

# **Views of Nature and Environmental Concern in Iceland**

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## Foreword and acknowledgements:

What *meaning* can human beings find in nature? How do we, as persons engaging with, appreciating, and enjoying nature, perceive such meaning? How – or to what extent – is this meaning ‘colored’ by our historical, cultural, and social backgrounds? How can we know whether this meaning is ‘real’ and not just a figment of our fantasy or imagination? Or in other words: assuming that nature does indeed contain a wealth of meaning (as I believe she does), can we as human beings ever hope to really gain access to such meaning? It was questions like these (although not necessarily formulated as such) that initially, i.e. some fifteen or twenty years ago, led me onto the path which has cumulated in this work that is now before you. The seeds of these questions, I believe, were mainly sown during my own personal engagement with Icelandic nature in such places as *Jökulsárgljúfur*, *Askja*, *Herðubreið* and *Landmannalaugar* where I worked for many summers as a warden. In my twenties and early thirties, I was indeed fortunate enough to be able to spend every summer somewhere in the Central Highland or in other places where wild and beautiful nature was to be found in great abundance. I am quite certain that these encounters with nature left a permanent mark on me – in fact, I think one would pretty much have to be a troll to *not* be affected by the many strong experiences that these encounters engendered.

During this same period I completed my undergraduate studies in biology and, later, experimental filmmaking and film theory. This background in science and art undoubtedly gave me certain important tools to both sensitize me to encounters with the natural world and to help me gain some, if only intuitive, understanding of the meaning and value of such encounters. It was not, however, until I stumbled upon environmental philosophy in the early 1990s that I found the means to start engaging with the genesis and character of ‘natural meaning’ in a true scholarly fashion. What began as a series of informal discussions about man’s relationship(s) to nature between two philosophers, Páll Skúlason and Róbert H. Haraldsson, and two biologists, Skúli Skúlason and myself, held during the winter of 1992-1993, gradually turned into a career of studying, writing and teaching about precisely this subject. Before I knew it, I was studying examples of what I collectively like to call ‘humanistic environmental scholarship’ from many different disciplines, including history, literary theory, political science, sociology, and anthropology, as well as from ethics and aesthetics which have, by and large, formed the cornerstone of my research activities. The people most instrumental in these developments were undoubtedly my two supervisors: Professor Páll Skúlason, who hired me as his research assistant at the Ethical Research Institute in the fall of 1993 and Professor Einar R. Loftsson, who offered to take me on as a Ph.D. candidate at Tema Vatten in autumn 1996.

During the nine years or so that this Ph.D. project has been ongoing (with a number of study breaks, I must hasten to add!), its emphasis has changed quite a lot. What was initially supposed

to be a dissertation on the aesthetics and ethics of nature ('meaning and value in nature') gradually shifted to an history of ideas approach ('views of nature'), which was then in turn largely 'supplanted' by empirical survey work on contemporary environmental values, attitudes and behaviors ('environmental concern'). The reasons for these changes can partly be found in the research opportunities that were available to me, my supervisors, and other academic co-workers during the course of my studies – in other words, what research projects we actually managed to secure funding for and were thus able to conduct. Another important reason for this 'branching out', however, was that Iceland culture and society was at this time, by and large, *terra incognita* when it came to views of nature and environmental consciousness – some studies in these fields had been carried out by e.g. geographers, literary scholars, art historians and, especially, anthropologists, but a great deal of work still remained to be done. Environmental philosophy and history were still in their infancy and environmental sociology and politics did not as yet exist. So there were actually several academic 'niches' waiting to be filled, but more importantly for my own choices and scholarly development, I felt that it was difficult to choose just one of them without having at least some basic knowledge of the others.

In the preface to his now classic *Traces on the Rhodian Shore*, Clarence J. Glacken (1967, p. xiii) wrote:

A historian of ideas must go where his nose leads him, and it often leads him into chilly but not inhospitable regions whose borders are patrolled by men who know every square foot of it. Although I can lay no claims to being a specialist in a particular century or in the classical or medieval periods, my own specialization in the history of geographical thought has forced me to study many periods because their contributions are so great that they cannot be ignored. Problems like this must be faced by anyone who wishes to go beyond the narrowest limits. A historian of geographic ideas [...] who stays within the limits of his discipline sips a thin gruel because these ideas almost invariably are derived from broader inquiries like the nature and origin of life, the nature of man, the physical and biological characteristics of the earth. Of necessity they are spread widely over many areas of thought.

I can personally in most ways echo Glacken's sentiments, especially concerning the need to avoid disciplinary constraints in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of complex phenomena, such as the interactions of human beings and non-human nature. But a 'broad approach' such as this is not entirely without its costs. In Icelandic, we have a saying that something is 'neither fish nor fowl' – *hvorki fugl né fiskur* – meaning (roughly) that it does not amount to much or is of little worth. During the course of my development as a 'transdisciplinary, humanistic, environmental scholar', or 'environmental philosopher' in the broad sense of the term, I have sometimes experienced a certain degree of *angst* over not really belonging to any one discipline in particular and thus, in effect, being an outsider pretty much everywhere. In actuality, however, I have almost without exception been warmly received by colleagues in the various disciplines to which my academic wanderings have led, who have rarely been bothered that a generalist such as myself should forage for ideas and insights in their 'turf' for some period of time. I believe this voluntary decommissioning of academic "border patrols" to be a sign of the times, one which bodes well for 'hopeful monsters' such as myself, to borrow a term from evolutionary theory. Whether I have indeed been successful in my endeavors, transdisciplinary and otherwise, is an entirely different matter, one which I am not – for obvious reasons – qualified to pass judgment on. My 'tes-

timony', such as it is, is to be found in the following pages and I hope that all readers will find something of interest and value in the various arguments and studies presented.

The main body of this thesis is comprised of five articles, each of which deals with one or more aspects of Icelandic views of nature and/or environmental concern. The articles are, furthermore, preceded by a general Introduction which attempts to illustrate and clarify the common conceptual background that lies behind all of these individual works. The first article, titled "Nature in Medieval Icelandic and Nordic Literature", is concerned with the depiction of nature in medieval Icelandic literature, the oldest documents written in Old Norse, dating from first few centuries after settlement of the island.<sup>1</sup> The second article, "Sigfús Eymundsson 1837-1911: Icelandic Landscape Photography", deals with views of nature in mid- to late nineteenth century Iceland, based on a case study of the life and work of the first Icelandic landscape photographer.<sup>2</sup> The third article, "Views of Nature in Iceland: A Comparative Approach", presents the results of an attempt to operationalize and measure various aspects of 'views of nature' by empirical means, based on a survey conducted in 1997 in Iceland, Sweden and Denmark.<sup>3</sup> The fourth article, "Environmental Concern in Iceland: Values, Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors", deals with the results of another empirical survey, carried out in Iceland in 2003, which e.g. sought to probe environmental concern in a more holistic manner than had been done in the older survey.<sup>4</sup> The fifth and final article, "Sustainable Development in Iceland: Public Perceptions, Understanding, and Awareness", is also based on the results of this latter survey and primarily deals with attempts to measure perceptions and awareness of the various elements or principles of sustainable development, as well as exploring whether, and then in what way, attitudes toward environmental and developmental issues might be related to one another.<sup>5</sup>

Funding for the research projects, within which the above-mentioned articles were conceived and written, was received from a number of different sources. The article on Sigfús Eymundsson was written in connection with a larger research project on the history of Icelandic photography, led by Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson and Inga Lára Baldvinsdóttir, and supported by Rannís, the Icelandic Centre for Research. The Nordic survey of 1997 was part of the project *Nature, National Identity, and Environmental Policy in the Nordic Countries*, whose main sponsor was the Nordic Environmental Research Programme 1993-1997: Social Science Research on Environmental Policy Issues. This project was also supported by Rannís and the University of Iceland's Research Fund. Overall, this project was led by Elfar R. Loftsson, whilst the leaders of the Icelandic part were Páll Skúlason and, later, Róbert H. Haraldsson. The Icelandic survey of 2003 was part of the project *The Foundations of Sustainable Development in Iceland*, which was also led by Róbert H. Haraldsson. Its main sponsor was Rannís' Program on Information Technology and Environmental Research and support was also received from the University of Iceland, the City of Reykjavík, and the Icelandic Ministry for the Environment. Furthermore, I myself was, for a period of time, the personal beneficiary of a doctoral research stipendium from the Tema Institute of University of Linköping, as well as of a study grant from Rannís' Graduate Research Fund, and of two grants from *Hagþenkir*, the Association of authors of academic and educational works. The support of all the abovementioned funding agencies and other sponsors is hereby most gratefully acknowledged. Last but not least, I would like to thank my current employer,

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<sup>1</sup> Submitted to *Environmental History*.

<sup>2</sup> Published in *History of Photography*, 23(1), pp. 18-27.

<sup>3</sup> Submitted to *Environmental Conservation*.

<sup>4</sup> Accepted, with revisions, by *Environmental Sciences*.

<sup>5</sup> Submitted to *Environment, Development and Sustainability*.

Hólar University College, for generously allowing me the time and opportunity to complete this thesis in the very last – and thus especially crucial – stages of work.

An even greater debt of gratitude is owed to all the *people* that have helped make this thesis possible. To begin with, I would like to thank all the librarians at the Tema Institute and at the National-University Library of Iceland who have been an enormous help to me supplying materials for my research. Jón Bjarni Bjarnason at the University of Iceland Press amicably took over the task of doing the lay-out work for this volume on very short notice: his efforts were of invaluable assistance to me. My thanks also to Jörundur Guðmundsson for his important help in this matter. The photographs by Sigfús Eymundsson are reproduced here with the permission of the National Museum of Iceland. Guðbrandur Þorláksson's map, *Islandia*, was supplied to me by the National-University Library. My thanks to both of these institutions for kindly providing me with this great visual material. Finally, I would like to thank Bergur Þorgeirsson of Snorrastofa for putting me up in Reykholt during the last, hectic days of finishing this thesis: the facilities were superbly suited to this task and the location and environment were very inspirational.

I would also like to thank my many – and extremely important – co-workers who were involved in one or more of the projects detailed above, many of whom have become good friends: Anders Ahlqvist, Friðrik H. Jónsson, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, Hjalti J. Guðmundsson, Hjörleifur Finnsson, Johan Hedrén, Jón Á. Kalmansson, Lars-Henrik Schmidt, Salvör Nordal, Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson, Stacey Cozart, Svanur Kristbergsson, Ulrik Lohm, and Unnur Birna Karlsdóttir. Special thanks go to Róbert H. Haraldsson, for his unflinching and generous support in all matters, and – last but not least – to Einar Mar Þórðarson, co-author of two of the articles in this volume and a very important contributor to these, as well as our team's research efforts in general. Over the years, I have benefited a great deal from conversations or cooperation with a number of other colleagues and/or friends, including – but certainly not limited to: Anna Dóra Sæþórsdóttir, Björn Guðbrandur Jónsson, Dagný Kristjánsdóttir, Einar Sigurbjörnsson, Gísli Pálsson, Gísli Sigurðsson, Karl Benediktsson, Kristján Jóhann Jónsson, Magnús Sigurður Guðmundsson, Ólafur Páll Jónsson, Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir, Sigurður Pétursson, Skúli Skúlason, Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, Tryggvi Þórhallsson, Viðar Hreinsson, Vilhjálmur Árnason, and Þóra Ellen Þórhallsdóttir.

Above all, however, I am indebted to my supervisors, Elfar R. Loftsson and Páll Skúlason, who never abandoned their trust in me, despite a number of strange digressions, a slew of rough passages, and more than one dead end. Their encouragement and open-minded and friendly guidance from the start to the finish of this work is – and always has been – greatly appreciated.

For a father and husband, writing a doctoral thesis (even one that doesn't take almost a decade to complete!) is very much a family affair. And much has happened to my immediate family during this period, both very joyful and extremely sad. On the bright side, my lovely daughter, Sigríður Þórunn, was less than a year old when I started work on this thesis, and my vivacious son, Árni Birgir, was born two years after I started: They are the light and joy of my life. The pair of them have, however, grown up in an household where their father is always trying to get some work done on the THESIS, and thus sometimes aloof and even a bit irritable toward them. My two strapping foster sons, Jökull and Kolbeinn, have also at times had to bear the brunt of an often overworked, impatient, and sometimes unfair foster father. During this last decade, my family has suffered two great losses, first, the demise of my father-in-law, Birgir E. Halldórsson, and, second, the death of my own foster mother and maternal aunt, Anna Örnólfsdóttir. They are both

sorely missed. In my mind there is no doubt that Anna and Kristján, my foster parents, are the ultimate source of the interest in things wild and beautiful that led to this work. In countless hikes and trips into the country undertaken during my youth they passed their love of nature onto me – and this current work is therefore very much part of their legacy.

The final “Thank You” goes to my brilliant, beautiful, and loving spouse, Soffía Auður Birgisdóttir. Our time together almost perfectly ‘dovetails’ with the time that has passed since the first seed of this work was planted in my mind during the fall of 1993. I would not have started this project if not for her – and could certainly never have finished it without her - but more importantly, her good company and constant support throughout this period have made me an incredibly fortunate and happy man. I therefore lovingly dedicate this work to her.



# Views of Nature and Environmental Concern in Iceland

## INTRODUCTION

In the following pages I will attempt to ‘knit together’ the various articles and elements that together comprise this thesis. I start off by discussing the concept *view of nature* from the perspective of the history of ideas, including some thoughts about its theoretical/philosophical basis, and then go on to present a tentative sketch of the historical development of views of nature in Iceland from settlement to present times. I then, briefly, shift focus to a more philosophically based discussion about the *meaning(s) and value(s)* of nature, drawing e.g. on some Icelandic works of philosophy who had a strong influence on the direction of my research, in particular in its early stages. After this, I turn my attention to the empirical studies of the various aspects of *environmental concern* or consciousness that make up the bulk of this thesis and discuss the relation of this work, based primarily on environmental sociology and politics, to the (more) historical and philosophical parts of the thesis. In essence, the studies in question sought to operationalize a number of theoretical constructs drawn from ethics and aesthetics, i.e. to create quantitative measures or instruments that would allow us to probe socio-cultural phenomena, such as aesthetic preferences with regard to nature and environmental value orientations, in an empirical, as well as a theoretical fashion. Furthermore, the development of novel instruments such as the ‘environmentalist typology’ discussed in the last two papers, was in itself a form of ‘bridge-building’ (or at least border-crossing) between the concerns of the environmental humanities, on the one side, and the environmental social sciences, on the other. I refer in passing to the role and potential of public involvement in environmental issues, and its relation to democracy and democratic development, and also briefly discuss the academic and societal purpose of research efforts such as those on which this thesis was built.

## 1. Views of Nature

### 1.1 Views of Nature: An Historical Approach

There was a man called Floki Vilgerdason, a great viking. He set off in search of *Gardars' Isle* [...] On board Floki's ship was a man called Thorolf, and another called Herjolf, and also a Hebridean called Faxi. [...]

Floki and his crew sailed west across Breidafjord and made land at Vatsfjord in Bardstrand. At that time the fjord was teeming with fish, and they got so caught up with the fishing they forgot to make hay, so their livestock starved to death the following winter.

The spring was an extremely cold one. Floki climbed a certain high mountain, and north across the mountain range he could see a fjord full of drift ice. That's why they called the country *Iceland*, and so it's been called ever since. [...]

When they were asked about the new country Floki had nothing good to say of it, but Herjolf described its merits as well as its faults. Thorolf said that in the land they'd found, butter was dripping from every blade of grass. That's why people called him Thorolf Butter.<sup>6</sup>

As its name suggests, *The Book of Settlements – Landnámabók* – deals with the discovery (in the mid-ninth century CE) and subsequent Norse/Celtic occupation, of a large and rather strange island roughly in the middle of the North Atlantic ocean. *Landnáma*, dating from the early twelfth century CE and written by an unknown author, is partly based on a shorter predecessor, *The Book of Icelanders (Íslendingabók)*, which was written by Ari the Learned (Ari fróði Þorgilsson, 1068-1148), between 1122 and 1133 CE.<sup>7</sup> These books are the two oldest surviving historical works written in Icelandic (or, more precisely, Old Norse) and thus provide an invaluable source of knowledge and insight not only about who settled when and where on the then pristine and uninhabited island, but about *how* the earliest settlers conducted themselves with regard to each other and to the natural environment that they encountered around them.

