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VISIONS OF HISTORY IN THE HOPE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

David A. Westbrook*

The title of my talk is “*Visions of History in the Hope for Sustainable Development.*” Had this not been the autumn that it is, I might have titled these remarks more provocatively, and called it “*Against Sustainability.*” What can I mean by this? I frequently have a hard time handling the thrill of an academic presentation, so I like speakers to start with their conclusions. That makes the rest of their presentations so much less suspenseful. And here are my conclusions, the three big ideas in this talk. First, our discussions of sustainable development are organized around rarely articulated notions of human history. Such claims, once made explicit, turn out to be quite contradictory, and quite unexamined.¹

The second big idea in this talk is that if people who think of themselves as environmentalists (as I usually do), think carefully about the idea of history that they want, sustainability has little to do with it. In fact, the emphasis on “sustainability” leads to certain intellectual, and hence political, problems. Arguments made on the basis of sustainability are often defeated—not because the environmentalists were wrong, but because the concern that what they were trying to articulate actually had little to do with sustainability per se. Sustainability was just a shorthand—I’m suggesting, an inelegant shorthand—for far more troubling, if difficult to express, political desires.

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¹ This is not unique to environmental law. Other areas of the law, such as intellectual property, trade, antitrust, and securities law, to say nothing of the old ideas of contract and property now discussed in terms of law and economics, are organized around claims about development, and hence, more fundamentally, history.

My third idea, and practical conclusion, is to suggest that international environmentalists should abandon the concept of sustainable development in favor of a more nuanced concern with history, as in natural history.

I've promised history, so let's start with a very stylized bit of history. Recall that in the 1970s and especially the 1980s, the environmental movement in the United States and other industrialized countries became much more international. We had long talked about the fact that many environmental issues were transborder, and made reference to the Stockholm conference of 1972, sort of the Runnymede in this area. But it was only once the ozone hole and global warming took off as issues, however, that the environment came to be seen as a concern to be addressed largely, maybe even primarily, on the international plane, as opposed to the national plane in which the early environmental battles were fought—one thinks of national parks, national monuments, at the turn of the century—or even the great environmental legislation of the late 1960 & 1970s, NEPA and so forth.²

As a result of internationalization, environmentalists found themselves asking after the causes of environmental problems in other countries, many of which were poor. And it turned out that many environmental problems were caused by the struggles of people in what was variously referred to as the "Third World," or with more hope, the "Developing World," or in a spatial metaphor, "the South," to lead better lives, or even to survive at all. Many people in "the South" quite candidly wanted to enjoy more of the benefits considered ordinary in

² On a personal note, internationalizing environmental law was what I went to law school to do—that was in 1989. I spent some time working in Directorate General XI of the Commission of the European Communities, on the EC's position at the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development—which I attended as an NGO observer. So I have a considerable biographical investment in the idea that environmental law is an international concern. But it is now almost ten years after Rio, and considerably more than ten years since the phrase "sustainable development" began to gain overwhelming prominence as a way to think about the environmental policy, and so it is perhaps time to ask whether "sustainable development" is the right way to think about environmental policy.

“the North.” The environmental movement, which had understood itself as an opposition to the dominant trends of industrial and post-industrial societies, began to recognize that from the perspective of the developing world, the developed world was necessarily something of a model, perhaps not in detail, but in broad outline. And, from a humanitarian perspective, it was hard to deny the claims made from the South, impossible, in fact. So it came to pass that environmentalists discovered another of the world’s altruistic idealisms, development, and found themselves sympathizing with people who were more or less explicitly pro-everything they had traditionally been against: development, growth, even industrialization.

