do not notice the world around them. Now more than ever, people are consumed by their jobs and the objects they buy. As a result of their ignorance, people put the natural aesthetics of the Earth in danger. Humans pollute, consume, and exploit the world at an alarming rate. One specific element seems to be the main problem behind humans' ignorance: small, daily decisions. Many environmental issues stem from quick choices on mundane topics made by people who have an apathetic outlook on nature.

William Odum (1982) commented on the effects of small decisions in "Environmental Degradation and the Tyranny of Small Decisions," stating, "Each threatened and endangered species, with a few exceptions, owes its special status to series of small decisions" (p. 291). Odum is suggesting that animals on the endangered species list have been placed there by humans who have made bad choices regarding the environment. Moreover, Odum believes that these bad choices are not large scale. Rather, the largest damaging effects to the Earth result from seemingly small judgments made by individuals on a daily basis. Odum uses the example of the Florida Everglades: through "small pin pricks," the natural land was consumed by human roads and buildings (p.290). Though "no one [directly] chose to reduce the annual surface flow of water into the Everglades National Park . . . or to encourage unnaturally hot, destructive fires . . . all of these things have happened . . ." (p. 291). Odum's example of the

Everglades shows that many small decisions on the part of individuals can accumulate into serious, large scale disasters.

How people grow food causes huge disasters as well. As populations have increased, so has food production, thus giving rise to the need for quicker methods of growing food. However, the technological, agri-business way in which food is produced for consumers is detrimental to the preservation of natural aesthetics. Joel Salatin (2011) sums up the connection between the public and their diet by stating, "People should have a good relationship with their food." Nevertheless, the problem, as Salatin suggests, is that humans have lost touch with their food, due to mechanical, industrial farming practices. The philosophy these days is to produce food as quickly as possible in order to get it to the consumer. Unfortunately, advances in technology for farming have meant making small decisions that are harmful to the environment. In order to produce more food more quickly, a company must make bigger and better machines, which in turn put out more pollution into the atmosphere.

Salatin's farming practices illustrate that machines are not necessary in order to feed the public. His company, Polyface, Inc., gets food to consumers through the natural method of grass farming. Instead of using chemical fertilizers and toxic pesticides, Salatin lets his animals do the work. Subsequently, the animals graze on natural grass instead of being corn-fed. As Salatin states, "If every farmer followed this model [of grass farming], in ten years, we would get rid of all the carbon emitted since the Industrial Revolution." In essence, humans and "farming should be [in an] aesthetically romantic" relationship (Salatin, 2011). It seems that Salatin suggests humans *should* keep making small decisions, yet these decisions should be useful and beneficial to the environment as well as to the decision makers.

However, people have a long way to go before their decision-making turns around for the better. For many years, mainly since the start of the Industrial Revolution, people have lost touch with the aesthetic qualities of nature; land has become a product rather than a beauty. Richard Burke (2011), in his lecture concerning the poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, talked about the nineteenth century concerns about the human relationship with the natural world. According to Wordsworth and Coleridge, as Burke stated, "One must treat [nature] with sustainability; it's a moral responsibility." Regrettably, in the current world, people have what Burke would call an exploitative relationship with nature. In essence, humans see nature purely as a device "to serve their needs [through] ruthless domination" (Burke, 2011). As Odum (1982) would say, with no regard for nature or the effect they have on it, humans make small decisions that exploit the land, air, and sea. In order for decision-making to turn for the better, people must view the world in a collaborative way (much like Salatin's grass-farming). Burke's definition of collaboration is that it simply "benefits humans and nature." In other words, humans must form a sustainable relationship with nature.

Nevertheless, getting humans to live sustainably is not an easy undertaking. Burke (2011) believes that the only way in which humans can understand nature and its inherent aesthetic value is through experience; humans must see nature directly as opposed to only knowing something about it. Most people nowadays are so completely sheltered by urban life that the idea of living in the natural world is frightening to them. Moreover, it takes an effort for people to put down their electronic devices and to listen to the natural world around them. However, it is important to put aside the urban lifestyle in order to develop a relationship with the Earth.

Jane Goodall's (1990) experience shows that such a relationship with nature can be very rewarding. By living among the chimpanzees, Goodall was able to observe not only the animals' behavior in their natural environment, but also the way in which humans react in that environment: "The opening of this window onto the way of life of our closest living relatives gives us a better understanding not only of the chimpanzee's place in nature, but also of *man's* place in nature" (p. 191). By seeing how the chimpanzees live in the world, Goodall saw the place man has in the world as well. From her experience, Goodall witnessed aesthetic beauty at its core, and she saw how humans should live collaboratively with nature. Of course, most people do not have to go as far as watching animals as intensely as Goodall did to appreciate the natural world. Instead, maybe a walk along a trail or a simple sit in a park can show just how exquisite the Earth is.

One might ask why it is important for humans to observe the natural world. Going back to Salatin's (2011) quote that humans and "farming should be aesthetically romantic" brings into focus how beneficial an appreciation of our natural environment can be. By looking at the world for what it is (not as a series of products for human consumption or a place for dumping garbage), humans have a chance to learn and turn their exploitative relationship with nature into a collaborative one. Moreover, it is important for people to see the world in its aesthetic wonder, for sooner or later, their abuse of it will catch up. As a result of our prolonged ignorance of sustainability, the aesthetic beauty of the Earth will deteriorate and eventually cease to exist. It is time for humans to learn from the natural world around them instead of ignoring the problems they cause through their detrimental small decisions.

## References

- Burke, R. (2011, 30 January). *"Something far more deeply interfused": Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the divine in nature*. Lecture at Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, VA.
- Goodall, J. (2009). *Through a window*. In D. Werner (Ed.), Lynchburg College Symposium Readings (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Vol. IX: *Science and Human Nature*. (pp.188-204). Philadelphia: XLibris. (Original work published 1990).
- Odum, W.E. (2009). Environmental degradation and the tyranny of small decisions. In D. Freier (Ed.), Lynchburg College Symposium Readings (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Vol. VIII: *Shaping the Environment*. (pp. 288-293). Philadelphia: XLibris. (Original work published 1982).
- Salatin, J. (2011, February 14). *Dancing with dinner*. Lecture at Lynchburg College, Lynchburg, VA.