The quote above from *Landnáma* recounts the legend of how the island received the name that has stuck to it ever since. Raven-Floki (Hrafna-Flóki) was not the first Norse adventurer to chance upon it – *Landnáma* tells of two prior discoveries, the first by the viking Naddoddur, whose ship was blown there off course, he called the island “Snowland” (Snæland), and the second by Garðar Svavarsson, a man of Swedish descent, who named it after himself and called it “Garðar’s Isle” (Garðarshólmur).<sup>8</sup> Entertaining as these accounts are, for present purposes it is less important for us to know what name the island eventually received or who named it, than to

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<sup>6</sup> Hermann Pálsson & Paul W. Edwards, transl. (1972): *The Book of Settlements*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>7</sup> Ari, who was a Christian priest, is also thought to have written the original *Landnáma* manuscript, which is now lost, perhaps with contributions from Kolskeggur the Wise (Kolskeggur vitri) and/or other scholars.

<sup>8</sup> Naddoddur stayed for some months in Iceland before sailing in the fall to the Faroe Isles where he had originally been heading. Garðar stayed in Iceland for one winter and then left. Different recensions of *Landnáma* differ with regard to which of the pair is said to have discovered the island first (Nordal 1990, p. 13). The recensions, however, agree that upon their return, both Naddoddur and Garðar “were full of praise” for the new land (Pálsson & Edwards *op. cit.*, pg. 17; Benediktsson 1968, p. 34). Interestingly, the views or evaluations of Naddoddur and Garðar would thus appear to be considerably closer to those of Thorolf Butter than of Raven-Floki.

know how the island *appeared* to the first people who laid their eyes on it.<sup>9</sup> The tale of Raven-Floki and his companions in *Landnáma* is, of course, not a first person account, so we can never be certain of its historical veracity (i.e. whether the three shipmates did indeed judge the qualities of the island in the ways that the book describes). What is clearly true and undisputable, however, is the *manner* in which the author of *Landnáma*, whatever his sources may have been, chooses to recount this tale. He could simply have said “There was (yet) another viking, Raven-Floki, who found the island and he called it “Iceland” because he saw a fjord full of ice”, thus saving himself (and his many transcribers) a fair amount of ink and vellum. Instead he provides us with a rather lengthy tale which is, in addition to all its historical and literary value, an incredible ‘text book example’ of how views of nature can operate and come into being. As previously noted, the description in *Landnáma* goes as follows: “When they were asked about the new country Floki had nothing good to say of it, but Herjolf described its merits as well as its faults. Thorolf said that in the land they’d found, butter was dripping from every blade of grass.”<sup>10</sup>

The three shipmate’s evaluations of the qualities of Iceland are strikingly different, a fact which is even more intriguing given that they were pretty much the first people to ever lay their eyes on the island. Their views can thus hardly have been molded by any culturally transmitted ideas of Iceland *per se*, although they, like everybody else, were undoubtedly the children of the culture(s) they were raised in. So, in this sense, their eyes were as ‘innocent’ as the land was pristine: their minds were not burdened with any preconceived images of Iceland.<sup>11</sup> It is equally remarkable that the author of *Landnáma* should have chosen to preserve this prime example of differing views of nature for posterity in his book – maybe even more so, I would say, if he or one of his predecessors actually made the whole thing up, because then the tale becomes something of a parable, i.e. an illustrative fiction.<sup>12</sup> Whether fact or fiction, I think that the tale would hardly have been included in *Landnáma* except to serve some specific purpose. Perhaps it was simply considered to be entertaining (although one can not begin to imagine what exactly may have cracked a smile on the faces of the settlers or their immediate descendants) but whatever its actual purpose, it clearly

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<sup>9</sup> The first humans to lay their eyes on Iceland were in all likelihood Irish anchorites but these were few and did not leave behind much evidence of their stay in the country. *Landnáma* says: “But before Iceland was settled from Norway there were other people there, called Papar by the Norwegians. They were Christians and were thought to have come overseas from the west [i.e. from Britain]” (Pálsson & Edwards *op. cit.*, p. 15).

<sup>10</sup> Pálsson & Edwards *op. cit.*, pg. 18.

<sup>11</sup> According to *Landnáma*, Floki had heard of Garðar who in turn (at least according to one recension) knew of Naddoddur’s discovery; all of them may, furthermore, possibly have heard about the island “Thule” whose name appears in various documents dating back to Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* [Natural History] which was written in the mid- to late first century CE (see e.g. Ísleifsson 1996, pp. 11-13). Pliny is in turn thought to have learned about this northerly isle from the accounts, now lost, of the Greek merchant and explorer, Pytheas, who claimed to have gone there during a trip undertaken in the fourth century BCE. Judging from this, the shipmates may have entertained some ideas about Iceland before they set out on their voyage but these would have been very limited and thus unlikely to ‘cloud’ their perceptions of the isle, where they lived for roughly two years, to any great extent.

<sup>12</sup> This tale certainly has mythical overtones, e.g. the part which explains how Raven-Floki got his nickname: “Floki took three ravens with him on the voyage. When he set the first one free it flew back from the stern, but the second raven flew straight up into the air, and then back down to the ship, while the third flew straight ahead from the prow, and it was in that direction that they found land.” (Pálsson & Edwards *op. cit.*, pg. 17) This is quite reminiscent of the biblical tale of Noah’s raven and dove, with which it has indeed been compared, according to Pálsson and Edwards (*ibid.*). It might even be taken as an indication that Iceland was seen as something of a ‘promised land’.

brings home the point that *from the very beginning*, people living in or visiting Iceland have envisioned the island's qualities in very different ways. And this is, furthermore, a point which I believe that the author of *Landnáma* consciously intended to make, even if the reason for doing so remains a mystery to his/her present day scholarly colleagues.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2 Views of nature: A Structural Approach

As a concept, 'view of nature' is deceptively simple. It is roughly synonymous with terms such as 'world view' (*weltanschauung*), 'paradigm', 'mind-set', 'cosmology' and 'conceptual framework'. Taken literally it refers, of course, to what a person sees when she or he looks upon nature. A closer look at the semantics of the term, however, reveals a much more complex picture. The Icelandic variant, *nátúrusýn*, is a very good example of this. The second half of the word, *sýn*, is polysemic and can mean either:

- (1) 'a view' (i.e. what you actually see),
- (2) 'a vista' (a selected field of vision),
- (3) 'a vision' (an ideal, insight or dream), or
- (4) 'an illusion' (a mirage, *fata morgana*).

I would argue that a 'view of nature' combines all of these meanings into one – or at least that we can never be sure whether what we are seeing in nature is a view, vista, vision or illusion – or some mixture of these various elements. As a scholarly concept, 'view of nature' is therefore not very precise: It is essentially a term we use to express the ambiguity and uncertainty with which we face nature and, especially, the problems of 'interpreting' or 'channeling' natural meaning into words, ideas, and feelings that are comprehensible to human beings. At the same time, the concept does have a certain heuristic value, if only for demonstrating that the way we perceive nature is never a given; there are a multitude of factors that can influence how nature appears to us or, in other words, what we *think* we see when we are looking at nature.

What perhaps first and foremost defines a 'view of nature' as a phenomenon is that fact that such views tend to *diverge*, as we saw from the example given in the previous chapter. Indeed, if they didn't and we all saw exactly the same thing when we look at nature, then there would be no sense in talking about a 'view of nature' at all – we wouldn't even notice that we had one, much less spend our time and energies debating with other people who do not share our view of things. This also means that the concept is essentially a plural term; when we refer to any given (i.e. singular) view of nature, it is always as one view out of several or even many. A second characteristic of a 'view of nature' is that it often – perhaps always – contains within itself a parallel view of *man*; viewing nature is thus like looking at a semi-transparent and rather murky mirror ("looking glass") through which we can see the outlines of something we call "nature", at the same time as our envisioning countenance is reflected back onto itself.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It is a great shame that *Landnáma* does not tell us what Faxi, the Hebridean, thought about Iceland. Perhaps his view – coming from a different culture – was totally different from the other three or perhaps he agreed with one of the others, which in turn might have given us an indication of the view of nature which was dominant in their time.

<sup>14</sup> The same can be said of many views of man – i.e. that they are 'twinned' with a reverse image of nature – but humans can, of course, attempt to 'measure up' to all sorts of things, for example persons from other classes or ethnic backgrounds, or to their god(s).

Divergence and thus *diversity* in views of nature can be encountered on at least four different levels:

- (1) Temporal diversity – views of nature tend to change over time in any given culture or society, regardless of the characteristics of the nature or culture in question.
- (2) Cultural diversity (inter-national) – views of nature can differ considerably *between* different (national) cultures, co-existing within the same time period.
- (3) Societal diversity (intra-national) – views of nature can differ *within* any given culture or society, e.g. between different social classes or ethnic groups, also between rural and urban populations.
- (4) Individual diversity – a person’s view of nature is never completely conditioned by the culture or social group to which she or he belongs; there are numerous personal factors that can come into play, such as experience or education, and even completely random occurrences that radically change the way that person has customarily seen things.

These levels are more or less interconnected – changes on the temporal level rarely happen ‘purely of themselves’, they are caused by such things as encounters with foreign cultures or large-scale changes in the societal structure of a given community or nation. Changes within cultures, societies or segments thereof can, at least in some cases, furthermore be traced back to individuals such as artists, scholars or entrepreneurs who have introduced novel ways of seeing things, which can then gradually gain a ‘foothold’ in their socio-cultural *milieus*.<sup>15</sup> From a broader perspective, views of nature are, of course, tied up with all sorts of other ideas, such as the structure of the cosmos, the nature of human beings and the will of god, which throughout history have constantly been undergoing change. Any major change in the more general understanding of the world will have its effect on views of nature. Such epochal shifts in the wider *Zeitgeist* – which are, arguably, the ‘prime movers’ of cultural change – are most clearly evidenced by characteristic changes in views of nature which happen in many different nations or cultures during, roughly, the same time period.

Indeed, in line with this way of thinking, many scholars have defined views of nature which they take to be characteristic of a given epoch and which then undergo change from one epoch to another. Looking at European cultural history we could thus e.g. speak of ‘prehistoric’ views of nature, which were superseded by ‘classical’ (i.e. Greco-Roman) views, who gave way to ‘ecclesiastic’ views, followed by ‘humanistic’ (i.e. renaissance) views, ‘industrial era’ views, ‘romantic’ views and, finally, ‘ecological’ views – or however one might wish to define the main epochs of environmental history. Any ordering such as this raises the question of whether there is some kind of ‘succession’ – i.e. progressive evolution – going on from one time period to the next, that is whether our (minds’) eyes are getting better at seeing nature ‘as she really is’? I seriously doubt

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<sup>15</sup> The power of a single person to change the outlook of her or his society is, of course, highly debatable. Here I have in mind individuals such as the artists Jónas Hallgrímsson and Jóhannes S. Kjarval whose work arguably had a very strong impact on Icelandic views of nature. One could, perhaps, just as well see them as ‘conduits’ of new, foreign thought currents: this would certainly not be untrue of Jónas, who was quite well versed in the works of the romantic poets and thinkers on continental Europe. However, these new ways of seeing were illustrated in the poems written by Jónas and the paintings made by Kjarval. Had they not bothered to create these works and thus ‘champion’ the new, it is far from clear that any change in the then ‘customary’ or dominant views of nature would have taken place. I do thus not consider it justifiable to ignore efforts undertaken on the individual level, even if it may be difficult to disentangle their effects from those of broader cultural forces.

that one can answer a question like this decisively and, in any case, for an historian of ideas about nature (or someone trying to emulate her work), the main concern is not whether one view is better than another but how these views were and how and why they differed and changed.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.3 Views of Nature: The Icelandic Context

What ‘epochs’ can be defined in the development of Icelandic views of nature? This question can not be fully answered as no one has as yet systematically attempted to catalogue and interpret segments dealing with nature in the historical documents that are available from the time of settlement onwards.<sup>17</sup> A preliminary list (perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic) might read like the following:

- (1) ‘pagan’ era: from settlement (late 9<sup>th</sup> century CE) to the conversion to Christianity (early to mid 11<sup>th</sup> century CE).<sup>18</sup>
- (2) ‘commonwealth’ period: from the conversion to Christianity to end of the *goðorð* political system (late 13<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>19</sup>
- (3) ‘catholic’ era: from the beginning of foreign rule to the reformation (mid-16<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>20</sup>
- (4) ‘humanistic’ era: from the reformation to ca. the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- (5) era of ‘magic and superstition’: mid-17<sup>th</sup> century to late 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- (6) ‘enlightenment’ era: early 18<sup>th</sup> century to early 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- (7) ‘romantic’ era: early 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- (8) ‘industrial’ era: early 20<sup>th</sup> century to present.
- (9) ‘ecological’ era: very recent, if it has indeed as yet set in.<sup>21</sup>

Most of the ‘epochs’ listed above should be familiar to readers as they are, by and large, drawn from the traditional subdivisions of idea and/or literary history.<sup>22</sup> I cannot do them justice in such

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<sup>16</sup> For an environmental ethicist, however, this question is certainly very relevant, at least with regard to contemporary views and values – but I will not tackle the question of ‘progress’ or ‘embetterment’ from this perspective until later on in the introduction.

<sup>17</sup> This would, of course, be a huge undertaking (!) but by focussing on the most well-known documents from each era it should be quite ‘doable’, at least up until the nineteenth or twentieth century. A comparable effort has, in fact, already been quite successfully carried out by historian Sumarliði Ísleifsson with regard to the main *foreign* accounts of Iceland that have been written throughout the centuries, many of which express very interesting views of Icelandic nature. It is noteworthy (although surely not unexpected) that the views of foreign writers toward nature in Iceland have also undergone considerable change over time, perhaps even more so than of the Icelanders themselves (see e.g. Ísleifsson 1996, pp. 229-232, and further discussion below).

<sup>18</sup> The first permanent inhabitant of Iceland, Ingólfur Arnarson, is thought to have settled there in ca. 870 CE – it has become a tradition to refer to 874 CE as the first year of settlement but Ingólfur probably arrived a few years earlier. The island is said to have been fully settled in 930 CE, at which point *Alþingi*, the ‘parliament’, was founded and the *goðorð* system created. The conversion to Christianity formally took place at Alþingi in the year 1000 CE. It is, however, likely that the pagan religion lived on in many places, e.g. as people were allowed by law to continue sacrificing to the pagan gods in secret.

<sup>19</sup> Strictly speaking, the Commonwealth period begins in 930 CE with the foundation of Alþingi and ends in 1262 CE, when the Icelanders pledged fealty to the King of Norway.

<sup>20</sup> The reformation in Iceland was carried out between 1541 and 1551 CE.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Metzner (1993) for a sketch of the outlines of an “ecological worldview”.

<sup>22</sup> For information in English about Icelandic history in general, see e.g. Hálfðanarson (1997) and Karlsson (2000). Benediktsson (2000) provides a short but lucid overview of the characteristics of views of nature during various periods of Icelandic cultural history, as well as a thoughtful discussion about the theoretical

a short introduction – the list is, in any case, just a tentative one. In short, however, the rationale for this particular subdivision might run something like the following: the **pagan** era was characterised by views of nature related to the animistic religion, based on belief in Odin (Óðinn) and his fellow *Æsir*, which had been the dominant religion amongst people of Norse/Germanic descent. The surviving Eddaic and Scaldic poems are our main sources of information about how Icelanders (and other Nordic peoples) envisioned nature before their conversion to Christianity. There is no sharp distinction between this epoch and the **commonwealth** period that follows, the main difference lies in the advent of vernacular writing and literacy which in turn led to the creation of the, by and large fictional, Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), as well as (more) historical works such as *Landnáma*.<sup>23</sup> The *saga* writers and scholars were, furthermore, all Christians and this is very likely to have had at least some effect on how they documented (or recreated) the tales of their pagan predecessors. The commonwealth period then flows into what I called the **catholic** era (for want of a better word), during which Iceland gradually passes onto foreign rule. As the king grows stronger, so does the clergy and becomes a very powerful economic and cultural force. Less material – or at least less *original* material – seems to have been penned in this period by secular writers than during the previous ‘golden age’ of *saga* writing. There is still a lot of interesting material dealing with relations between humans and nature to be found e.g. in the Legendary Tales (*Fornaldarsögur*), even if these mostly take part on foreign grounds.<sup>24</sup>

The era of Latin **humanism** in Iceland is a very interesting period, even if shortlived. This epoch e.g. saw the (re)birth of scholarly interest in nature in Iceland, as evidenced by a number of works dealing, at least partly, with nature written from the late 16<sup>th</sup> to mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. Some of these, especially the works of Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned (Arngrímur lærði, 1568-1648), written in Latin, became quite well known amongst continental scholars.<sup>25</sup> Some scientific activity was also carried out during this period, e.g. by Arngrímur’s patron, Guðbrandur Þorláksson (1541-1627), bishop of the Hólar diocese and a correspondent of the accomplished Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, who quite accurately calculated the latitude and longitude of Iceland and also drew up the magnificent map of its contours (first printed in 1590 CE) which graces the cover of this book. This scientific spirit, however, by and large came to an end in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, to become

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considerations that must be taken into account when dealing with conceptions and representations of nature, historical or otherwise.