At about the same time, and perhaps to a lesser extent, business folk (especially in the North) began to realize that they needed a certain degree of regulation, and that they could get by quite well, perhaps better, in a regulated environment than in an unregulated one. Environmental laws had been passed in all industrialized economies, and the economies had not come to a halt. Indeed, they had prospered. While business people would often complain about a new regulation, they also found ways to cope. Most business people would concede that the Great Lakes got cleaner, rivers caught on fire less often, and so forth. Most business people would further concede that, in a competitive marketplace, their firms could not have done many of these things without the discipline of forces external to the marketplace. And most people, from all walks of life, would think that these were good developments. In short, environmental law became an important part of mainstream business thinking, precisely because environmental law had been so successful.

In the minds of many progressive intellectuals, the sorts of people who go to conferences like this, the developing world and corporate America are very different places. Progressive intellectuals want to be sympathetic to the first, and tend to be suspicious of the second. But viewed in terms of visions of history, the ideals of the development community and those of the business community are very similar. Both communities have a progressive vision of history; both believe that history progresses insofar as the material conditions of life are improved; both communities are about growth. In fact, the

international development community increasingly understands its job to be fostering the conditions for indigenous economic activity, so called “bottom-up” development—sort of like the Rotary Club.

The encounter with these two very different types of people, who shared fundamental visions of history, precipitated an intellectual crisis among environmentalists, who traditionally had a fundamentally different view of history. For environmentalists, as already suggested, industrialist urban civilization is not the goal, it is a social construct that alienates us from our true selves. The sense that civilization is the problem is why environmentalists glorify writers like Henry David Thoreau and especially John Muir, and why, philosophically speaking, we must understand our environmentalism in the romantic critical tradition of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Environmentalism has generally been about “getting back” to something “more natural.” Implicit in such longings, and often expressed explicitly, is a criticism of society. Our society, environmentalists tend to say, can’t go on like this. Environmentalists understand civilization to be a succession of insults to the natural order, and believe that sufficient damage leads to disaster. So, if business and development understand history as a story of progress, which we should encourage, then environmentalists understand history as decline, which should be resisted.

As we all know, these fundamental differences over the course and moral import of human history were papered over with the term “sustainable.” Environmentalists conceded that growth was okay, was even a good thing, so long as it was sustainable. In the 1987 Brundtland Report, titled *Our Common Future*, and the 1992 U.N. Conference on Environment and Development, the goal was stated: we would all, North and South, try to achieve sustainable development.³ That is, we would attempt to create an economy that was environmentally sustainable.

Who could be against sustainability? Being against sustainability sounds like being for disaster. Less dramatically, we should not

³ See generally *OUR COMMON FUTURE: WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT* (Oxford Univ. Press 1987).

impoverish future generations, but should instead build a society that functioned on a sort of, well, sustainable basis.⁴ And who, with children at any rate, could be for impoverishing future generations? Similarly, many people believe that humanity—the planet, even—is one giant organism. And organisms stay alive, maintain what the biologists like to call homeostasis, that is, their processes are sustainable.⁵ So, sustainability seemed like a good idea.

The life sciences supplied us with further metaphors for more practical situations, with their talk of nitrogen cycles, water cycles, life cycles. Drawing policy from biology (always a risky enterprise), sustainable development seemed to be an imperative to strive for a society where nothing is wasted, where there is nothing superfluous, just elegant recycling, reusing—the circle would overcome the line as the shape of our thinking. In short, “sustainable development” was an answer—a tremendously successful answer—to the intellectual crisis of modern environmentalism, which was in essence the need for environmentalists to develop an acceptable political economy.

Ten years after Rio, however, the question is whether “sustainable development” was a good resolution of the conflict between theories of progress and theories of decline, or was such a good answer that we should continue to perpetuate it. After all, conceptual and hence, practical policy problems with the term “sustainable” emerged almost immediately—certainly no later than the run-up to the Rio Conference. Should “sustainable development” dominate environmental thinking about the economy? I think it is a close call, and would like to argue (or suggest, explore) that the answer is no.

While sustainable development may have been a politically necessary compromise during the 1980s, it is simply not a strong enough idea to carry the burden of environmental thought forward. As an intellectual matter, sustainability is not a very good way for

⁴ See David Westbrook, *Liberal Environmental Jurisprudence*, 27 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 619, 702 (1994) (discussing inter-generational inequity).

