

Introduction to John Visvader's “Philosophy and Human Ecology”

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Although much has changed since 1986, when John Visvader's paper was originally published, his guidance is still wise and necessary for today's reader. It is still tempting to pigeon-hole human ecology as a particular kind of study with distinctive methods. After all, we tend to allocate funds and prestige to interdisciplinary fields once they have adopted a clear paradigm and some defining achievements that serve as exemplars for future research and that contain the norms and concepts defining the field. Conservation biology and sustainability science have come into their own in just such a fashion. Professor Visvader warned us against interpreting human ecology as having an essence—a defining set of characteristics. He argued that given the complexity of socioecological systems, we should expect to find many different ways of studying their dynamics, with some being largely descriptive and others being highly value-laden. Following Wittgenstein, he suggested that these approaches share a range of family resemblances in virtue of which they are all ways of conducting human ecology. It follows that human ecology is more open-ended and inclusive than many interdisciplinary studies, which is both a curse (for those who crave clarity and consistent standards) and a blessing (for those whose curiosity is stimulated by new connections).

But is there a unity among the different approaches in human ecology? Visvader suggested there is, and it is not just that all approaches investigate what the human relation to nature is or ought to be. He talked somewhat obscurely about human ecology addressing a “nested set of questions.” The interrelations between the questions create a unity, but they avoid the unachievable unity that is associated with reductionism. The nature of these interrelations deserves a great deal more investigation. This paper is a useful starting point for such work.

Another important question Visvader raised is how we should evaluate normative human ecological work—how we can know anything about the values humans *should* have regarding nature. He stated that “there are no experts in values,” which might suggest that values are purely subjective, so normative work would not itself be objectively evaluable. But he then said that “the realm of values has its own ... methods of arguments and demonstration.” He later suggested that these methods result in judgments of what relations to nature are practically prudent. A great deal of fruitful work has been done in the last 30 years on the epistemology of values, though the issues are far from resolved. Visvader's overview invites more integration of values epistemology into human ecology.

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