<sup>23</sup> Until recently, most scholars – and almost all laymen – saw the Icelandic Family Sagas, such as *Njáls saga* [The Saga of Njáll] and *Egils saga* [The Saga of Egill], as being chronicles of events that had actually taken place in medieval Iceland and thus regarded them as historical works, rather than fictional ones.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Kress (1993) for some interesting examples. My description of the ‘catholic’ epoch above is – due to lack of systematic research – still very much open to conjecture and I therefore ask readers to take it with a ‘a grain of salt’, e.g. as some of these ideas smack more than a bit of ‘received scholarly opinion’. The Legendary Tales (*Fornaldarsögur*, literally: “Tales of Ancient Times”) and the Chivalric Romances (*Riddarasögur*), which were the main literary *genres* of the 14th and 15th centuries, may be less reliable sources about Icelandic views of nature than e.g. the Family Sagas because these stories (all clearly fictional) mostly take place abroad and are in many cases translations or adaptations of foreign works. But this should not diminish their value to historians of ideas as these are the works that Icelandic people *read* – and were therefore (perhaps) influenced by or at least interested in – during this period.

<sup>25</sup> This epoch corresponds roughly to the first half of what is often called “The Age of Learning” (*Lærdómsöld*), considered to have lasted from roughly 1550 to 1750 CE. During this period approximately ten works concerning nature were written by Icelandic scholars. Arngrímur Jónsson’s works are undoubtedly the most famous of these, especially *Brevis Commentarius de Islandia* [A Brief Commentary on Iceland] published in 1593 and *Crymogaea* (Greek for “Ice-land”) published in 1609 CE.

dormant for half a century or so. Rather curiously, it overlapped considerably with a period of pronounced **superstition**, most notably evidenced by the burning of suspected warlocks and witches.<sup>26</sup> The views of nature of this period are perhaps best captured in an essay written by the “Fire Cleric” Jón Steingrímsson (1728-1791) in 1788 CE, where he e.g. describes how he was able to use the power of prayer to stop a lava flow – sent as punishment from God for the sinful ways of his parish – from overrunning his church.<sup>27</sup> But, again, there is no sharp dividing line between this ‘epoch’ and the one preceding or following it; the demarkation is merely one of convenience.

Over the centuries, the nation’s fortunes had faded considerably, due to both socio-political and natural factors, including several severe outbreaks of pestilence. It is commonly believed that Icelandic views of nature underwent a change corresponding to this decline, becoming in the process much more negative and fearful than they had been during the immediate post-settlement period. In the words of art historian Björn Th. Björnsson:

The nation as a whole viewed mountains, lava fields and deserts as the abode of malevolent forces, and feared them. For many centuries, the old cross-country paths had been left untrodden, to become overgrown; people were convinced that deserts were inhabited by demons and outlaws, who lay in ambush to seize the possessions, or take the lives, of travelers; in their minds, volcanoes were the gaping maw of Hell, while blizzards and evil storms originated in the glaciers.<sup>28</sup>

This view of (wild) nature may have started to gain hold in Iceland as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> century and is likely to have been dominant – or at least to have held considerable sway - well into the enlightenment or even the romantic period.<sup>29</sup> It is e.g. evidenced by place-names such as “Ódáðahraun” – the lava of evil deeds – a large and difficult to navigate lava-flow in North-East Iceland. The following description of Iceland, from abbot Arngrímur Brandsson’s (-1361) saga of Hólar bishop Guðmundur Arason the Good (Guðmundur góði), written in the mid-fourteenth century, is a case in point:

Greindr the servant of God was bishop of the land that books call Thule, but which the Norsemen call Iceland. It must indeed be said that this was the proper name for the island, since there is ice aplenty on both land and sea. On the sea there are sheets of drift ice which with their overwhelming size threaten to fill the oceans to the north, while over the high mountains on land there are nevermelting glaciers of such exceeding height and breadth that

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<sup>26</sup> This particular (sub-)period often called “The Age of Burnings” (*Brennuöld*) lasted from ca. 1625 to 1683 CE. A total of 21 people were burned at the stake in Iceland during this period, after having been convicted of practicing black magic. Unlike the situation on continental Europe, however, only one of these was a woman. For more information in English, see: <http://www.vestfirdir.is/galdrasyning/witch-hunts.php>.

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. Benediktsson (2000, p. 18) and Sæmundsson (1996) for discussions of Steingrímsson’s views on the ties between divine punishment and natural calamities.

<sup>28</sup> Björn Th. Björnsson (1964): *Íslensk myndlist á 19. og 20. öld* [Icelandic Visual Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries], Volume I, p. 34. English translation by the present author.

<sup>29</sup> Whether this did indeed become the dominant view of nature and, if it did, for how long this dominance lasted, are questions that cannot fully be answered until much more thorough research has been carried out.



they must seem incredible to those who were born far away. These glaciers at times discharge powerful currents with extraordinary eddies and the foulest stench, so that the birds in the air die of it and men and other living creatures on land. Other mountains in this country cast forth dreadful fire with the most terrible cascades of stones, so that the noise of the outburst can be heard all over the country.<sup>30</sup>

The spirit of the **enlightenment** period in Iceland is probably best captured by the words ‘bucolic’, ‘utilitarian’ and ‘reformistic’. Its main protagonists, such as poet and naturalist Eggert Ólafsson (1726-1768), sought to educate the nation and urge people to better their lives, e.g. by introducing new agricultural techniques and even some proto-factories. Changing people’s view of nature seemed to be quite central to this effort, at least for Eggert, who in his poems and other writings attempted to instill a vision of Icelandic nature as being both benign and fruitful.<sup>31</sup> Eggert and Bjarni Pálsson (1719-1779) also undertook the first thorough scientific exploration of Iceland, during which they “memorably challenged the traditional view of Iceland’s nature by ascending the volcano Hekla, which, according to them, no one had dared to do before.”<sup>32</sup> The ‘pastoral’ view of Icelandic nature introduced by Eggert Ólafsson was, by and large, adopted by fellow poet-naturalist Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807-1845) and the other early Icelandic **romantics**, but with the important change that nature was to be revered for her beauty, not just her utility. Jónas thus introduced a veneration of nature *qua* nature that most scholars believe to have been (fairly) novel to Icelandic mentality.<sup>33</sup> Jónas Hallgrímsson’s championship of nature was deeply related to his nationalistic concerns and from his day onward, the discourses of nature and of independence/nationalism in Iceland have been very strongly linked together. These ‘twin themes’ were e.g. strongly taken up by the pioneers of Icelandic painting, such as Þórarinn B. Þorláksson (1867-1924), Ásgrímur Jónsson (1876-1958) and Jóhannes S. Kjarval (1885-1872) who started practicing and exhibiting their art around the turn of the century.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> This saga is believed to have been written after 1343 CE, probably based (at least in part) on an earlier work written in latin by Arngrímur’s predecessor, Bergur Sökkason (-1350) (Johanson 2000, p. 185). The English translation is taken from Hafsteinsson (1995), see <http://www.brandts.dk/katalog/abne/htmlen/arkiv9/9703/conquest.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Icelandic nature probably showed her harshest face during the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when repeated, large-scale volcanic activity joined destructive forces with a cooling climate, the so-called “Little Ice Age”, the effect of which had been felt as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The Lakagígar eruption of 1783-1784, one of the greatest single outpourings of lava in historic times, covering almost 600 km<sup>2</sup> of land, led to grass poisoning and the subsequent death of the majority of all livestock, followed by a decrease in the human population of about 20%.

<sup>32</sup> Gunnar Karlsson (2000): *Iceland’s 1100 Years. The History of a Marginal Society*, p. 174. Foreign accounts of Iceland had long described the horrors of Mount Hekla, some even going as far as to call her the gateway to Hell. Whether or to what extent such ideas were found amongst the Icelanders themselves during various epochs is not, however, completely clear, as previously noted.

<sup>33</sup> I devote a chapter to Jónas Hallgrímsson later on in this Introduction, where I e.g. discuss the importance of his contribution to Icelandic views of nature.

<sup>34</sup> These painters are all famous for their landscapes. I have discussed these painters and the importance of their work for the development of Icelandic views of nature in my article “Náttúrufegurð” [The Beauty of Nature] (Árnason 1994). See also Ólafsdóttir (2001) for an overview of the role and importance of nature in Icelandic visual art during the century or so that it has been in existence. It has been claimed that landscapes made up 90 % of all paintings created by Icelanders during the first four decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that painting of landscapes was, furthermore, supported by politicians for nationalistic reasons (see Sigurðsson 1997).

One of the curiosities of Icelandic art history is that photography, by and large, pre-dated painting. Early photographers such as Sigfús Eymundsson (1837-1911) thus had a considerable part to play in the formation of the Icelandic landscape tradition. In 1872, Sigfús and/or arch-romantic poet Steingrímur Thorsteinsson (1831-1913), his assistant in this matter – drew up a ‘letter of invitation’ which was to be used to advertise a collection of (primarily) landscape photographs that Sigfús wanted to mass-produce for sale to foreign buyers. The letter includes the following description of Icelandic nature:

Among those countries that Nature has provided, if not with genial and luxuriant ornament, yet with impressive beauty and stunning majesty, Iceland may justly be named among the first. Surrounded by the north Atlantic Ocean, domed by the endless limpid blue of the northern sky, this country admittedly lacks the rich and fertile vegetation of southern climes, yet Nature has wrought it splendidly and strangely, and endowed it with marvels that seize the mind and enchant the imagination, to become indelibly fixed in the memory of those who have looked upon them. In the summer glow of the midnight sun, and the wintry glimmer of the Northern Lights, this island with its crown of mountains is adorned with a wondrous splendour that combines the mild and magnificent, the beautiful and the awe-inspiring.<sup>35</sup>

These historical developments in Icelandic views of nature since settlement times that have been outlined (however briefly) above were, by and large, mirrored by changes in the perceptions of foreigners who wrote about and/or visited the country. Sumarliði Ísleifsson has provided the following summary of the latter:

Right from the start, Icelandic nature came in for considerable discussion, especially volcanic activity, springs with various properties, and the supposition that the country was surrounded by ice for much of the year. Icelandic nature was generally regarded as harsh and extreme. Iceland was also a land of the weird and wonderful; sea monsters appeared there, and when the ice was old enough it could be set afire. The noise that accompanied the burning was the howling of tormented souls who were being punished for their sinful lives. They were, however, more commonly heated in the furnace of Mt. Hekla, which erupted continuously, together with other volcanoes, wreaking havoc. Icelandic nature provided evidence of many wonders, but probably it served primarily as a reminder to the living of purgatory, or, even worse, Hell itself.

Until 1800, this image of Icelandic nature was predominant, with the emphasis upon its punitive and destructive qualities, in addition to wondrous springs and various other strange phenomena which were harped upon. [...] During the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the 19<sup>th</sup>, a growing number of people found Iceland both terrible and enchanting, magnificent and grotesque. During the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more and more of Icelandic nature was judged beautiful by those who visited it. [...] Many such descriptions of “awesome horror” and “indescribable beauty” had acquired cliché status by the end of the century.<sup>36</sup>

Near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, romanticism was largely supplanted by realism as the main literary *genre* in Iceland, as least for a time. The rise of realism roughly coincided with the beginning

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<sup>35</sup> Translation by the present author. See my article “Sigfús Eymundsson 1837-1911: Icelandic Landscape Photography” (Arnason 1999, this volume) for further details.

<sup>36</sup> Sumarliði Ísleifsson (1996): *Ísland, framandi land* [Iceland, an alien country], p. 231.

of the **industrial** era in Iceland and, indeed, many of its proponents were quite enamoured with the project of industrialization. Together, poems and politics put ‘strict’ utilitarianism once again very much on the national agenda, as is e.g. evidenced in the work of Hannes Hafstein (1861-1922), who was a powerful politician, as well as a poet. Historian Helgi Skúli Kjartansson describes the onset of the industrial age as follows:

Icelandic industry was radically transformed over the period from the beginning of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century until World War I. In terms of production technology and lifestyle, it had begun to cut back some of the lead enjoyed by neighbouring countries, and was assuming the features of an industrialized nation. This rapid economic development was based in part on rich and previously underutilized marine resources, new imported technology and foreign capital.<sup>37</sup>

This period also marks the beginning of the interest to harness the water-power present in Iceland’s abundant rivers. Historian Guðmundur Hálfðanarson says that the route to modernity in Iceland was :

[...] marked at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Icelandic modernizers began to look for technological solutions to the persistent economic problems and poverty in their country. Now, the murky glacial rivers, running from the Icelandic highlands toward the sea, caught the imagination of nationalistic intellectuals as a potential source of wealth. Until then, they had been considered nuisance at best, hampering communications between the different lowland regions of the island, but the advent of the electrical age, around the turn of the twentieth century, transformed the rivers into important resources and a key to future prosperity [...].<sup>38</sup>

This change in the way the glacial rivers were conceptualized would in coming decades ‘solidify’ into a highly anthropocentric and utilitarian view of these natural phenomena and, by extension, Icelandic nature as a whole. This view is well captured by the words of Guðmundur Hálfðanarson:

[...] the advocates of hydroelectric power in Iceland have always worked from the basic principle that it was not only the prerogative of the human inhabitants of Iceland to harness the energy of the Icelandic rivers, but it was their duty, or even their national mission.<sup>39</sup>

This interest in hydro-electric power development was to be perennially ‘rekindled’ over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, indeed, shows little sign of abatement at the start of the new millennium.<sup>40</sup> It is, of course, also the root of many of Iceland’s most serious environmental debates during this same period, including the ongoing opposition to *Kárahnjúkavirkjun* (the Kárahnjúkar

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<sup>37</sup> Helgi Skúli Kjartansson (1996): “History and Culture”, p. 87. Available: [www.sedlabanki.is/uploads/files/History%20and%20culture.pdf](http://www.sedlabanki.is/uploads/files/History%20and%20culture.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (forthcoming): “Sustaining Economic Development or Preserving Nature: On Environmental Politics in Iceland”, p. 1. Unpublished manuscript courtesy of the author.

<sup>39</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 3

<sup>40</sup> The environmental history of the development of hydropower capacity in Iceland is the subject of an ongoing Ph.D. project by historian Unnur B. Karlsdóttir. See Karlsdóttir (2003), and Hálfðanarson and Karlsdóttir (2005) for further information.

hydro-electric power plant), which may have marked the dawn of a more **ecologically** informed age – or perhaps be the harbinger of an era yet to come.<sup>41</sup>

#### 1.4 Views of Nature: Iceland a Special Case?

If we compare these Icelandic epochs to the periods, somewhat broader, that had previously been defined for (Western) European cultural history in general, we find two or three especially noteworthy differences: First, that views of nature in Iceland ‘progress’ directly from a pagan or ‘pre-historic’ outlook to one influenced by late-medieval Christianity, thus bypassing both the ‘classical’ epoch and much of the ‘ecclesiastic’ one. The reason for this is, of course, the late settlement of Iceland – but a similar situation would also have pertained in much of Northern and Eastern Europe. What effect this might have had on the development of views of nature in Iceland is difficult to tell. Second, the ‘industrial’ era doesn’t begin in Iceland until the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, this is very important e.g. as it explains why there is still so much wild nature left in Iceland, i.e. nature that has not (yet) been ‘developed’ for human benefit.<sup>42</sup> One could also venture forth the conjecture that this late industrialisation – which is still fairly limited, at least when compared to most of Iceland’s neighbouring countries – may also be an important factor in the continuing drive to ‘harness’ its natural resources, whose proponents sometimes appear to be effectively blind to the environmental consequences of such efforts. A likely third difference is that it is doubtful that the ‘ecological’ era has arrived in Iceland, in particular as no large-scale environmental movement (with perhaps one, short-lived exception) has as yet made its presence felt in Icelandic society and politics. This situation will be discussed in more detail later on in this introduction when we shift our attention to contemporary environmental consciousness.