⁵ David Westbrook and David Leacock, *The Ages of Gaia: A Biography of Our Living Earth*, 14 HARV. ENVTL. L. REV. 535, 536 (1990) (book review).

environmentalists to organize thought about the economy. The political economy suggested by sustainable development does not work very well at achieving environmental ends.⁶ Second, as a political matter, due to its incoherence, a focus on sustainability weakens, rather than strengthens, environmental argument.

Let me discuss some of the problems with using sustainability as an organizing principle for how environmentalists should think about the economy.

(1) Sustainability implies that unreformed markets tend to operate in linear and non-sustainable fashion. The classic example of this would be a fish stock worked to death. While that can happen, markets, like ecosystems, are recursive systems. That does not mean that the economy (or an ecosystem) will always self-correct. But the economy often does, and across a range of problems. Unsustainable trends are not sustained.⁷

(2) The economy provides enormous incentives for development. When I was growing up, during the first oil shock, we were full of numbers about petroleum supplies. But technology for locating and extracting oil got much better, even cleaner, and lots and lots more oil was found, and it got much cheaper. That presumably cannot last forever. But it has lasted a solid generation—my son is now gaining environmental consciousness—longer than environmentalists said it would. Arguments made on the basis of the unavailability of oil in the short to medium term were flatly wrong.⁸

⁶ Concerns over distributive justice play a complicated, and to my mind ill-defined, role in much of the “progressive” (troubling word) discourse over environmentalism. This talk, however, is about thinking about nature rather than justice. My thinking on environmental justice under conditions of modernity is suggested by *Liberal Environmental Jurisprudence*, *supra* note 4.

⁷ Economists spend a lot of time worrying about information flows in markets, and particularly about the relationships between price and information. In fact, that’s what the Nobel Prize was given to George A. Akerlof, Michael Spence, and Joseph E. Stiglitz for this past week.

⁸ The infamous example here is the bet between the economist Julian Simon and the environmentalist Paul Ehrlich over whether commodity prices would increase. See John Tierney, *Betting the Planet*, N.Y. TIMES, December 2, 1990, §

(3) Sustainable development asserts that all times are considered to have the same value. We should not impoverish our children. Well, of course not. But, insofar as sustainable development suggests a theory of political economy, we have to take account of time. In our economic lives, we engage in unsustainable behavior all the time, and that is often the right thing to do. Consider student debt, or a car, or a house note—we borrow in the hope of improving the future, not impoverishing it. But that does not change the fact that the borrowing is unsustainable. In short, “when” matters.

It is perhaps unsurprising that “sustainable” does not do a very good job of addressing the economy. After all, the concept is the creature of environmentalists and bureaucrats, not business folk or even academic economists.⁹ But what is a little more surprising is that the concept of sustainable development does not articulate—in fact tends to obscure—concerns environmentalists hold dear.

(1) First, and most commonly noted, “sustainable development” is woefully underdetermined. In a given context, it often is impossible to understand what sustainable really means. For example, I am involved in a book about conservation in the Galapagos, a huge multi-author affair.¹⁰ A few years back, the government of Ecuador

6 (Magazine), at 52. They did not. They might, at some point. But evidently not in the short to long/medium term, say 20 years, in which the vast majority of politics takes place.

⁹ But maybe this is surprising. Economic and evolutionary thought (Thomas Malthus and Charles Darwin) have a great deal to do with one another, both structurally and as a matter of actual intellectual history. See Edward J. Larson, *EVOLUTION'S WORKSHOP: GOD AND SCIENCE ON THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS* (2002). Both economies and ecosystems are interdependent, recursive systems in which the order of things matters. Both are increasingly discussed in terms of the flow of encoded information. At a less abstract and perhaps more familiar level, a great deal of work has been done to restructure environmental policy in the tropes of law and economics. I criticize such efforts *infra*, and in *Liberal Environmental Jurisprudence*, *supra* note 4.

