Chase Mack

Representing Extinction

Final Paper

3/17/21

The Intersection of Humanism and Environmentalism

In his enlightening speech, "Rewilding the World," George Monbiot outlines the concept of our modern "ecological boredom," and the pathways by which we can reconnect with the wild and improve our quality of life. Monbiot highlights the importance of rewilding and restoring natural habitats to their previously untouched complexion, yet, such an initiative only addresses half of the issue. Faced with a rapidly growing human population, humanity confronts the immense task of making its urban areas environmentally-friendly. In Episode Three of the podcast series, "Extinction Elegies," Professor Sarah Bekessy speaks to the imperative of sustainability and greenery within cities, not only as a means of environmentalism but as a medium through which humans can rekindle their connection to the environment itself. Ecological boredom finds its pinnacle within the modern city, and efforts to improve city sustainability could simultaneously rehabilitate our earth along with our dwindling relationship with nature. While much of environmental problem-solving lies in far off-habitats which the average person has likely never visited, green urban design inserts environmentalism directly into population hubs, helping to foster environmental appreciation, reduce emissions, and improve general mental health.

To address climate change's imminent impact, we must look at it through the lens of our current urban development, as humanity will only increasingly flood into large, consumption-heavy urban areas. With the UN predicting a 70% urbanization rate by 2050 (Bibri,

2020), cities will heighten energy-consumption and resource-use, presenting a challenge to environmentalists hoping to reduce ecological impact. However, the basis of this problem is an incorrect view of how cities have to be designed, as cities will never be eliminated altogether. Bekessy distills the mission of green urbanism quite eloquently when saying, "the future of cities is going to rely on us letting nature back in," whereas in the past design had always focused on keeping it out (Bekessy, 2020). The U.S., along with a host of other Western countries, has increasingly made room for vast parking lots and sky-scraping buildings in metropolitan areas, at the expense of green space, functionality, and sustainability. The expansion of our cities relies upon the decimation of natural habitats, contributing to heightened rates of extinction and lower levels of biodiversity in metropolitan areas. A multitude of architects have been developing green building techniques, with green buildings potentially helping to reduce collective CO_2 emissions by 30% if fully implemented (Global Status Report, 2017), while also allowing for significantly cheaper maintenance and costs. The future of green urbanism is multifaceted and diverse, ranging from increased solar power to reduced automobile traffic to rooftop gardens to increased urban forest and in turn carbon capture. If given space to enact natural processes, urban greenery can help to reduce air pollution and capture emissions from some of the most dangerously-consumptive urban centers. According to Sarah Bekessy, a robust urban forest, "can cool a city by eight degrees… which could prevent a lot of the death and sickness we have from heat waves," (Bekessy, 2020) just one of many examples in which basic environmental upgrades could revolutionize city living and environmental impact. Not only can cities potentially move towards a more green, environmentally-friendly design, they can systematically improve quality of life and reduce urban suffering in the process.

Although green urbanism is an environmentalist solution, it also addresses the growing mental health crisis which plagues the inhabitants of dull, gray areas with little access to the natural world. Humanity is fundamentally tied to nature, and as Monbiot describes it, there is an almost indescribable, liberating sentiment when one spends quality time in a natural space, as it is innate to our being. However, as many authors and artists have noted in recent times, we have become increasingly detached from our natural roots, seeing nature as an entity altogether separate from the human experience, only to be accessed for occasional adventure or leisure. In his opinion piece, "Our Ecological Boredom," for the New York Times, Monbiot eloquently describes his ideal course of action for humanity's reunion with nature, writing, "...we don't have to give up our washing machines and computers and eyeglasses and longevity to shed our ecological boredom and recover some measure of the freedom that has been denied to us" (Monbiot, 2015). We don't have to abandon our current lifestyle in order to reconnect with the wild, rather we must integrate nature more seamlessly into our human experience. The exploration of the "wild" is a part of our innate freedom, and an existence incompatible with nature is one not truly free, although we may perceive it to be. We live our urban lives in active neglect of natural serenity and connection, as "...public spaces in our cities are reduced to pasteurized piazzas, in which loitering without intent to shop is treated as suspicious" (Monbiot, 2015). Cities are built around commerce, not natural interaction, and thus it's a foregone conclusion that inhabitants often find themselves detached and lost. Obviously, we cannot fully reverse our evolutionary change towards urban living, as we've built large cities and only continue to expand our concrete domain, but nor do we have to. Rather, we can work with the infrastructure we currently have to integrate the natural world into our modern lives. Green urban development can improve mental health by increasing access to nature, active areas for exercise,

hotspots for positive social interaction, and reducing harmful noise (Roe, 2016). Beyond such social benefits, an increased natural presence has been shown to actively improve human health. Groves of urban trees help to remove harmful toxins and CO_2 in the air, reducing allergies and infections, while also releasing cleaner oxygen to make cities more breathable and livable (Bekessy, 2020). By investing in a greener future for our cities, we are inherently investing in the well-being of its residents, not just our atmosphere and environment, a concept often lost on those who see green spending as a net detriment to human life.