Exceptions such as these immediately raise speculations about whether views of nature can in some way be culture-specific, i.e. only found amongst the inhabitants of one nation or area. This is, of course, difficult to judge in any decisive or unambiguous way – in order to do so one would e.g. have to be able to make extensive comparisons, both spatially (i.e. in a variety of different countries) and over time. Despite these reservations, however, there are some fairly good reasons to expect that Icelandic views of nature *might* – up to some degree at least – be ‘special’, i.e. show some characteristic or element that is not (or only rarely) encountered elsewhere. *A priori*, the main grounds for such suspicions would be Icelandic nature which is in many ways unique and certainly vastly different from what one would encounter on continental Europe.<sup>43</sup> Any such conjecture, however, immediately gives rise to a number of theoretical problems, e.g. concerning the borderline between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ and whether nature ‘as such’ can really have any impact on how she is viewed. As such problems need not concern us here for the moment, I will postpone discussion about them until later.

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<sup>41</sup> For further details of this project and the opposition against it, see “Environmental Concern in Iceland: Values, Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors” in this volume.

<sup>42</sup> Technological development is, of course, one of the main driving forces of changing views of nature. The scope of this investigation is, however, too limited to allow anything but general comments on the possible effects of technology during any given period of Icelandic history.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. Thórhallsdóttir (2002) for a good description of the characteristics of the wilderness in the Icelandic central highland. Her description is also discussed in some detail in a later section of this Introduction.

Turning back to cultural development and striking a somewhat different note, it would seem clear that temporal changes in views of nature, whether epochal or culture-specific, do not ‘wipe the slate clean’ every time they happen. On the contrary, the underlying ideas or conceptions which have been supplanted can easily remain ‘embedded’ in culture and tradition and thus e.g. return again to prominence – and even dominance – in some later period. Over time, such conceptions become like layers of river-born sediment that have been deposited, year after year and layer after layer, in the river’s bed. These ‘layers of thought’, once deposited, do not all that easily disappear – they remain where they are and may even constantly be kept alive by some segment of the population. This also, and no less importantly, means that views of nature in any given culture do not only change *per se* but tend to become more numerous and/or more diverse over time. We who live in the current ‘ecological epoch’ (or so I will for now assume) should thus not be surprised to encounter fellow citizens who hold e.g. ‘romantic’, ‘industrial’ or ‘enlightenment’ views of nature (or, rather, new variants thereof), whereas we would not expect a person living in the ‘ecclesiastic epoch’ to have met up with any of these. This is, of course, common sense – but my point is simply that while certain views of nature may certainly ‘die out’ in a given culture, they are perhaps more likely to just fall from dominance and/or become ‘submerged’ for a period of time, without ever becoming fully extinct.

In an article based on his research on Icelandic foxhunters, anthropologist Haraldur Ólafsson provides us with a nice example of such ‘cultural layering’ and (possible) ‘reemergence’ of old views of nature (or “world views”, as he prefers to call them):

What is most interesting is that in the hunter’s interpretation and attitude toward the animal, one can see a glimpse of an ancient attitude toward the animal world. We are in the center of the hunter’s world. There we have a world view where all living things are of the same nature, they obey the same laws, and they all belong to one family. Humans and animals form a unit in nature: humans become animals and animals humans. That “primitive” viewpoint asserts itself very clearly in almost everything that has been written about fox hunting in Iceland. [...] Nature is like a living body, and man and animal belong to the same nature and are of the same material.<sup>44</sup>

Compare this description to the one which Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) gives us of the Pre-Christian pagan religion in the prologue of his *Edda*, probably written between 1220-1230 CE:

They pondered and were amazed at what it could mean that the earth and animals and birds had common characteristics in some things, though there was a difference in quality. [...] From this they reasoned that the earth was alive and had life after a certain fashion, and they realized that it was enormously old in count of years and mighty in nature. It fed all creatures and took possession of everything that died. For this reason they gave it a name and traced their ancestry to it.<sup>45</sup>

This idea/interpretation is certainly interesting, both in itself and because it seems to involve a ‘reincarnation’ of the pagan view of nature, more than a thousand years after that period came to

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<sup>44</sup> Haraldur Ólafsson (1989): “The hunter and the animal“, pp. 44-45.

<sup>45</sup> Snorri Sturluson (1995, original date of completion unknown), *Edda*, pp. 1-2. For the full citation, see “Nature in Medieval Icelandic and Nordic Literature” in this volume.

an end. Alternatively, one could say that such views have lived on amongst Icelandic foxhunters, generation after generation; or that they are characteristic of hunters everywhere throughout the ages; and/or that they are somehow tied to the experience of being a hunter. None of these ‘counterexplanations’ changes the fact that a very old view of nature appears to have survived amongst Icelandic foxhunters, where it apparently co-exists with more modern conceptualisations. As previously noted, it is my own opinion that something highly reminiscent of the earliest industrial view of nature is still very much ‘alive and kicking’ in contemporary Iceland. The building of the Kárahnjúkar-dam is, I believe, a prime example of this – I am e.g. extremely doubtful that such an huge and destructive project would have been allowed to go ahead in any other European country in this day and age. But there is certainly also a strong strain of romanticism still to be found amongst nature preservationists in Iceland – the prime opponents of projects such as *Kárahnjúkavirkjun* – many of whom use arguments highly reminiscent of earlier days, e.g. of the organic bond between nature and nation which *giga*-projects such as *Kárahnjúkavirkjun* are then seen to place in great peril, thus threatening the Icelandic nation no less than Icelandic nature. It is highly questionable whether discourse such as this can be truly effective in this (post)modern age – indeed, other and less nationalistic opponents of *Kárahnjúkavirkjun* have started to openly criticize the arguments and tactics that have most commonly been used to try to sway the public into the opposition camp.<sup>46</sup> Here I largely agree with Guðmundur Hálfðanarson who writes:

The Kárahnjúkar project instigated the most heated environmental debate ever occurring in Iceland, as individuals and NGOs protested what they termed to be the largest environmental disaster in Icelandic history. But in spite of demonstrations of different sorts, lawsuits, petition campaigns, etc., the opposition to the continued development of the aluminum industry in Iceland and the concomitant expansion of the hydroelectric production seem to have been fairly ineffective. Both the Kárahnjúkar Project and the contract for the construction of the aluminum smelter in Reyðarfjörður were passed in the Icelandic parliament with considerable majority, and all opinion polls indicate that there is widespread support among the general public for this industrial buildup. There is nothing to indicate, therefore, that environmentalism is on the increase in Iceland – if anything, it seems to have been more effective in the late 1960s and the early 1970s when the Laxár Valley and Þjórsárver projects were defeated than it is at the present.

There is no simple explanation to this apparent weakness of the environmentalist movement in Iceland, but when the discussion is scrutinized it becomes clear that the public debates on these issues are still locked in the same discursive patterns as characterized them through much of the twentieth century. The arguments for the expansion of the energy intensive industries have, for example, changed little from the beginning of the century, when politicians dreamed of a modern industrial society in Iceland.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, I would briefly like to mention a *possible* fifth category of diversity in views of nature, i.e. those cases where two or more views of nature may be encountered ‘side by side’, as it were, within the same person or society. This, in other words, is a situation not unlike schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder. A famous Icelandic example of such ‘plural-viewing’ on the individual level can be found in the poem *Dettifoss* by Einar Benediktsson (1864-1940), which alternates between being a earnest and magnificent celebration of the creative or spiritual power of

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<sup>46</sup> Eiríkur Ö. Norðdahl (2004): “Nasistar” [Nazis].

<sup>47</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

Dettifoss, Iceland's greatest waterfall, and being a eulogy to a grand scheme the poet-entrepreneur had hatched for national embetterment (and personal gain), based on using the falls' physical power to generate electricity.<sup>48</sup> The fact that these two visions or aspirations are totally incompatible does not at all seem to bother the poet. Compare the following stanzas, numbers 1 and 5, respectively:

Sing, Dettifoss, and sunward lift each tone!  
Shine, lustrous light, upon the shadow's throne!  
And mold my thoughts, thou din, to lays eternal  
About the greatest force our earth has grown!  
Let touch my spirit deep thy wondrous might,  
That can disturb from rest the rocks infernal.  
I know, I feel thy voice with music bright  
Empowers manly hearts. Thy cords now smite,  
Fall-heart! For writing give me strength supernal.

[...]

Our land and folk in wealth could surely grow  
By setting shafts of light upon thy bow,  
And at the summit all thy power treating,  
So that increased would be thy water's flow,  
And air creative drawn to flower and tree,  
Yes, garments of the glaciers used for heating.  
Here life enclosed in death might be set free  
And light within thy darkness kindled be,  
Where in magnetic nerves thy heart is beating.<sup>49</sup>

According to Guðmundur Hálfðanarson (1999, pp. 317-318), such a twofold view was quite characteristic of Icelandic society as a whole (although, I would add, perhaps not quite as extremely so as in Einar Benediktsson) from the onset of the romantic period and even up until the present day, e.g. in the tourism industry. Thus, what he calls, respectively, "utilitarian" and "romantic" views of nature, have in Iceland tended to merge, so that neither is found in 'pure' form; the utilitarian view is always to some extent mixed with the romantic view and *vice-versa*. This is an intriguing observation, which deserves further research – I would e.g. be curious to know whether evidence of such 'double vision' could be found in earlier epochs, perhaps all the way back to (pre-)settlement times. This would e.g. call into question the idea held by many scholars that Icelanders were, by and large, unappreciative of natural beauty until the onset of the romantic period.<sup>50</sup>

On the whole, it is probably far too much to expect people to be totally consistent in their views of nature – or anything else, for that matter. From an ethical standpoint, both anthropocentric

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<sup>48</sup> See my article "'Kný minn huga, gnýr'. Dettifoss með augum Einars Benediktssonar" ['Mold my thought, thou din'. Dettifoss in the Eyes of Einar Benediktsson] (2005b).

<sup>49</sup> Einar's poem was translated by Frederic T. Wood and published in the book *Harp of the north: Poems by Einar Benediktsson* (1955), pp. 14-16. These stanzas are on pages 14-15.

<sup>50</sup> This idea, which has perhaps become a bit too 'received', is dealt with in more detail in my articles "Nature in Medieval Icelandic and Nordic Literature" (this volume) and "Náttúrufréttir" (Árnason 1994).

stances (often - but not necessarily - expressed in utilitarian terms) and ecocentric stances are based on sound moral arguments, concerning the wellbeing of human beings, on the one hand, and the flourishing of nature and non-human organisms, on the other. It can often be very difficult to 'balance' these concerns in one's mind, a problem which is, in my opinion, further compounded by the fact that they belong to separate value dimensions, one based on classical humanism, the other on experience and love of nature, as I will attempt to argue for later on in this Introduction.

This does not, however, in any way 'absolve' politicians, officials and others in positions of power from behaving in a well-informed, thoughtful and, above all, consistent manner with regard to nature. Nor does it diminish the importance of each of us trying to make more sense of our – perhaps at times contradictory – ideas and feelings about nature and our place in the world.

## 1.5 Views of Nature: A Natural Approach?

While it may not have any landscape types that are truly unique, the central highland of Iceland offers a more diverse visual experience than is available in most other countries. It is a rich mosaic of colors, landforms, and textures [...] It may be unrivaled as a virtual textbook on the processes shaping the surface of the earth through the action of glaciers, volcanoes, wind, and water. The resulting landforms are presented with great clarity because of their recent age and lack of vegetation. It is a land that simultaneously looks ancient and is obviously still being created.

The second distinctive feature of the highland is its openness. It is a totally treeless landscape, often with a monotonous foreground but spectacular distant views of glaciers and blue mountains framing the horizon. The long expanses of rolling, dark grey, basaltic moraines are broken by oases of vegetation in the depressions [...] usually with springs and running water. The greens of the vegetation and the deep blue of the spring water contrast sharply with the surrounding desert. [...] Several rhyolitic areas [...] are characterized by multicolored, striated mountains in bright tones of yellow, pink, green, and blue. [...] in parts of the [...] Ódádahraun lava field, fields of tortuous black lava are half submerged in shining yellow pumice.

The Icelandic central highland is mostly harsh, often hostile, and in some places decidedly alien compared to most other parts of the world. It is clearly a place where man does not belong.<sup>51</sup>

The description above, written by ecologist Þóra Ellen Þórhallsdóttir, brings home the most striking physical characteristics of the 'wildest' part of Iceland, the part that most people today – or at least the nature preservationists among them – see as the 'heartland' of Icelandic nature. Off hand, it would seem to be an ideal place to look for powerful experiences of wilderness and natural beauty – and this is e.g. indeed the reason why most tourists in present times travel to Iceland.<sup>52</sup> This is also the nature which forms the 'backdrop' for all sorts of patriotic/nationalistic discourses and concerns, of politicians, entrepreneurs, special interest groups and others – an es-

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<sup>51</sup> See Þórhallsdóttir (2002): "Evaluating Nature and Wilderness in Iceland", p. 98.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g. Sæþórsdóttir (1998).



sential part of pretty much any image of ‘Icelandicness’.<sup>53</sup> But this is also an highly *contested* terrain, both physically and conceptually – plans for e.g. hydropower or touristic development clash with hopes to create national parks and nature reserves, and ‘combatants’ on either side, furthermore, frequently draw on cultural-historic representations of this nature to drive home their point. Thus the conception of the central highland or *öræfi* as an useless and ugly desert – much more an infertile or even degenerate wasteland than any ‘pristine’ wilderness – is pitted against arguments that emphasize the uniqueness of its landscapes and/or the magnificence of the stark but overpowering features of a nature that seems to define or embody the very essence of the sublime.<sup>54</sup> In this fashion, the battle for the physical terrain of the central highland is also a struggle for alternative conceptions of it’s nature – as well as for the heart and minds of the public to whom this nature belongs, culturally and spiritually. But how or on what grounds is the public (and/or the policy-maker) to choose between rival views of nature in the highland?<sup>55</sup>

Turning away from politics for the moment, I have in the preceding chapters discussed how different ideas or *conceptions* of nature affect our *perceptions* of her and thus e.g. create the need for a concept such as ‘view of nature’ to explain, or at least symbolize, the process which takes place. But where is nature herself in all of this – does nature herself have any ‘say’ about how she is perceived, or is she just a construct or image that we can mold in any way we choose? We can phrase this question somewhat differently and ask whether a person can ever have *immediate* access to nature or whether all access to her must inevitably be ‘mediated’ by culture? The answers to such questions depends on the theoretical standpoint or ‘meta-view’ that one takes toward the generation of specific conceptions/perceptions of nature. Thus, a radical constructionist might even go so far to say that *nature as such* does not exist, at least not for us humans – we as human beings can only know ‘nature’ through culture and thus we do not really know ‘nature’ at all, only various cultural conceptions of what she might *possibly* look like – always assuming that she was, in fact, ‘for real’. Nature, in other words, from this perspective has no part to play in how she is envisioned or perceived; views of nature, therefore, have little or no relation to nature’s ‘actual’ qualities – indeed, if they do show any such apparent correspondence, this would be of no great relevance, but rather just one out of an infinite number of alternative perceptions.

The legend of Raven-Floki and his companions can be interpreted as an early example of the situated and/or non-natural origin of ‘views of nature’ – the differences between the two extreme views are far too great to be put down to the country’s physical characteristics, there is something completely different at stake here. Indeed, Thorolf’s reputed view of a land where “butter was

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<sup>53</sup> See critical treatments of such discourses and images by e.g. Hafsteinsson 1995, Sigurðsson 1996, Hálf-danarson 1999, and Benediktsson 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Some manifestations of the sublime in the works of nineteenth century Icelandic poets and scholars have been discussed by Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson (2003). I also touch upon this issue in my article on Dettifoss (Árnason 2005b). The idea that Icelandic nature is inherently sublime – or at least exceptionally conducive to sublime experiences – has not, however, been probed in any great depth. Holmes Rolston (1998, p. 98) provides an interesting starting point for such a study: “Almost by definition, the sublime runs off scale. There is vertigo before vastness, antiquity, power, elemental forces austere and fierce, mysterious and enormously beyond human limits.”