¹⁰ DAVID WESTBROOK, JAMES THORSELL & ALFREDO CARRASCO, *International Law, politics, and the Conservation of the Galapagos*, in *GALAPAGOS CONSERVATION: EXPLORING SUSTAINABILITY* (Marc Miller, Matthew James & Gregory Aplet, Eds. 2003).

passed a new law for the Galapagos, which of course sought to promote sustainable development. It also sought to promote conservation and tourism and fishing and lots of other things, in some as yet to be determined policy mix.¹¹ Presumably, not every aspect of these commitments could be simultaneously sustained, or not without cost to some other commitment. But at the same time, any number of mixes of policy objective could be put in place, and might work—some sort of *modus vivendi* would emerge. That is, sustainable development hardly helps us a good policy from a bad policy.

While its under-determined quality is the most widely heard criticism of sustainable development, I do not think it is the most important. In fact, I would like to argue that the idea of sustainable development has more content than might initially appear to be the case. And it is precisely the nature of this content that environmentalists ought to regard with suspicion. Let me explain.

(2) Sustainable development is generally taken to unify, if sometimes awkwardly, our ideas of economic activity and environmental context. Maybe, but our environmental desires are often something altogether different—something that is nearly the opposite of sustainable development. Another story from the Galapagos: Over the years, various islands have been invaded by a number of alien species, most importantly goats and several species of rats. Such species were successful elsewhere, and were brought to the island, mostly inadvertently, by humans. Indigenous species often have no defenses against the invaders, and tend to be wiped out. In particular, the Galapagos tortoise is threatened by goats, who are eating all the food. Because this is the Galapagos, the home of evolutionary theory, one might take a Darwinian perspective, and tell the turtles to “adapt or die.” That’s what folks used to say in Silicon Valley, thinking they were talking about somebody else. But why shouldn’t the species better equipped for survival, survive? Well, because we environmentalists don’t actually want to watch evolution, or at least not a process of extinction that we humans set in motion.

¹¹ *Id.*

The international environmental community has decided not to let events take their course. There is now an enormous, internationally funded effort to eradicate the non-native species in the Galapagos, so that the strange species that are already there can continue to evolve in their backwater. In so doing, we are distinguishing the artificial (the human activities of transporting goats, and then killing them) from the natural (the Galapagos without goats). Bluntly put, we environmentalists wish to understand humans and nature as different things.¹²

Consider global warming. In any sufficiently catholic meeting on the topic, somebody, generally trained as an economist, will attempt to do a cost-benefit analysis. In such analyses, the costs of things like building sea walls are weighed against the savings in heating bills, the cost of a bit more water here, a lot less water there, the benefits of longer summer vacations versus the downsides of fancier snowmaking equipment, and so on and so on. Usually, the person playing the role of the economist will find at least as many benefits from global warming as costs. Heating the planet will be recharacterized as progress (and the debate will be back where this talk started, with competing visions of history). At the very least, such analyses tend to find that the costs of compliance with, say, Kyoto, are far outweighed by the potential benefits.¹³ Confronted with such

¹² This may be too bluntly put. For a range of reasons, the last few generations of progressive legal intellectuals have been suspicious of such Cartesian distinctions like nature/culture, or public/private, regulation/property, political/personal. Although such suspicions are generally reflexive and in that sense old-fashioned, it still is argued that such distinctions tend to be used to shut down thought or discourse, which is held to be a bad thing. It is true that people often use the categories of their thought as replacements for the rather uncomfortable act of thinking. Insofar as this talk is an intellectual exercise, I hope we have done little of that here. But it is also true—and in my judgment, a more important truth here—that the mind needs conceptual apparatus with which to think. The idea of environmental thought without a notion of “nature” is an oxymoron, but is also the situation in which our commitment to “sustainable development” has left us. Consequently, if we are to be serious about environmental policy, we need to acknowledge that we care about nature—even a nature that we cannot finally define.

