

Two new books for Anthropocene times

Book review by Ben Collyer, published in New Scientist, print issue of Jan 20, 2018

Fully embracing our connectedness with the biosphere will take rethinking how we see our objects and a new legal framework, argue two new books

Reviewing:

* *Being Ecological*, by Timothy Morton, Pelican Books, Jan 2018, 240 pp

* *Our Oldest Task: Making sense of our place in nature*, by Eric T. Freyfogle, University of Chicago Press, Aug 2017, 240 pp

WHAT on earth would two humanities scholars know about ecological destruction and how to tackle it? While this is a puzzle one might be tempted to pass by, that could be a mistake.

Campaigning scientists are understandably frustrated and baffled that governments and influential players don't grasp the urgent necessity to reverse global warming and pollution. They should welcome two professors: Timothy Morton, of the English department at Rice University, Texas, and Eric Freyfogle, a law emeritus from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Both shed useful light on the mindset of non-scientists, and point to a more holistic approach for both sides of the science-humanities divide.

Both insist that it won't help to panic; instead, we need to understand the phase through which our social institutions and modes of thought are passing. If we don't take these cultural factors on board, we will be unable to act effectively on the science.

According to these authors, the greatest impediment to addressing our ecological crisis is the pervasive anthropocentric illusion underpinning current human relationships. These interactions continue as if humans are separate from the biosphere, and as if nature can be forced into mute subservience to human will.

It is an error of thought and rule-making that first arose when agriculture sundered the domestic sphere from the wild. And this soon evolved into the fixed "eternal" social orders and rigid monotheisms of ancient states and the medieval world.

While the Enlightenment's struggle for individual freedoms began to loosen some of the shackles of political oppression, the objectification of nature lingered on, enshrined in law and in the way we think.

In *Being Ecological*, Morton tackles the problem from inside the whirl of everyday thought. But he tries to look forward and imagine modes of thinking more attuned to the reality of our interconnection with the biosphere. Stop for just a moment, Morton urges, and sense the squiggling bacteria in your gut. Now visualise all the plastic fragments in all the oceans of the

world. Can you see them, feel them? They are not “out there”, they are interconnected with us in time and space.

We need these moments of meditation, he suggests, because such sensory and conceptual awareness might incline us to see a plastic bag blowing down the street in its future existence, too – possibly choking a seabird.

To permit such connection is also to yield to beauty and disgust, to an acceptance of enchantment and mystery as essential aspects of rationality. Ecological politics, for Morton, is “about expanding, modifying and developing new forms of pleasure, not restraining the meagre pleasures we already experience because we are only thinking in ways that our current modes of doing things allows. What would pleasure look like beyond the oil economy?”

“The greatest impediment to addressing our ecological crisis is the anthropocentric illusion”

This is interesting territory, made more so by a curious omission. Morton never considers that ecologists might already experience the enchantment and mystery of the world their knowledge reveals, and that this awareness is exactly why they campaign. He complains that science approaches its activism with “data dumps” that fail to engage the population at large. This is fair. But rather than engaging more with the raw science, Morton seems to turn away.

Being Ecological is the culmination of a series of books by Morton on a common theme – and the most accessible. But he remains content to use the same small set of biological and social reference points. And rather than expand that set, which would be helpful, he returns to the humanities. For example, it would be fascinating to hear his thoughts on quorum sensing, where organisms simultaneously change their behaviour when the density of the group reaches a certain level.

Shouldn't Morton be encouraging his humanities readers to follow him into the lab and science lecture theatres to learn the detail required to help science improve its enchantment skills? After all, using his philosophical work to illuminate a richer set of ecological discoveries can only be a good thing for ecological awareness.

Or is this to utterly miss his point, and be guilty of just more “scientism” and data dumping? Morton isn't really clear.

There is no such inconsistency in Freyfogle's *Our Oldest Task*, informed by years of practical interaction with land managers and ecologists. As Morton does in the more enticing parts of his analysis, Freyfogle promotes the idea that ecological campaigns should stress the promise of a brighter future, rather than motivate by guilt or shame.

It is reassuring that he can draw this conclusion from another branch of the humanities: the history of law. Working on long-term ecological restoration projects made him realise that the barriers to change are not technical, but cultural and moral. The shift humanity needs is not held back by a lack of information or proposed solutions, but by the absence of an institutional imperative to act on them.

Freyfogle's work has immediate relevance for both environmental campaigning and the social and business dysfunction that plays such a major part in ecological degradation: inequality, corporate power over politics, and abuses of private property are everywhere intimate to ecological ruin.

Freyfogle argues that for 250 years, progress in social relations has relied on the fight for individual rights, which are mostly "negative liberties". This term, first used in the 1950s by the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, describes the legal form of an individual's right to minimum interference by state and church.

These personal liberties, so important in the battle against medievalism, have been extended beyond their purpose to corporations and land owners. And this extension is indifferent to inequalities in wealth and to business malpractice, both so damaging to collective welfare, Freyfogle argues.

This means that timber from a pristine forest can be sold at profit as the legal right of the owner, but there is rarely any obligation in law regarding the regeneration of a thousand-year-old ecosystem, its role in water catchment, or as simple community enjoyment.

We now need positive liberties, a framework of law that aims to ensure genuine access to a decent life, a more fertile agriculture, and responsible management of wilderness and oceans. Freyfogle ambitiously proposes a thorough review of modern law to place the enrichment of our environment and community at its core.

Any timescale for reform will be long, says Freyfogle, but we should still make a start right away. Activists in environmental and social fields need to zero in on the most offensive aspects of corporate lobbying, property rights that permit environmental damage, and welfare inequalities. Any changes these activists advocate will need a positive spin.

One wonders if Freyfogle's legal framework might not already be forming. Despite hostile winds, the recent Paris climate summit made progress, and brought together governments, NGOs and large investment funds. And the focus of the agreement is precisely what Freyfogle asks for: humanity's shared ecology.

Can we build on Paris? Quite possibly. But to judge by Freyfogle and Morton, whatever form our efforts take, they must be accompanied by an accelerated and deeper exchange of learning between sciences and humanities.

Those of us trained in science need to remember that Plato, Kant and Weber are key to ensuring that it takes its proper place in society, while those from the humanities need encouragement to delve deeper into the detail of the green sciences.

Perhaps then we can all learn how to enchant ourselves with practical plans and changed behaviours to speed the day when good news surpasses the bad.