<sup>55</sup> A considerable part of the central highland is believed to have been covered with vegetation at the time of settlement; this cover has since been lost and the soil eroded, leaving bare the rocks and gravel underneath. This situation, of course, raises questions about how ‘unspoilt’ or ‘pristine’ the highland really is, in particular as these changes are likely to have been caused, directly or indirectly, by humans, at least to some extent.

dripping from every blade of grass” would appear to be much more in line with a great feat of imagination on his part, than the flora and growing conditions that he had actually encountered. Floki’s view appears, at first glance, to be closer to the reality of nature in Iceland – after all, he had lost all his livestock during the (harsh) winter – but then again, Floki’s ‘evaluation’ may have been nothing but a blatant attempt to transfer the blame for his neglect of the farm animals onto nature. From this latter perspective, the reason why Floki had “nothing good to say” of Iceland may simply be that he was trying to ‘save face’ when he returned back to Norway, considerably poorer than when he set out.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the arguments and examples put forth above, I am not myself fully content with the radical (de)constructionist position. I totally agree that a view of nature is always situated – it is a view from *someone*, *somewhere* and at *some given time* - and thus dependant upon various factors that need not have anything to do with nature as such. On the other hand, denying nature any part in how she could and has been envisioned results in an absurd simplification of the richness and complexity of human experience *vis-à-vis* the natural world, including the genesis of human fascination and delight in nature’s beauty. The intricate interplay of natural features, individual preferences, societal conditions, cultural heritage and historical developments, both national and foreign, that forms the foundation for any given ‘view of nature’ cannot be reduced to a model of exclusively socio-cultural determination without losing sight of much of what is most important and intriguing in the actual formation of such views. The radical constructionist position is, in short, equally as inadequate as a naïve ‘naturalism’ when it comes to explaining what really matters about views of nature.

Furthermore, the constructionist position – although certainly not without its theoretical merits – would also appear to be linked to a strong relativism about human-nature interactions, which calls both the public and the private role of such scholarship into critical question, as e.g. environmental historian Donald Worster has pointed out:

If nature is nothing but a bewildering panorama of changes, many of them induced by human beings [...] and if our attitudes toward nature are themselves demonstrably in a state of constant flux, so that yesterday we hated wolves and today we love them, then *what should conservation mean?* What should we derive from the study of history to inform current land-use decisions? Is environmental history at all useful to the management of land, or is it a mental disease confusing decisions and clouding judgment?<sup>57</sup>

[...]

The theory of historical relativism frees us from dogma but offers no firm guidance to belief. It cannot really invalidate the intellectual tendencies of our time, or any other time, nor can it validate new ones. On the contrary, it can only lead either to complete cynicism or to the acceptance of any set of ideas or any environment that humans have created as legitimate.<sup>58</sup>

In sum, the scholarly turn to (de)constructionism and relativism opens up ‘a whole new can of worms’ – these positions offer (partial) solutions to one set of perennial theoretical problems,

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<sup>56</sup> I discuss alternative interpretations of the three shipmates’s views in more depth in “Nature in Medieval Icelandic and Nordic Literature”.

<sup>57</sup> Donald Worster (1995): “Nature and the Disorder of History”, pp. 67-68, my italics.

<sup>58</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.

only to replace them with another and no less problematic set. It is not possible in a short introduction such as this to do justice to the important theoretical considerations at stake in the debates between what I have called ‘constructionists’ and ‘naturalists’ or the related disputes concerning ‘absolutism’ versus ‘relativism’ with regard to values, and ‘dualism’ versus ‘monism’ in connection with man’s position *vis-à-vis* nature. Still, it is important to keep these distinctions and their relevance in mind, if only to avoid falling into a “two cultures” or “science wars” conceptual trap with regard to these issues.

To close this chapter, I would like to offer a tentative sketch of a ‘revised’ naturalism, i.e. one which tries to skirt past any type of determinism, drawn from philosopher Páll Skúlason’s observations and reflections on the phenomenology of natural encounters. Páll’s views on this matter, best presented in his article “Meditation at the Edge of Askja”, were to begin with largely based on his personal experience of an highly ‘evocative’ natural phenomena – the Askja caldera, a collapsed, amphitheater-like volcano in the central highland – which he then subjects to theoretical scrutiny and critical evaluation.<sup>59</sup> Páll describes his initial experience, after coming to Askja for the first time, in the following words:

When I came to Askja, I found myself in a unique and independent world, the Askja-world, a clearly-delimited whole that embraced everything and completely filled the mind, so that one had the sense of having encountered all of reality, past, present and future. Beyond the horizon lay unknown eternity – a great, silent emptiness. When one encounters such a world, one has come to the end of the road. One has come into contact with reality itself. The mind opens itself to perfect beauty, and one grasps at last what life is all about.<sup>60</sup>

In his subsequent deliberations about this experience, Páll reaches the conclusion that during this experience Askja became the embodiment or “symbol”, as he calls it, of nature: an “objective reality, independent of all thought, belief and expression, independent of human existence.”<sup>61</sup> Faced with this natural reality, the human being discovers her bond to the earth and, furthermore, a feeling that the earth is a “fundamental premise” of her life:

[we] cannot be what we are except in the face of Askja (or other, comparable, symbol of the earth), to which we can turn again and again, if not in actuality, then in our thoughts. We stand on the earth—build, work, and destroy it, if it comes to that—because we are born to the earth and can only find ourselves in relation to it, in the light of it or in its embrace. [...] The earth is the premise of our being ourselves, of our existing together and being aware of ourselves.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The original Icelandic version of the article was published in 1995. Some of its themes have been developed further by Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir (2005). I also discuss this article and its relevance to Páll Skúlason’s work in environmental ethics in general in my article “Hvernig heimurinn kemur okkur við. Um náttúrusiðfræði Páls Skúlasonar” [How the world concerns us. On Páll Skúlason’s environmental ethics] (Árnason 2005a).

<sup>60</sup> Skúlason 2005, pp. 5-7.

<sup>61</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

Páll's position here can be paraphrased (in the light of my earlier discussion) by saying that although our personal knowledge and encounters with nature are, by and large, all mediated by culture, it would also appear true that human beings cannot truly know who they are *as* human beings except when facing a phenomenon or a reality which is decidedly not of human origin, i.e. which is 'strange' or 'alien' to them. In another article, Páll describes this by saying that "man's images of himself stem from his understanding of nature or, more precisely, [...] nature is the mirror which reflects to man his images of himself."<sup>63</sup>

Human consciousness needs an external, non-human mirror to be able to see itself for what it is, however dimly. The man-made environment is not up to this task precisely because it created by man and thus imbued with human logic and design; holding this up as our mirror would be like trying to see one's face directly out of one's eyes – we know that the face is there and we know that our eyes are part of it, but still we can see no further than our nose, if we can indeed see so far. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to human culture and artifacts.

According to Páll's argument, having unimpeded access to 'wild', 'pristine' or 'unspoilt' nature (or whatever word one chooses to describe the essence of an independent, non-human and natural reality) is of vital importance to humans:

If I am right, then our human life is possible only if we can bridge the gap between mind and nature. It is precisely in the mind's connection with nature as an independent totality that the human world comes to exist. This connection is essentially bound up with signs. [...] Nature gives us signs of itself, pictures itself for us, takes on forms which impress and fascinate us, and which terrify us as well.<sup>64</sup>

Páll ends by asking how thought, which "gives man his special place in reality and which distinguishes him from everything else in the world?"<sup>65</sup>, enters into this picture, a question he himself answers in the following way:

[...] we cannot think unless Askja, the natural world, speaks to us and gets us to believe in an independent reality lying beyond human thought and culture. Askja drives us to express our experience of such a reality and to ponder its intrinsic value.<sup>66</sup>

According to this view, nature herself *communicates* with us and by doing so both provides us with the means of knowing her and the foundation for our own consciousness and thought – the prerequisites of knowing anything at all. Nature is therefore very much an 'active force' in all her encounters with humans.<sup>67</sup> I do not expect that all readers – even those that might be sympathetic to some form of naturalism – will want to agree with Páll's analysis nor the conclusions which can be drawn from it. I am not presenting this as an argument for a naturalistic position – that would, of course, require a much more thorough treatment – but as an example of what such a position might conceivably look like. For now, at least, I leave it up to readers to ponder its merit,

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<sup>63</sup> Páll Skúlason (1999): "Man in the Mirror of Nature", p. 159.

<sup>64</sup> Skúlason 2005, pp. 37-41.

<sup>65</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>66</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>67</sup> I come to a similar conclusion, but built on a considerably different approach, in my article "Náttúru-*feegurð*" (Árnason 1994). See also my more recent discussion and interpretation of Einar Benediktsson's poem about Dettifoss (Árnason 2005b).

as well as the conundrums involved in any attempt to disentangle nature from culture – or *vice-versa*.

To conclude this section, I would briefly like to return to what I above called ‘meta-views’ of nature, i.e. the basic theoretical premises that underpin scholarly analysis of socio-cultural-natural phenomena such as views of nature. It seems to me that such meta-views cannot only be based on, or influenced by, broader theoretical stances such as constructionism or naturalism, but indeed by any number of different perspectives, theoretical or otherwise. Scholars are e.g. no more immune to cultural currents than the ‘normal’ person on the street. Trying to identify and untangle the underlying elements of various *scholarly* views is therefore no less rewarding (or frustrating) than dealing with the (more) public variants – and this is indeed what deconstruction is all about, at least in my understanding. Below, drawing on the example of poet-naturalist Jónas Hallgrímsson, I discuss a particular perspective or ‘blinder’ that I believe has long been in operation amongst Icelandic scholars concerning the historical roots of appreciation for natural beauty, resulting in a faulty ‘meta-view’ of nature.

## 1.6 Views of Nature: Jónas Hallgrímsson

Didn’t we say the country is *comely* and fair? Didn’t you actually say it yourself? But who can really appreciate this comeliness unless he is capable of approaching nature with intelligence and understanding? The stirrings of human emotion we felt as youngsters die out, later, as our bodies age, unless such stirrings are reinforced by knowledge and profound love for the outer integuments of the spirit.<sup>68</sup>

Thus wrote Jónas Hallgrímsson in a letter to his friend and fellow reformer, Konráð Gíslason, in March 1844. Jónas’ words “Didn’t we say the country is *comely* and fair?” refer to the lines he included in his poem *Iceland* (Ísland, 1835): “Comely and fair was our country, crested with snow-covered glaciers, / azure and empty the sky, ocean resplendently bright.”<sup>69</sup> It is, of course, interesting – and telling – that Jónas sees reason to comment on the fact he used the words “*fagurt og frítt*” to describe Iceland and Icelandic nature, the “bountiful mother”, in his poem.<sup>70</sup> According to the Dictionary of the University of Iceland, the term “*náttúrufegurð*” – natural beauty – does not appear on print in Icelandic until 1860, or a quarter century after Jónas wrote his poem and some fifteen years after his death.<sup>71</sup> The term appears in a travelogue from Germany written by Guðbrandur Vigfússon, whose conceptions of natural beauty appear to be heavily influenced by the bucolic or utilitarian views of the Enlightenment:

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<sup>68</sup> Translation by Dick Ringler, published in his book *Bard of Iceland* (2002, p. 61). Most of Ringler’s work concerning Jónas Hallgrímsson can also be accessed on his website which is dedicated to the poet: <http://www.library.wisc.edu/etext/Jonas>.

<sup>69</sup> Ringler *op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>70</sup> Ringler (*ibid.*) furthermore translates the opening line of the poem (with some poetic license) as “Iceland, frost-silvered isle! Our beautiful, bountiful mother!”. Both this part of Ringler’s translation (the original line in Icelandic is quite difficult to translate) and his decision to translate *fagurt* as “comely” rather than “beautiful”, a stronger adjective which would seem at least equally well called for, are debatable as such, but taken together in the context of the whole poem, these lines admirably convey the sentiments being expressed towards the motherland and nature. The use of maternal imagery in relation to Icelandic nature, in particular with regard to *Fjallkonan*, the Mountain Woman symbol or trope, has been discussed by Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir (1996).

<sup>71</sup> See Árnason 1994, p. 270.

I say no more about the beauty of nature and the fair countenance of the Alps perfectly in view, but take the reader straight into the barn, which is the fairest I've seen, with stalls for 30 to 40 head of cattle.<sup>72</sup>

This same influence can also be found in Jónas' work, at least up to a point. The nature depicted in Jónas' poems is thus not so much the wild, sublime nature of the central highland – which would certainly have furnished any continental romantic of his time with prime inspiration – but the landscapes of the Icelandic countryside, the *environs* of the farming community. Below are two stanzas, the first and last, from *Valley Song* (Dalvísa), written in 1844, which show this well:

Dandelions, a dazzling mass!  
Dimpled berries in the meadow!  
Ditches deep in cotton grass!  
Dandelions, a golden mass!  
In your midst I ache to pass  
all my years of sun and shadow!  
Dandelions, a dazzling mass!  
Dimpled berries in the meadow!

[...]

Summer valley, blissful, blest,  
brimmed with sunlight now and ever,  
slowly sweeping east to west!  
Summer valley, gorgeous, blest!  
Childhood's idyll, age's rest  
after years of long endeavor!  
Summer valley, blissful, blest,  
brimmed with sunlight now and ever!<sup>73</sup>

In a commentary that accompanies this poem, it's translator, Dick Ringler, writes: In this sequence of exclamatory apostrophes Jónas paints a rapturous picture of a typical rural valley in Iceland. In the first four stanzas he invokes the blossoms in its meadows, the waterfalls and ravines along its sides, the brooks and streams that flow along its bottom, and the cliff belts and high peaks that gird it round. In the fifth stanza he addresses the valley as a whole. It is hard to imagine a more briefly comprehensive or more artfully shaped portrait of this typical Icelandic landscape.<sup>74</sup>

Jónas was a well-known admirer of Eggert Ólafsson and, like him, an idealist and reformer at heart, especially with regard to Icelandic nationalism and the Icelandic language. But there are, however, crucial differences between the two poets which manifest themselves very early on in

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, translation by the present author.

<sup>73</sup> Ringler *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249.

<sup>74</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 249. It must be added that the landscape eulogized in the poem, whilst typical of the Icelandic countryside, bears little resemblance to the central highland.

Jónas' *oeuvre*. According to Ringler: "Already in the poetry of Jónas' Bessastaðir [i.e. gymnasium] years we find an appreciation for the beauty of nature, as distinct from its utility, that sets him apart from a forerunner like Eggert Ólafsson."<sup>75</sup> Jónas was, furthermore, certainly not blind to wilder sides of Icelandic nature, as can e.g. be seen from his poem *Mount Broadshield* (Fjallið Skjaldbreiður), written in 1841 after he had traveled to and around this well-known shield volcano in the vicinity of Þingvellir, the site of the ancient *Alþingi*. The stanzas (nr. five and six) from the poem cited below deal with the prehistoric geological origin of the Þingvellir area as Jónas, a trained natural scientist, envisioned it:<sup>76</sup>

Broadshield's icecap opened! Brawling  
earthquakes wrenched and tore the land,  
stunned as if the stars were falling,  
strewn to Earth by heaven's hand;  
spitting like a spray of midges  
sparks went hissing through the air;  
lava, spewed from rents and ridges,  
wreaked destruction everywhere.

Fiery surges snarl and thunder,  
smoke is roiling, bluish-grey;  
birch and rowan both go under,  
bush and shrub are seared away;  
valley flowers, scorched to vapor,  
vanish with a fragrant hiss;  
grasses glow like burning paper ---  
God alone beheld all this.

Jónas' poem *Gunnar's Holm* (Gunnarshólmi, 1837) is another example – perhaps the best – of what Jónas saw in Icelandic nature and/or how she presented herself to him. It is not one view but many – or multiple-sided – e.g. the visions of both “pure delight” of the play of birds and flourishing vegetation and of the “terror” lurking within the volcanoes, that are shown in the segment below:

Far to the north, its snowy peak defying  
the heavens, Hekla stands on guard: beneath  
its bulwarks, bound in dungeons deep as night,  
Terror and Death are gnashing greedy teeth,  
while high above them palisades of bright  
obsidian glitter, glassy as a mirror.  
From there you look on scenes of pure delight:  
Wood River glides through leafy glens, then, nearer,  
murmuring more softly, makes its leisured way  
through farmlands ripe with radiant harvest---dearer  
than gold---and grassy meads where cattle stray.

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<sup>75</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>76</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 192-193.