¹³ See WESTBROOK, *supra* note 4.

arguments, persons playing the role of environmentalists often sputter and add another (generally more speculative) layer of complexity to the analysis, tending to show that global warming is in fact disastrous. At this point, given the chance, the economist will tend to offer a set of truly fantastic (that is, fantasies) projections of what will happen, and what the present dollar value of such events might be . . . As I hope I've suggested, such discussions are usually pretty ridiculous. People who would be very hesitant to say much about the value of a share in a publicly traded company in a mature industry three years hence, e.g., Boeing, have no problem discussing the value of entire ecosystems and cultures generations hence, e.g., California.

The silliness of such discussions, however, raises an important underlying point for environmentalists. Our objection to goats on the Galapagos or considerable degrees of global warming is not, in the end, that such a state of affairs is "unsustainable." They may be quite sustainable on their own terms. They are only unsustainable if what you like is the Galapagos, or the weather, the way it is now, or at least, the way it exists in some—generally distant—relationship to human activity. More generally, sustainable development masks the fact that, in believing nature is important, environmentalists privilege nature as it exists now, as it is felt to be vanishing. Environmentalism used to be called, perhaps more truthfully, preservation.

(3) It is not just, as discussed in (2) above, that sustainable development renders inchoate our longing for nature. Conversely, sustainable development may help make culture—the particularities of our politics—difficult to articulate. Politics that are out of line with natural constraints are simply labeled "unsustainable," a synonym for "bad." But "bad" is an inadequately sophisticated way to consider the choices environmental policy requires. Taken seriously (which it rarely is), the idea of sustainable development makes it difficult for us to think about politics.

For a sense of how fusing the ideas of nature and culture makes environmental politics disappear, consider a charmingly written

book entitled *The Botany of Desire*,¹⁴ in which Michael Pollan sets forth a little diatribe against humanity's infatuation with itself. He argues that we are far too sure that we are little gods who control the fate of nature, whether as good steward or as despoiler. Pollan asks us to consider the possibility that we are more like bees than gods. Bees are used by plants for their own sexual purposes, cross pollination. In this light, the species that appeal to us, and who are furthered by us, are the most successful. Another example is dogs and wolves. We may admire wolves, but we love dogs. And while we feel that, at least in the abstract, the wolf may be a finer animal than the dog, there are very few wolves and millions and millions of dogs. Which is the more successful species?

Our tendency to select—or to believe we are selecting—one species instead of another is most visible in agriculture. We've cleared untold acres all over the planet, killing all sorts of plants, and planting other plants, from a relatively short list of favored plants. And those are the plants, from a sexual/biological point of view, that have been successful. Of course, these plants are genetically modified, mostly in the old fashioned way of selective breeding. But we're changing all that, starting to do our genetic modifications in faster, more efficient ways. From this perspective, the economy is already green indeed, altogether, inescapably, *green*. We have been the agents of rice, alfalfa, soy and oranges and the other plants victorious in the evolutionary contest for control of the earth's terrain. (Next, the oceans!) Yet, correct me if I'm wrong, I think most environmentalists find this perspective somewhat disturbing.

(4) Which brings me to my fourth and final objection to the idea of sustainable development, which is that I think the idea of sustainability encourages a certain dishonesty with ourselves. To repeat the last three objections: environmentalism requires us to privilege certain times, and certain ideas of nature, and certain ideas of what is appropriate in politics—over other times, and other

¹⁴ Michael Pollan, *THE BOTANY OF DESIRE: A PLANT'S-EYE VIEW OF THE WORLD* (2001).

environments, and other ways of living together. But sustainable development encourages us to ignore time, and encourages us to see the environment as economics and vice-a-versa. Sustainable development thus makes it essentially impossible to talk about politics, making decisions about nature with due care for history. Polemically rephrased, from within the global management perspective espoused by *Our Common Future*¹⁵ and since, there is no way to understand the development of the relationship between culture and nature.