Lastly, an increase in green urban design would help to foster environmental appreciation, in turn gaining more support for environmentalist causes. Not only would green urbanism aid in our current mental health crisis by bridging the gap between human and environment, it would also help to address the problem of support which has ever-plagued green movements. In "Extinction Elegies," the speakers devote significant time to our collective disenchantment with nature. We live altogether separate from it, and thus have become disinterested in its beauty and vitality. The average city-dweller likely has little to no contact with the natural world on any given day, traveling from concrete structure to concrete structure via a concrete road. From the perspective of Sarah Bekessy, in green urban development there lies the "opportunity to re-enchant people with nature… there is a strong opportunity for urban greening and urban nature to tell beautiful stories." (Bekessy, 2020) When describing the lack of animal species in Melbourne, Australia, Bekessy sees the importance in creating viable habitats for culturally-significant animals, so that people can develop real connections with the species at risk and return to an indigenous attitude of respect for nature. Bekessy sees one aspect of green urbanism as, "choosing species that we want to bring back to Melbourne that have strong cultural stories." (Bekessy, 2020) People need more interaction with the natural world, not less, and while

we shouldn't continue infringing on natural habitats, we should undoubtedly begin rebuilding what was once destroyed by concrete and industrialization, re-introducing the animal kingdom in part to the human experience. After all, urban areas are where the majority of the population is concentrated, and thus must be treated not only as areas to enact environmental change, but significant cultural change as well. The key tension of the environmentalist movement going forward will be connecting the human experience with that of the natural world. If the environment remains a separate, impersonal entity, the work to rehabilitate our earth will likely lack the gusto and passion necessary to enact meaningful change.

The issue of urbanism presents an interesting distillation of the problems confronting the environmentalist movement as a whole. Not only must we find ways to reduce our pollution and impact, we must also address an increasingly apathetic, disinterested human populus, one detached from the natural world and thus detached from environmentalism in most capacities. With an increasingly positive relationship with the natural world, people en masse would gain a deeper appreciation for its significance and in turn its salvation. Perhaps such a concept is an transparently anthropocentric outlook, yet a significant and necessary one nonetheless. Once the public can understand environmentalism as a fundamentally humanist cause, not simply in the world-ending manner often seen in the media, people are more likely to support ecological movements and see them through. Assuredly, green urbanism is not the panacea to our environmental plight, but it represents an interesting crossroads between humanity and the natural world, and how a shift towards a more sustainable urban future would effectively protect natural ecosystems while simultaneously improving our collective quality of life.

Works Cited

Bibri, Simon Elias. "The Eco-City and Its Core Environmental Dimension of Sustainability:
Green Energy Technologies and Their Integration with Data-Driven Smart Solutions."
SpringerOpen, Springer International Publishing, 15 June 2020,
https://energyinformatics.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s42162-020-00107-7.

Cooke, Stuart, and Sarah Bekessy. "Episode 3: 'The Loss of Australian Biodiversity' with Ali
Cobby Eckermann, Stuart Cooke & Professor Sarah Bekessy." *Extinction Elegies*, Red
Room Poetry, 2020, https://redroompoetry.org/projects/extinction-elegies/radio-series/.

Lehmann, Steffen. "What is Green Urbanism? Holistic Principles to Transform Cities for
Sustainability". Climate Change - Research and Technology for Adaptation and
Mitigation, edited by Juan Blanco, Houshang Kheradmand, IntechOpen, 2011.
10.5772/23957.

Monbiot, George. "George Monbiot: Rewilding the World." Visions for Change. Visions for
Change, University of Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqngI4sfBYs&ab_channel=SocialResponsibility%26
Sustainability.

Monbiot, George. "Our Ecological Boredom." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 18
Jan. 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/19/opinion/our-ecological-boredom.html.

Roe, Jenny. "Cities, Green Space, and Mental Well-Being." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of*

Environmental Science, 22 Nov. 2016,

https://oxfordre.com/environmentalscience/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389414.001.0

001/acrefore-9780199389414-e-93#acrefore-9780199389414-e-93-div1-6.