High on the hillside fragile blossoms gleam;  
golden-clawed eagles glide above their prey  
(for fish are flashing there in every stream)  
and whirring throngs of thrushes flit and trill  
through birch and beech groves lovely as a dream.<sup>77</sup>

Jónas wrote *Gunnars' Holm* not only to inspire (balanced) admiration of the natural beauty of Iceland but also obviously with the intention that such admiration would, subsequently or concurrently, induce patriotic love of the motherland amongst his countrymen. The poem is a lyrical rendition of the well-known segment of *Njálssaga* which tells of Gunnar Hámundarson's decision to stay in Iceland and meet his fate, rather than go abroad, because of the pull that the beautiful countryside exerts upon him.<sup>78</sup> Jónas 'paraphrases' Gunnar's famous words about the beauty (and/or bucolic bliss) of his native Fljótshlíð into the following direct address: "Never before has Iceland seemed so fair, / the fields so golden, roses in such glory, / such crowds of sheep and cattle everywhere!"<sup>79</sup> and then exhorts his readers to rise up and follow Gunnar's lead, living as they are in "a desperate land [that] abides its time of trouble".<sup>80</sup>

Jónas Hallgrímsson was not only a great admirer of nature, pastoral and otherwise; at the age of nineteen he wrote an essay criticizing cruelty toward animals in the school magazine at Bessastaðir.<sup>81</sup> He was, furthermore, an early supporter of tree planting and horticulture.<sup>82</sup> In one of his diaries, Jónas also writes a strong-worded critique of vandalism in the Geysir-area, including the common tourist practice of throwing rocks into the geysers to hasten their next fountains display. He writes: "I knew it was possible to provoke Strokkur and make him gush by throwing rocks into him. But that is unseemly behavior and I did not want to do any such thing for the sake of my conscience."<sup>83</sup> This diary entry prompts Páll Valsson, Jónas' most recent and thorough biographer, to call him "one of the first environmentalists in Iceland".<sup>84</sup> Although I certainly have no doubts about Jónas' love for nature, nor that he was a singularly important contributor to the development of more benign perceptions of her in Iceland, I do question whether his appreciation of nature's beauty was as novel as is often suggested. As I have elsewhere argued, I believe there is considerable evidence in the eddas, sagas and elsewhere that suggests that the early Icelandic settlers – or at least their pagan forebears – held nature in reverence and were appreciative of her beauty.<sup>85</sup> It so happens that Jónas, himself a scholar and admirer of the old writings, not in the least the eddas, appears to have agreed with me; thus, in his travel diary from 1839 there is a description of a grave mound believed to belong to a pagan seeress (*völva*)

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<sup>77</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>78</sup> As described in my article "Nature in Medieval Icelandic and Nordic Literature", this tale is open to a number of different interpretations and has thus been (and still is) a matter of considerable debate. Many scholars – including Jónas – have, however, chosen to champion the 'aesthetic interpretation' and this is therefore the one that I follow here.

<sup>79</sup> Ringler *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>80</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 138. For a discussion about alternative readings of this poem and its national symbolism, see Nordal (1994).

<sup>81</sup> See Jónas Hallgrímsson. *Ævisaga* [Jónas Hallgrímsson. A Biography] by Páll Valsson (1999), p. 32.

<sup>82</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 242

<sup>83</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> See "Nature in Medieval Icelandic and Nordic Literature".



which location in the landscape, Jónas maintained, was a clear indication of the ancient settlers' appreciation of natural beauty. Jónas describes the location of the mound in the following way:

It is placed just by a small pond, on a verdant slope, very beautiful, that faces southwest [...] In earlier days there has been much shrubbery here and even though this has now disappeared, there is an exceptional tranquility and romantic summer bliss that undeniably characterizes this site, which shows that the ancients were able to clearly and correctly appreciate natural beauty such as this, as there cannot be any doubt that the burying place was chosen after careful deliberation and probably by the ancient mound-dweller whilst she was still among the living, as often was the case.<sup>86</sup>

Another indication of Jónas' views on this matter are the opening words of his essay "On the Nature and Origin of the Earth", published in 1835:

Ancient poets and sages have called the earth the mother of all things. They could hardly have chosen a more attractive name or one that was more appropriate. From her lap springs everything that possesses life and motion, everything that flourishes, fades, and has its fated day, and she tirelessly provides material for the countless varied bodies that are created—and then abandoned—by the life force in its unending, hidden progress through nature.<sup>87</sup>

In these words, and others cited above, I believe that we see evidence of a *continuum* of thought and sentiment – rather than an abrupt break or 'conceptual revolution' – from the views of the early settlers of Iceland to those of Jónas Hallgrímsson. Alternatively, Jónas' interest in the old poems and stories may have served to 'rekindle' a much less hostile view toward nature which had lain dormant for some centuries, or perhaps survived as a (small) minority view. This is all, of course, pure speculation – but it is at least quite clear that Jónas, the great *connoisseur* and champion of natural beauty in Iceland, did not see himself as standing alone in Icelandic history.

This 're-visioning' of Jónas' place, which I have briefly sketched above, in the development of perceptions of nature is not just a question of historical accuracy, but has considerable implications for what I would call the 'dominant meta-view of nature' amongst Icelandic scholars and other commentators. In short, this meta-view argues or assumes that Icelanders were, by and large, incapable of truly appreciating natural beauty until the dawn of the romantic era, when new ways of seeing nature were pressed upon them by *avant-garde* thinkers and artists such as Jónas Hallgrímsson and/or by radical upheavals in the *Zeitgeist* of the period. This is not merely a scholarly position, however – some of its more rhetorical proponents have e.g. used it as a basis for an argument of strong aesthetic relativism with regard to nature, i.e. that we have no clear way of evaluating what is 'beautiful' in nature; or even for a quasi-historical argument that nature conservation does not matter much to the average Icelander because of his utilitarian cultural heritage and, therefore, that it is useless or unnecessary for policy-makers to pursue conservation. While I sincerely doubt that many scholars who hold this meta-view of nature would agree with rhetorical arguments such as the latter, such rhetoric does still have its starting point in scholarly deliberation and presentation. Scholarly arguments should, of course, stand – or fall – on their

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<sup>86</sup> Valsson *op. cit.*, p. 239. English translation by the present author.

<sup>87</sup> Ringler *op. cit.*, p. 106.

own merits, but ‘received opinion’ can be notoriously difficult to change once it has passed from scholarly circles into public domain.

## 2. *Interlude: Meaning and Value of Nature*

For a long time, I have felt that our assessment of the values of life is deeply inadequate, that we are frequently wrong regarding what really matters and that we tend to view everything that we encounter in the world solely from our own private and very narrow vantage point. Further, we have a tendency towards a certain self-centredness which entails the thought that we are higher and beyond all other living creatures; that we humans are such unique and remarkable beings that our interests should have absolute priority over against the interests of other creatures; that we have the right to manipulate other creatures as we please, guided solely by our own interests. According to this train of thought, the interests and the rights of other living creatures must always give way to our interests and our right to enjoy the values of life.

In my mind, it is quite clear that this standpoint violates the principles of true morality, and one of the most important tasks of ethics consists precisely in showing why it is wrong to put such weight on the specific character of us humans that, in the end, we cease to take the interests and the rights of other creatures into account.<sup>88</sup>

Environmental ethics is a relatively young field of philosophy, its beginnings are generally traced back to the mid-1970s and this discipline is therefore only about thirty years old. Environmental ethics in Iceland is even younger, it dates back to an article written by philosopher Páll Skúlason in 1990, from which the quote above – the opening statement of the article – was taken. Páll’s statement, in my opinion, is an excellent example of the arguments, observations and sentiments that have led philosophers in a great many countries to the critical study of man’s interactions with and relationship to nature. In short, much – even most – of the efforts that have been carried out within the framework of environmental ethics during the last three decades stem from a basic observation, or moral intuition, that there is something seriously *wrong* with the way we humans tend to conduct ourselves with regard to the rest of nature, i.e. the non-human world.

We can readily see the physical effects of our ‘wrongful’ actions, whether conscious or not, in the various environmental problems that increasingly plague us and/or the natural world that surrounds us. For an ethicist, however, the moral framework underpinning such actions – how we conceive of our relationship to non-human nature in ethical terms, on what we base our deliberations and discussions concerning questions of right or wrong, good or bad, *etcetera* in our dealings with nature – can be no less disturbing than the physical problems that are caused by the decisions and actions that are taken in the end. Environmental problems are thus also inherently *moral* prob-

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<sup>88</sup> Páll Skúlason (1990): “Siðfræði náttúrunnar. Um gæði lífsins, afstöðu manna til náttúrunnar og skyldur okkar gagnvart dýrunum” [The Ethics of Nature. Nature, values and our duties towards animals], p. 13. An unpublished English translation of this text, used in this chapter, was kindly provided to me by the author. The page numbers supplied for citations to this article here and below refer to the original Icelandic text. Páll discusses the theory of value presented here, as well as his views on environmental ethics, in various essays collected in his book *Saga and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1999).

lems, as well as natural ones, and therefore equally worthy of consideration as such.<sup>89</sup> Environmental ethicists, and philosophers more generally, have approached such issues from a great variety of different theoretical and practical viewpoints. Any thorough discussion of these approaches would be way beyond the scope of this Introduction but some mention of different schools and viewpoints will be made later on, in connection with the section concerning the creation and use of what I call ‘environmentalist typologies’.<sup>90</sup>

Turning back to the Icelandic context, Páll Skúlason’s article, cited at the beginning of this chapter, was not only an important starting point for environmental ethics in Iceland a such – it also provided the initial framework for the research into the environmental values and attitudes of the Icelandic public that the Ethical Research Institute would later conduct.<sup>91</sup> As this has considerable bearing on the empirical studies that form part of this thesis, I will attempt to briefly outline this initial framework. The main part of Páll’s article is devoted to the presentation of a theory concerning the interplay of basic value categories and views of nature. He thus identifies three such basic categories of values which he then links to three kinds of “fundamental views that human beings have of nature”:

- 1 Nature is what we perceive as outer reality. This is a *subjective view* that entails the conception of nature as the origin of mental values and regards the human being as passive or receptive.
- 2 Nature is what we seek to struggle with and seek to exploit. This is a *practical view* that conceives of nature as the origin of worldly values and considers the human being in its creative or active aspect.
- 3 Nature is what we need to reconcile ourselves with and return to. This is a *moral view* that sees nature as the origin of moral values and conceives of the human being as simultaneously receptive and creative, i.e. equal weight is given to the two aspects of the human being.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> These problems, of course, also have e.g. social, political, psychological, economic and cultural aspects – the emphasis on morality here is only because I am considering the human roots of such problems from the perspective of environmental ethics, rather than environmental sociology, environmental politics or any other relevant discipline.

<sup>90</sup> See e.g. Hay (2002) and Palmer (2003) for recent overviews over the field of environmental ethics. An useful introduction by Brennan and Lo (2002) can furthermore be accessed on the Web, see: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-environmental/>. I discuss environmental ethics in more general terms in my article “Náttúran sem siðfræðilegt viðfangsefni” [Nature as subject matter for ethics] (Árnason 2002), available at: <http://www.umvefur.is/land/2002natturan.pdf>.

<sup>91</sup> As previously mentioned, these studies were carried out in the years 1997 and 2003, respectively, in connection with the projects *Nature, National Identity, and Environmental Policy in the Nordic Countries* (1996-1998) and *The Foundations of Sustainable Development in Iceland* (2001-2004). Páll Skúlason was the initial Icelandic project leader of the older study.

<sup>92</sup> Skúlason 1990, p. 14.

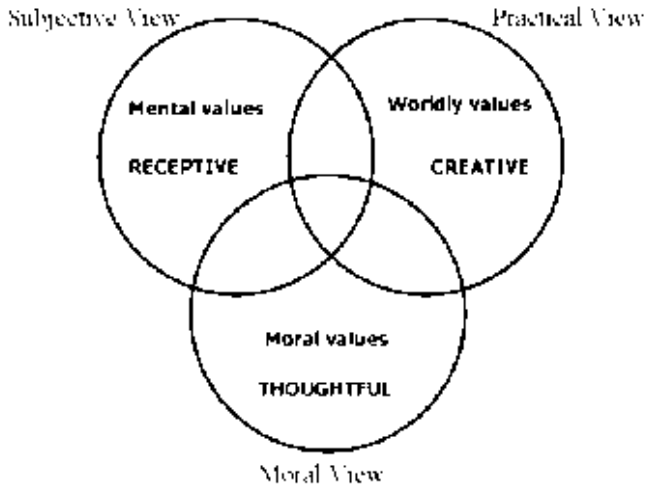


Figure 1: Fundamental views of nature and their associated values. Based on an illustration in Iceland included in Skúlason 1991, p. 16.

All three types of value are important for human existence and they also overlap one or another to some extent, as is shown in Figure 1, but the views that pertain to them are still fundamentally different. Thus, according to the practical view:

[...] nature poses a perpetual task for us in our striving for establishing ourselves on the earth. This struggle constantly calls for a great variety of practical operations, calculations and projects. In this respect, we wage a persistent war against nature and its forces which we try to exploit or defend ourselves against. We situate ourselves in opposition to nature, we make use of her in order to obtain the things we value, in view of establishing ourselves on the earth, travelling around the world, etc. [...] According to the practical view of nature, culture is akin to our victory over nature and its forces. [...]

This view of nature is very old and it can even be found in the Bible. According to the commandment of the creator, we should conquer nature, the earth and the animals; in other words, we should not let it suffice to understand nature or revere her, but go further and subject her to our will and to our powers. The human being is, or should be, the master of the earth.<sup>93</sup>

The “practical view” of nature is thus a strongly *anthropocentric* one, to use a different and now more common terminology; Páll’s characterization of this view, in particular in the latter paragraph, is very akin to that of critical environmental ethicists and ecotheologians. Although highly critical of this view, the problem according to Páll, is not so much located in the occurrence of practical view *per se* nor with the material or “worldly” values that underlie it, but with the situa-

<sup>93</sup> Op. cit., p. 15.

tion that arises when such views and values assume a *dominant* position, either in one's personal ethical deliberations or in culture at large:

The view of nature and of animals in particular thus described is and has been predominant among humankind, not least after the advent of the industrial revolution and all the new possibilities for exploiting nature opened by technology. But it has to be said that this view, when taken in isolation from other perspectives, has given rise to a great deal of immoral actions dominated by a short-sighted utilitarian way of thinking.<sup>94</sup>

The main danger thus lies in the domination of either the practical or the mental view of nature over the others – most importantly the moral view – which acts as a ‘counterbalance’ to the excesses of the other two, in addition to cherishing and protecting the moral values which are at stake in human--human and human--nature interactions. In Páll's own words:

[...] it is often the case that we become dogmatically adherent to a variant of either the mental or the practical view of nature and thus we fall short of adopting a genuinely moral view of nature. As it happens, in most cases a defective sense of value goes hand in hand with the lack of a moral view of life.<sup>95</sup>

In order to avoid this situation, we as human beings need to become more aware of the moral values that pertain to our relationship and interaction with nature and, subsequently, take steps to foster such values in ourselves and others. Once we do so, we will succeed in attaining the full potential offered by the moral view of nature:

When we adopt this view of nature we discover or perceive ourselves as a part of nature as well as *that* particular part of nature which enables her to become conscious of herself, as it were. Simultaneously, our responsibility for nature and life dawns upon us. Our special status does not consist in our being of a different kind than everything else in the realm of nature, nor does it lie in our capability to conquer nature and bring her forces under our control; rather, our singularity consists in the fact that we can observe nature, and decide how to act, based on any perspective that we please. We can decide to take into account what is for the good of other living creatures than ourselves and we can do an infinite number of things in order to promote life in nature, completely regardless of ourselves and our private interests.<sup>96</sup>

[...]

To put it briefly, such an attitude would entail taking into account, in a serious way, the fact that we ourselves are a part of nature, that every living thing harbours the same vital force, that revering and respecting life is the condition *sine qua non* of learning to appreciate and enjoy the values of life, of learning to live with humans and animals alike.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>96</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>97</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

In sum, there are two central points in Páll Skúlason's theory of value; first, that there are a number of fundamental viewpoints and value categories that are in constant interaction with one another and second, that we above all need to emphasize and foster the moral view and its related values, because this view is crucial to how we balance and evaluate the various types of values that are available to us, in nature and elsewhere. Páll's description of the moral view of nature may, furthermore, strike readers as being decidedly 'naturocentric'.<sup>98</sup> I don't think Páll would himself argue strongly against this interpretation, even if I expect that he would emphasize the need for a balanced view, but what matters most is that each of us – regardless of our basic value orientations – use our faculty for moral deliberation to criticize and weigh our own value judgments, as well as those of others:

Each and every human being must [...] try and develop their own sense of judgment, refine their comprehension of what really matters, and learn to evaluate things in different circumstances. [...] Whether we manage to keep ourselves alive on this earth in community with other living creatures depends above all else on our overcoming our foolish tendency to consider life and nature solely from our own perspective.<sup>99</sup>

Although Páll's conceptualization of three different fundamental views of nature differs somewhat from the typologies most commonly encountered in Anglo-Saxon environmental ethics theory, e.g. the tripartite division between anthropocentric, ecocentric and biocentric value orientations, the underlying thoughts and conclusions are still, by and large, the same – i.e. that there are logical and/or systematic correspondences to be found between views of nature, values or value categories, and people's actions in everyday life. Should we wish to investigate the possible existence of such associations with empirical, quantitative means, we need, however, to turn from philosophy and the humanities to the social sciences.