So if environmentalists cannot talk about nature as it exists, what are they left talking about? Harms, as they may come to exist. But the language of harm is often unconvincing. So many environmentalists, myself included, are healthy and affluent and really unlikely to be hurt by things to which we nonetheless object. I do not want to deny that sometimes proposed activities entail very real dangers. Sometimes there are things that we don't know, and we should apply the precautionary principle—although even here, there are usually buried costs to not adopting a technology. Most of the time, however, the use of harm language by environmentalists is reflexive. An event occurs, a development emerges, and we speculate as to what harms it will cause. Not that we generally have much practical sense that the harms will affect us, except in the abstract.

But we're not really talking about harms. Returning to the idea of genetically modified food, I think we would object, or feel there is something strange going on, even if we could be assured that there was no harm to ourselves or the natural environment. I could fairly easily be persuaded that I have nothing to fear from a properly regulated biotech industry- there are lots of other things that are far more likely to hurt me or the environment.

Similarly, the disappearance of tortoises from the Galapagos is too bad, but it is hard to see how it harms me. Even if I'm interested in preserving biodiversity, my efforts may be better spent

¹⁵ See generally *OUR COMMON FUTURE: WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT* (Oxford Univ. Press 1987).

elsewhere. If I believe that the data encoded in the turtle's DNA is valuable, I can of course take a few blood samples, even put the turtles in a zoo. In other words, what is operating in such cases is not "harm."

What is being "harmed" in such cases is my belief that the Galapagos is a special place, with its own pace of history, and that place ought to be left to develop at its own pace, without the artificial introduction of a new species, or my sense that there are limits to how much technology should go into food. I'm not sure what those limits are. I certainly don't live too close to nature. We have a garden, but the growing season here is less than 180 days, and most of what I eat is shipped great distances. Nevertheless, I feel that there is something wrong about too many chemicals, too much modification. But that something has nothing much to do with whether or not the practice is "sustainable," or even whether I'm likely to be harmed.

Let me summarize this critique, and finish with the sort of modestly hopeful suggestion traditional in policy discourse. I've argued that the concept of sustainable development is inadequate for an environmentalist's political economy because it:

- imposes a false linearity on the economy
- underrates the impact of knowledge on trends in both nature and society
- abolishes time-value, a notion central to development
- is under-determined, and hence politically vacuous
- denies normative priority of nature as it exists
- obscures distinctive quality of politics, and
- fosters dishonesty

While these are pretty grave charges, and while I think they are intrinsic to the very idea of sustainable development, it is difficult to be too critical. The concept of sustainable development was a diplomatic device contrived in order to satisfy conflicted commitments to entirely different visions of human history, held by groups with profoundly different interests who traditionally did not talk to one another, much less sign treaties on environment and development. Rather than attempting to manage the conflict between such commit-

ments, the idea of sustainable development was used to deny that any conflict existed. Specifically, sustainable development obscured the intellectual crisis of mid-1980s environmentalism by suppressing the distinction between nature and culture, and by understanding the resulting synthesis from the atemporal perspective enjoyed only by angels and policy intellectuals. This obscurantism was probably a diplomatic necessity and a good thing. While it is generally impossible to prove counterfactuals in history, I believe that the concept of sustainable development made it possible to launch international environmental law—to move nature onto the plane of international politics—in the late 1980s and early 1990s. And that was quite an accomplishment.

Was. “Sustainable development” was the accomplishment of a generation of politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats, mandarins that are now retiring. They did their work well. Environmentalism is now and seems likely to remain a concern of the international community. Moreover, environmental concerns have been integrated into other areas of international politics, most especially the ongoing efforts to improve the economic circumstances of poor people. So, without meaning any disrespect to my elders, the question for policy intellectuals now is whether “sustainable development” provides an adequate conceptual foundation for environmental thinking moving forward. I think it does not.