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<sup>98</sup> I much prefer the word "naturocentric" to the more commonly encountered term "non-anthropocentric" as an umbrella term for both ecocentric and biocentric views or value orientations. Indeed, using a concept with an inherent *negation* seems to me to defeat the purpose of attempting to propose viable alternatives to the anthropocentric perspective and is in fact a certain testimony to its dominance – i.e. that such alternatives should be defined in light of *what they are not*, rather than as what they are.

<sup>99</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

### 3. *Environmental Concern*

#### 3.1 *Environmental Concern: The Value(s) of Research*

The fact of widespread support for environmental protection suggests that motives other than the short-term and individualistic impel many people to act. This paper suggests that one such motive is provided by a judgment that pollution is, to put it bluntly, morally wrong. [...] We propose that support for environmental protection depends in part on a moral judgment, that supporters of demands for environmental protection see environmental problems not only as unfortunate situations but as morally intolerable.<sup>100</sup>

Sociology has been deeply influenced by the Western cultural traditions in which it developed, a culture that is strongly anthropocentric in viewing humans as separate from and above the rest of nature.<sup>101</sup>

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to illustrate the meanings and values attached – or attributed – to nature in Iceland from a number of different theoretical perspectives. The central question that remains to be discussed is what *relevance* – if any – do such considerations, e.g. about views of nature or environmental values, have for contemporary public opinion on environmental issues? And what are their implications for environmental policy? These are crucial questions because environmental policy – to be effective and just – must be informed about all the relevant facts, whether natural or social, concerning the causes and effects of environmental problems. Furthermore, how the public regards nature and environmental problems is – or should at least be – of prime importance to environmental policy-makers in any democratic society. Besides this, citizens themselves also have an important part to play as individuals, who with their life-style choices and consumption habits can have a direct impact on the quality of the environment. Such impacts, even if miniscule on a global level, still need to be taken into account because no one can change these habits except the citizen in question. Government's can (and should), of course, attempt to facilitate life-style changes by making the structural improvements or changes (e.g. what sorts of materials are accepted for recycling, how the tax system is organized, how much importance is placed on environmental education, *etcetera*) that are needed to make green behavior easier than before – but in the end, it is first and foremost up to the individual citizen to choose – on an informed and voluntarily basis – to make the necessary changes.

The quest for a sustainable society thus clearly involves considerable *re*-thinking of human relationships to nature and the environment. But scholars – even if they could themselves agree about what needs to be done – can not, of course, think for the public; all we can do is to engage people in discussions about what may be wrong in our relations to nature, why it is wrong, and how we might possibly go about remedying the situation. To do so effectively, we preferably need some way of gauging people's actual ideas, opinions and actions about or toward nature in their everyday life, both so we can probe theories about how these might be related to one another and so that we can learn enough about the current environmental *Zeitgeist* to be able to engage people on

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<sup>100</sup> Paul C. Stern, Thomas Dietz and J. Stanley Black (1986): "Support for Environmental Protection: The Role of Moral Norms", pp. 205-206.

<sup>101</sup> Riley E. Dunlap (2002): "Paradigms, Theories and Environmental Sociology", p. 331.

their own terms.<sup>102</sup> By doing so, we may e.g. be able to identify socio-cultural ‘bottlenecks’ which hinder the establishment or spread of e.g. behaviors that are more environmentally benign than many present ones. A bottleneck such as this may then be pointed out to citizens and/or to policy-makers as the root of a problem that needs to be solved.

Research into environmental values, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors is also important in its own right, i.e. as a field of scientific and scholarly inquiry. Views of nature and environmental concern are intriguing subjects for research and knowledge and insights gained from their study can be of great value to similar efforts in other fields which need not have anything to do with the environment. As previously noted, the last three decades or so have witnessed increasing interest in these subjects amongst scholars from the humanities (e.g. history and philosophy). A parallel development has taken place within the social sciences with the result that each branch (e.g. sociology, political studies and psychology) now has one or more sub-discipline(s) devoted to the study of environmental issues. Over the years there has been some, even considerable, transfer of knowledge and ideas between the various disciplines in question, but it still seems apparent that various disciplinary boundaries are still in place, if only because of different research traditions, field-specific concepts and terminology, and – perhaps most of all – the different methods used in different different disciplines. It is thus e.g. not very common to find philosophers citing the results of empirical surveys in their theories and arguments (much less actually conducting such surveys themselves)<sup>103</sup>, nor is one likely to find many examples of social science research based specifically on the work of environmental philosophers. This situation is changing, however – especially with regard to the ‘cross-over’ of theory from environmental ethics to the social sciences. Such ‘blending’ of disciplines, in my opinion, creates new and important opportunities for research, as I will discuss in more detail below. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to define and discuss in more detail the meaning and/or character of environmental concern.

### 3.2 Environmental Concern: Attempting a Definition

What do we mean by “environmental justice” or “environmental ethics?” Answers to this question inevitably involve notions of value—what is, or what ought to be assigned value by individuals and collectivities. Concepts of justice, equity or fairness make sense only in relation to actions that affect specific objects—who or what is important enough to deserve justice or fair treatment. What objects fit within the span of ethical consideration? Which impacts of human action require attention and which can be ignored because they have no effect on things of value?<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> There are various approaches to such ‘pro-active’ engagement (none of which may, of course, be appealing to academics who prefer to restrict their discussions to other academics) and it is clear that they can give rise to all sorts of problems or dilemmas, such as the problem of potential “pandering” described by P. Wesley Schultz and Lynnette Zelezny in their article “Reframing Environmental Messages to be Congruent with American Values” (2003).

<sup>103</sup> There are some exceptions to this general rule, perhaps most intriguingly Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, often called the “father” of Deep Ecology, who has carried out surveys both with regard to environmental attitudes and also attitudes to democracy.

<sup>104</sup> Paul C. Stern and Thomas Dietz (1995): “The Value Basis of Environmental Concern”, pp. 65-66. This quote is a very good example of how environmental philosophy and environmental sociology have begun to ‘speak to one another’ in recent years.



In a recent and very extensive review of research on environmental concern, Dunlap and Jones (2002, pp. 484-485) describe this as “[...] a broad concept that refers to a wide range of phenomena – from awareness of environmental problems to support for environmental protection – that reflect attitudes, related cognitions, and behavioral intentions toward the environment”. Research on environmental concern began in the late 1960s in the United States of America and Dunlap and Jones (*op. cit.*, p. 482) describe the initial focus and impetus of such research as follows: “Besides trying to document the degree to which the public (and segments thereof) saw environmental problems as serious and supported efforts to solve them, these early studies examined variation in concern for environmental quality among differing sectors of the public as well as trends in environmental concern over time”. As such studies grew in number, however, “[...] the divergent disciplinary backgrounds and resulting diversity of approaches of the investigators compounded the problem that most of the studies were ad hoc and atheoretical, seldom building upon another or attitude theory.” (*ibid.*) As a result, the situation is now such that “[...] the combination of diverse conceptualizations and varying measurement approaches has yielded an incredibly diverse set of measures or operational definitions of environmental concern” (*op. cit.*, p. 483).

As part of their attempt “to clarify and specify the meaning of environmental concern”, Dunlap and Jones (*op. cit.*) put forth a definition of this concept - which they note that most researchers fail to provide - which runs as follows:

[...] environmental concern refers to the degree to which people are aware of problems regarding the environment and support efforts to solve them and/or indicate a willingness to contribute personally to their solution.<sup>105</sup>

This is a rather broad definition which can easily encompass measures of behavior, knowledge, beliefs, and values, as well as of attitudes. Bamberg (2003, p. 21) e.g. notes: “People use this term to refer to the whole range of environmentally related perceptions, emotions, knowledge, attitudes, values and behaviors.” Environmental concern is, however, most commonly measured on the level of attitudes and it is thus quite common for scholars to use the term in a more narrow sense, i.e. to refer only to (pro)environmental attitudes. This may lead to some conceptual confusion but other terms that scholars have put forth to encompass the broader field, such as “environmental awareness” or “environmental consciousness”, do not seem to have caught on.<sup>106</sup> So it appears that we will have to deal with such polysemy in the concept’s meaning for at least some years to come.<sup>107</sup>

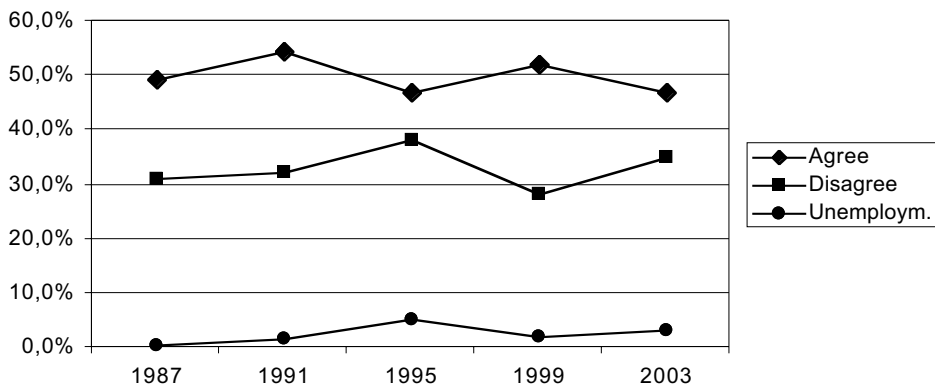
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<sup>105</sup> Riley E. Dunlap and Robert Emmet Jones (2002): “Environmental Concern: Conceptual and Measurement Issues”, p. 485

<sup>106</sup> For a more detailed account of environmental concern as such and a discussion about the general picture that has emerged over the years from this body of research with regard to the roots or main correlates of such concern, see the article “Environmental Concern in Iceland: Values, Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors” in this volume.

<sup>107</sup> Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed which attempt to account for the interconnections between the main elements of environmental concern, with those developed by Paul C. Stern and Thomas Dietz probably being the most influential (see e.g. Stern *et al.* 1995; Dietz *et al.* 1998; Stern *et al.* 1999; Stern 2000).

If we take efforts to measure environmental concern in Iceland as examples, then these can e.g. be used to gauge the level of such concern in Iceland (or any other country) relative to that of other countries where the same measure(s) and research procedures have been used, as in e.g. the various waves of the European Values Study (EVS) (Inglehart 1995; Halman 2001; Inglehart *et al.* 2004); to document and follow developments in environmental concern over time, e.g. to see if the level of concern is increasing or decreasing (Hardarson, personal communication – see Figure 2.); to investigate the possible associations that might be found between environmental concern and socio-demographic (i.e. ‘background’) variables, such as gender, age or political party preference (Knutsen 1996); or to use as the basis for creating novel, more complex measures such as ‘environmentalist typologies’ of one kind or another (Ester *et al.* 1994). Indeed, three of the research papers cited above use the same set of data, i.e. the results of the general environmental concern measures that were included in the second wave of the EVS in 1990, but in different ways and for different purposes.<sup>108</sup> Such multiplicity in the aims and strategies of data analysis add yet another layer of diversity to research into environmental concern.



**Figure 2.** Changes in environmental attitudes in Iceland, 1987-2003 Data on environmental attitudes from Ólafur Þ. Harðarson (personal communication); data on unemployment rate from Statistics Iceland.

Based on the results of such analyses we can draw some tentative conclusions about the level or character of environmental concern in Iceland, i.e., firstly, that it has tended to be quite high, roughly on par with the level found in the other Nordic countries, and, secondly, that it has been

<sup>108</sup> The 1990 EVS data from Iceland has been analyzed in Ester *et al.* 1994, Inglehart 1995, and Knutsen 1996. It includes six general measures of environmental concern; only Knutsen uses all of these in his analysis, while Inglehart and Ester *et al.* use a set of four variables each; these sets, furthermore, differ from one another. It is therefore not possible (or at least very difficult) to make meaningful comparisons between these three studies, even if they are all based on the same data. In one of these studies (Ester *et al.*) there appears to have been some miscalculation of the Icelandic data, which makes the otherwise interesting analytic procedure of no use with regard to the Icelandic results. Inglehart unfortunately does not include the Icelandic data in his more detailed analysis in this paper of e.g. associations between environmental concern and materialist/post-materialist values. To avoid confusion, it should furthermore be noted that the Icelandic “Green” party that Knutsen refers to in his analysis is actually the now-disbanded Women’s List; the Left-Green Movement, Iceland’s first environmental political party, wasn’t established until 1999.

quite stable during the period that the measurements cover. However, the most recent research efforts undertaken, seem to indicate a considerable decrease in the level of concern, both in relative (Inglehart *et al.* 2005,) and absolute terms (Árnason 2004; Harðarson personal communication).<sup>109</sup> The older studies and results discussed above are all, furthermore, based on the analysis of attitudinal measures; they do not present any analysis of either environmental values or behaviors, simply because they do not have any data on these elements to work with.

This observation brings us to the question whether we can gain a sufficient understanding of environmental concern by using *only* measures of environmental attitudes, such as the ones employed in the EVS surveys? The answer depends, in part, on what the aim of the study is; if it is e.g. part of a time series which is intended to serve as a ‘barometer’ of possible changes in public opinion over time, then an attitudinal measure is very well (and probably best) suited to such a task. Likewise, differences between social groups, age cohorts, male and female respondents *et-cetera*, or associations between one set of beliefs/opinions/intentions to another (e.g. possible relationships between democratic opinions and environmental opinions), can be probed at least as well on the attitudinal level as on the level of either values or behaviors. But at least two objections can still be made at the practice of measuring environmental concern with such general attitudinal measures as were employed in the 1990 EVS study. The first objection, which is based on the problem of *truncation*, would be that we need to include measures of environmental values or knowledge (preferably both) and also of ‘green’ behavior, in addition to the measures of environmental attitudes, in order to be able to see the full, holistic picture. If we do not do so, then we risk not catching sight of important relationships between these various elements.<sup>110</sup> As an example, in our 2003 survey we attempted to use measures of all the main elements of environmental concern in the broader sense, and e.g. in several cases found associations between environmental values orientations and other elements, including pro-developmental attitudes.<sup>111</sup>

The second, and perhaps more contentious objection, is based on the problem of *simplification*, i.e. that general measures of environmental attitudes, while certainly of great importance concerning conceptual and methodological developments in the environmental social sciences, are – by their very nature – too limited to grasp the complex and diverse faces of environmental concern in a truly satisfactory manner. The main problem is that the use of such measures implicitly involves a *monistic* conception of environmental concern, i.e. that environmental concern means the same thing and/or stems from the same root amongst all citizens of a given nation or even amongst all the different peoples of the world, and also that it remains essentially timeless, i.e. immutable from one period of sampling to the next. So although the validity of these measures *per se* is not in question, nor the practice of using them, even exclusively, to gauge environmental concern, the risk here is that they cannot capture what is most important for the origin and devel-

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<sup>109</sup> This change is discussed in the article “Environmental Concern in Iceland: Values, Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors” (below). It is not (as yet) clear whether this is a short term fluctuation, e.g. due to an higher unemployment rate or some other such temporary factor, or a long-term trend towards an overall lower level of concern.

<sup>110</sup> A great number of studies include both measures of environmental attitudes and environmentally responsible or ‘green’ behavior, which e.g. allows them to probe possible associations between these two elements of a broader, more inclusive environmental concern. The objection on the basis of ‘truncation’ does thus not apply to them, or at least not nearly as strongly.

<sup>111</sup> See the two last articles in this volume, each of which covers roughly half of the main results of the 2003 survey. The survey was part of a project called “The Foundations of Sustainable Development in Iceland”, for the full survey results see Þórðarson *et al.* 2004.

opment of environmental concern. To be able to do this, or so the argument might run, we need more sophisticated instruments which would e.g. allow us to probe the potentially very diverse underlying factors – in particular values and beliefs – in which proenvironmental attitudes and behaviors are rooted. In other words, new instruments appear to be called for – instruments that can deal with the diversity and plurality of e.g. the ethical stances that underpin environmental concern.