I think the way forward lies, oddly enough, backwards, in and with history. A more thoughtful environmentalism would go back to the movement’s roots in the concern for the interplay between natural history and human history. In doing so, environmentalists who concern themselves with development will see a distinction between their longing for nature and their understanding of culture. A concern for nature presumes that there is a non-nature, “culture,” from which we long for nature. There is no wilderness without cities. Conversely, its stance vis-a-vis nature gives a culture much of its character. Consequently, we cannot look for answers to our political questions in nature, at least not directly. If politics is different from nature (if nature is in some sense the desire to reject politics, *pace* Rousseau), then we environmentalists must be very careful how we import

metaphors from the life sciences into our discussions of what to do. At some point, therefore, environmentalism needs to free itself from its dependence on biology, and more deeply, from its faith that “nature” frees us from politics, that all with which we disagree is “unsustainable.” Instead, a more thoughtful environmentalism would use a self-conscious (yet unavoidable) distinction between nature and culture to ask what our society wants to believe about nature, or about nature as it is found in the matter at hand (the ecology of the island, the food we eat, etc.). This is a political question, answerable only by politics.

On the other hand, and perhaps the more difficult task, the ubiquity of culture—the fact that climate change is anthropogenic, and the United Nations says that the planet needs to be managed as if it were a farm—does not mean the death of nature.¹⁶ Politics (which, in the environmental context in capitalist societies, generally means economics) is everywhere, but it is not everything. Nature, it has emerged, is a longing of the human spirit that understands itself opposed to culture. And so we find nature even in Switzerland, even in Japan, with all their people.¹⁷ Perhaps especially in such places. At some point, therefore, environmentalism needs to free itself from not only the details of academic economics, but more profoundly, from political economy and even political thought. That is, environmentalists should be able to understand—at least as philosophical exercise (or vacation)—their own desire to reject politics. If it is to recover its political and spiritual strength, environmentalism needs to remember and declare its romantic roots and intentions.

Such romanticism has serious limitations; even Muir returns to politics. More specifically, environmentalists who concern them-

¹⁶ See BILL MCKIBBEN, *THE END OF NATURE* (1989) (McKibben argued that anthropogenic climate change meant the end of nature as a concept. Brilliant, if a bit overstated).

¹⁷ Especially in America, where there was so little culture, and so much land, it is understandable how nature would come to be identified with wilderness, defined as the near total absence of humans—that notion of nature is no longer available to us, indeed never was.

selves with development must have some nuanced notion of both human and natural history, in order to begin thinking about what is appropriate, with regard to this question, at this place, at this time. That is, a historically informed aesthetic—neither biology nor economics—should inform environmental politics. This sense of history needs to be more sophisticated than the grand stories of progress told by economists, or the equally grand stories of decline told by environmentalists, or the grand equilibrium envisaged by “sustainable development.” Only by thinking historically can we begin to articulate the sense in which I (and I think many others) find genetically modified organisms disturbing, but e-mail much less disturbing, or for that matter why I find drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge disturbing, even if I could be convinced that the environmental impact would be minimal.¹⁸

So, to conclude: The concept of sustainable development leads us away from a serious conception of how time, the narrative of experience, informs our understanding of what an appropriate culture, and what an appropriate context for our experience of the natural, might be. Moreover, the concept of sustainable development serves to obliterate distinctions between nature and culture, and replaces it with more frankly economic notions of harm determined in the context of an adequately “green” economy. Insofar as such efforts are successful, we will have rendered ourselves mute, unable to speak to our longing for nature. And environmentalism, as a historical phenomenon, will have come to an end. But I don’t think that will happen anytime soon.

¹⁸ Perhaps the best model for beginning such thinking is quite traditional, *see* ALDO LEOPOLD, *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC: WITH ESSAYS ON CONSERVATION* (2001) (Leopold understands human and natural history in terms of one another, and particularized on either side of the divide).