Discussing recent developments in both the methodology and conceptualizations of empirical survey work on environmental concern, Schultz and Zelezny (2003, p. 129) note that “[...] recent research has moved beyond the broad question of whether or not people are concerned, and has begun to ask why they care.” In a slightly older article, Schultz and Zelezny (1999) described the basis of such developments in more detail:

Within the past five years, a new approach to the study of environmental issues has opened promising lines of research and has begun to ask fundamentally different questions. Rather than investigating general attitudes about environmental issues, recent research has attempted to identify underlying values that provide a basis for environmental attitudes. Thus, two people could be equally concerned about environmental issues, but for fundamentally different reasons.<sup>112</sup>

The last sentence in this quote states the crucial consideration in the argument against a ‘monistic’ conception of environmental concern: in any given society or social group even, we are almost certain to find evidence of a number of *different* value orientations, belief systems or views of nature, each of which might potentially assert an effect on environmental concern as measured by general attitude variables. It is conceivable that these effects might in all cases be ‘positive’, i.e. all contribute to a higher level of environmental concern, but the various roots of environmental concern would still be fundamentally different from one another, as pointed out by Schultz and Zelezny above. It is perhaps more likely that some value orientations would assert a ‘negative’ effect while others had a ‘positive’ effect, but in both this case and the former one, the use of general measures would *not* be able to capture the various ‘driving forces’ of environmental concern and their interplay, and would, indeed, even tend to *mask* or overlook the fact that a many-sided and complex causality might lie behind the observed changes in – or, as the case might be, the apparent stability of – environmental concern.

Such considerations have in the last decade or so led many researchers to attempt to probe the value basis of environmental concern. These are many ways of approaching this field of inquiry, as is clearly evidenced by the various methods that have been reported in the scholarly literature during this time. Schultz and Zelezny (2003, p. 129) e.g. identify six different empirical approaches to the study of values in an environmental context. In the last part of this chapter, I will discuss some of these approaches, including what Schultz and Zelezny (*ibid.*) call “studies of [...] ecocentric and anthropocentric environmental values”, which I, however, would prefer to call the use of environmentalist typologies.

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<sup>112</sup> P. Wesley Schultz & Lynette Zelezny (1999): “Values as predictors of environmental attitudes: Evidence for consistency across 14 countries”, p. 255.

### 3.3 Environmental Concern. The New Biophilia?

In Western countries in general and in highly urbanized ones such as The Netherlands in particular, remarkable levels of nature-friendliness are currently found to exist within the general public. In surveys in Norway and Sweden, an average of 80% of the respondents acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature, that is, nature's right to exist irrespective of its uses and functions for humankind (Grendstad and Wollebaek, 1998). In surveys in The Netherlands, this percentage is usually 90% or higher (Van den Born et al., 2001). This 'new biophilia', as it is sometimes called, may be hypothesized as a new cultural phase of the Western societies, that is now succeeding the previous phases of nature's conquest and domestication (De Groot, 1999).<sup>113</sup>

The connections between views of nature and environmental concern have been the subject of two recent papers by Wouter de Groot and Riyan van den Born (van den Born *et al.* 2001; de Groot & van den Born 2003). Although their hypothesis concerning the dawn of a new era of "biophilia" may be a bit more optimistic than the studies cited actually warrant, there does seem to be a growing consensus amongst scholars that naturocentric or "non-anthropocentric" values, beliefs and/or attitudes are gaining ground in Western societies – or at the very least that such values, beliefs or attitudes are currently widespread enough to suggest or even necessitate careful study. Dunlap *et al.* (2000) note for example that the emergence of global environmental problems and the growing acknowledgement of the need to achieve more sustainable forms of development:

[...] give credence to suggestions that we are in the midst of a fundamental reevaluation of the underlying worldview that has guided our relationship to the physical environment (e.g., Milbraith, 1984). In particular, suggestions that a more ecologically sound worldview is emerging have gained credibility in the past decade (e.g., Olsen, Lodwick, & Dunlap, 1992).

In this context, it is not surprising to see that traditional measures of "environmental concern" are being supplanted by instruments seeking to measure "ecological consciousness" (Ellis & Thompson, 1997), "anthropocentrism" (Chandler & Dreger, 1993), and "anthropocentrism versus ecocentrism" (Thompson & Barton, 1994).<sup>114</sup>

There are at least two basic approaches to the study of naturocentric values, which in turn can be repeatedly subdivided, the first is based on the use of inventories of general value orientations, and the second based on the use of batteries or typologies of more specific environmental values. Both of these will be dealt with below. There are, to be sure, several other approaches to the study of interrelationships between values and environmental concern, e.g. Ronald Inglehart's work concerning "materialist" versus "post-materialist" values (see e.g. Inglehart 1995). The most important precursor to contemporary approaches on environmental value research within environmental sociology, however, is the "New Ecological Paradigm" (NEP) Scale created by

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<sup>113</sup> Wouter T. de Groot and Riyan J. G. van den Born (2003): "Visions of nature and landscape type preferences: an exploration in The Netherlands", p. 127.

<sup>114</sup> Dunlap, R. E., Van Liere, K. D., Mertig, A. G. & Jones, R. E. (2000): "Measuring Endorsement of the New Ecological Paradigm: A Revised NEP Scale", p. 426.

Riley E. Dunlap and Kent D. Van Liere in the late 1970s (see e.g. Dunlap & Van Liere 1978; Dunlap *et al.* 2000; Dunlap 2002).<sup>115</sup>

In short, the NEP Scale measures endorsement of a new conceptual framework (from which it takes its name), a coherent set of beliefs based on ecological premises or considerations, which is seen as having been gaining momentum in recent decades, gradually replacing – or at least challenging – an older, more anthropocentric, utilitarian, and resource-orientated “Dominant Social Paradigm” (DSP). In the words of Dunlap *et al.* (2000, p. 428) “a pro-ecological orientation or “seeing the world ecologically”, reflected by a high score on the NEP Scale, should lead to pro-environmental beliefs and attitudes on a wide range of issues.” As noted by Dunlap *et al.* (*op. cit.*, p. 426), the NEP scale was the earliest “measure of endorsement of an ecological worldview” created within environmental sociology. It has since been widely used – indeed, according to Stern *et. al* (1995, p. 723), the NEP Scale is “the most frequently used measure of environmental concern”. Stern *et. al* (*op. cit.*) categorize the NEP Scale as a measure which taps into what they alternatively call “general beliefs” or a “broad worldview” (p. 726-727), and which they subsequently situate in between values and specific beliefs or attitudes, in terms of likely causal connections (*ibid.*) In a similar fashion, Dunlap *et al.* (*op. cit.*, p. 427) argue that the NEP items “primarily tap “primitive beliefs” about the nature of the earth and humanity’s relationship with it.” They furthermore note that “the fact that the NEP scale is treated as a measure of endorsement of a fundamental paradigm or worldview, as well as of environmental attitudes, beliefs, and even values, reflects the ambiguity inherent in measuring these phenomena [...]” (*ibid.*). The same could be said of most, if not all, the measures that will be discussed below.

Paul Stern, Thomas Dietz and their various coworkers have been the forerunners of a somewhat different approach to the relationship between values and environmental concern. In short, their methods are based on the use of an inventory of values (usually shortened and/or somewhat modified) created by Shalom S. Schwartz (see e.g. Schwartz 1992; Schwartz & Sagiv 1995) to identify a number of separate general value dimensions or orientations, whose possible associations with e.g. environmental attitudes or behaviors can then be investigated and analyzed. As Dietz *et al.* (1998, p. 453) note: “This body of literature generally supports the conclusion that broad values and attitudes are predictive of specific ones.” In other words, such *general* values orientations have e.g. been found to be associated with environmental attitudes, an indication that such values form an important basis for, or are an important part of, environmental concern (depending whether one defines the latter term in the narrow or broad fashion, as previously discussed). Interestingly, the three main value orientations identified by Stern and Dietz – which they call social-altruistic, biospheric, and egoistic, respectively – “strikingly parallel” the three environmental ethics identified by Carolyn Merchant (Stern & Dietz 1995, p. 66; see also Merchant 1992). This approach has subsequently been utilized by a number of other scholars, including P. Wesley Schultz, who has since developed his own variant of this method (see e.g. Schultz 2001; Schultz *et al.* 2004; and previously cited references).

The second new approach to studying relationships between values and environmental concern is to create direct measures of environmental values, which are then e.g. probed for associations with more specific attitudes and behaviors. This approach basically takes two main forms, what I here call use of ‘environmental value batteries’ and ‘environmentalist typologies’, both of which,

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<sup>115</sup> Dunlap and Van Liere originally called this the “New Environmental Paradigm” (see e.g. Dunlap & Van Liere 1978).

however, are characterized by a great deal of variation in conceptual and methodological approaches. I have so been able to find roughly 30 examples of studies using some variant of these approaches and the majority of these utilize instruments that are: (1) created specifically for the study in question (and therefore e.g. do not draw on the experiences of older studies), and (2) used only once or at most a few times by the researcher in question. There are, therefore, a great number of both methodological and conceptual issues that need to be taken into account with regard to the typological approaches, issues which can only briefly be touched upon here.<sup>116</sup>

One does not have to be deeply immersed in environmental ethics theory to know the meaning of anthropocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentrism - nor indeed, to be aware of the academic divisions that these concepts also signify. But what about the general public – are people in general likely to be aware of these different ethical perspectives on man’s relation to nature and/or to non-human organisms? How – if at all – do these theoretical positions relate to ethical insights, general value orientations, or ‘folk beliefs’ held by environmentally conscious individuals, and/or that are prevalent in society in general? Can academic theories ‘trickle down’ to the public? Or do theories in environmental ethics perhaps rather spring from basic moral intuitions, which we would then in turn expect to find evidence of amongst ordinary citizens as well as among learned scholars? To take a different approach, one can also ask: Do environmental values differ within a given society? Do such differences manifest themselves as coherent clusters of values and/or attitudes? Are environmental values changing in a progressive fashion – is environmentalism undergoing a transition from one perspective to another? Or are environmentalists rather becoming more diversified in their perspectives as the environmental movement increases in size and/or becomes more stabilized in society?

The above are some of the theoretical considerations that underpin research concerning environmental values. Other, more applied or practical, considerations include the following:

- (1) How many types of values or environmentalists are specified?
- (2) Which values/types are included in the analysis?
- (3) On what grounds are different values/types selected or identified?
- (4) How are these different values/types related to one another?
- (5) On what level (value, belief, or attitude) are the measures placed?
- (6) How many value dimensions are involved?
- (7) Are the typological groupings open or forced?

The items listed above can also serve as tools to create a ‘meta-typology’ of sorts – i.e. a classification scheme for existing typologies. As an example, we can compare the approaches used in two well-known typological studies, i.e. Thompson and Barton (1994) and Grenstad and Wollebaek (1998).

Thompson and Barton specify two categories of specific environmental attitudes or values which they call “ecocentric” and “anthropocentric”, respectively. They furthermore create a third novel measure which they call “apathy” about environmental issues, this instrument is based on attitudes, rather than values (the dividing line is less clear with regard to the two main categories). The theoretical conception for these categories was apparently drawn from a number of dif-

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<sup>116</sup> I presented an early critique and overview of environmentalist typologies in a paper written in the fall of 1997, see “*Natursyn*: Some prospects and problems of using Environmentalist Typologies in a Nordic context”.

ferent sources, rather than one single theorist or school of environmental philosophy. Each category was operationalized by creating a scale composed of nine to twelve different items. Associations were then probed between these scales and a number of other variables. The results of the first study reported were that “individuals who were more ecocentric expressed less apathy about environmental issues, were more likely to engage in conservation, belonged to more environmental organizations” whereas “more anthropocentric individuals expressed more general environmental apathy and were less likely to conserve.”<sup>117</sup> A series of multiple regressions was then carried out to examine the effects of ecocentric and anthropocentric attitudes simultaneously, the results of these showed that the two attitude/value stances made “independent contributions” (*ibid.*) to the other variables that were included in the analysis. In the second study, which included the Weigel and Weigel Scale (1978), a traditional measure of environmental attitudes, analysis revealed that ecocentric attitudes were significant predictors of behaviour even when the Weigel and Weigel Scale was controlled for. The authors therefore conclude that:

Ecocentrism appeared to tap a disposition toward environmental issues that was not captured in traditional measures of environmental attitudes with no ecocentric-anthropocentric distinction. What the constructs of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism add is the idea that the *motives* and *values* that underlie environmental attitudes are pertinent.<sup>118</sup>

Grenstad and Wollebaek (1998), drawing on a prior theoretical classification by Robyn Eckersley (1992), specify a total of seven possible variants or streams of environmental thought, which are called “resource conservation”, “human welfare ecology”, “preservationism”, “animal liberation”, “transpersonal ecology”, “autopoietic intrinsic value” and “ecofeminism”. The first three were all considered to be variants of *anthropocentrism*, whereas the last three were variants of *ecocentrism*. These seven variants or “conceptual subtypes” were operationalized by creating two question items for each of them to measure the level of endorsement for the particular sub-type in question. The results were then subjected to factor analysis which was e.g. intended to probe whether the differences between the variants were differences in degree or differences in kind, i.e. “whether the seven subtypes [could] be subsumed under one ideological spectrum, or whether ecocentrism and anthropocentrism are two independent dimensions.”<sup>119</sup> The results indicated that ecocentrism and anthropocentrism were both “moderately coherent in themselves and that they differ more in kind than in degree” (*op. cit.*, p. 665), i.e. belong to two, more or less, separate or independent value dimensions. The variant called “animal liberation” was, furthermore, seemingly “independent of an expanded type of ecocentrism and [...] opposed to mainstream anthropocentrism.”<sup>120</sup> The ecocentric variants, both separately and together, were then analyzed with regard to possible associations with several socio-demographic variables, as well as with other constructs such as “political radicalism” and “environment friendly behavior”. Associations were subsequently found with all the variables in question, including positive correlations with environmental behavior and also with an indice of egalitarianism.

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<sup>117</sup> Suzanne C. Gagnon Thompson and Michelle A. Barton (1994): “Ecocentric and anthropocentric attitudes toward the environment”, p. 151.

<sup>118</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>119</sup> Gunnar Grenstad & Dag Wollebaek (1998): “Greener Still? An Empirical Examination of Eckersley’s Ecocentric Approach”, pp. 661-662.

<sup>120</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 665.



Both of the studies described above are based on the use of what I would call ‘environmentalist typologies’, i.e. instruments that are specifically designed to identify two or more different variants of environmental value (or attitude) orientations, such as ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, with the aim of probing – and comparing – their possible effects or relations to e.g. more traditional measures or elements of environmental concern. To be a ‘proper’ environmental typology, at least as I would define it, the study must be able to *separate* the effects of the different types from one another, so that it is clear what effect each and everyone of them is having, relative to the other(s). As previously mentioned, such typologies can – and have – come in many different ‘sizes and shapes’, which is not surprising given that great variety of different stances that can be found both amongst environmental academics and activists (see e.g. Vincent 1993).<sup>121</sup>

The empirical work, carried out in a series of recent studies, by Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning, presents a good example of a related type of inquiry which we could call ‘environmental value batteries’. The study reported in Minteer and Manning 1999 e.g. used what the authors call “a pluralistic typology” comprised of seventeen different variants or “environmental ethics”, operationalized with one question item each. These variants were then clustered into five, composite conceptual categories which the authors term “anti-environment”, “benign indifference”, “utilitarian conservation”, “stewardship” and “radical environmentalism”.<sup>122</sup> The main results of this study were that most of the “ethics” received an high level of support, both in terms of personal agreement and the level of importance attached to these by respondents, including all of the variants belonging to the “radical environmentalism” cluster, and also all of those belonging to “utilitarian conservation”. From this the authors draw the conclusion that “it is clear that the study sample subscribed to a number of environmental ethical positions, as is evident from the high level of agreement and importance placed upon multiple environmental ethics.”<sup>123</sup> However, unlike the studies by Thompson and Barton, and Grenstad and Wollebaek, Minteer and Manning did not attempt to gauge the effects or relations of these items/clusters to one another, nor did they attempt to explore the dimensionality of these, as Grenstad and Wollebaek did, and their approach therefore does not qualify as an typology in the strict sense defined above.

All of these three studies, however, and indeed most of the studies that have explicitly set out to explore the existence and/or effects of ecocentric environmental value stances or orientations, show *at a minimum* that such values enjoy considerable support among the public. The first two studies cited furthermore show that such values are positively associated with proenvironmental attitudes and behaviors, and that they may even form a coherent dimension, separate from anthropocentrism, which one could posit to be the older, dominant value orientation. But anthropocentrism is also found to have considerable support and, in some cases, to be associated with other values, attitudes or behaviors. This latter result is not surprising, nor should it necessarily be taken to imply a continued dominance of human-centered values (*aka* Dominant Social Paradigm); there are several variants of anthropocentric thought, some considerably more benign towards the environment than others. More importantly, the roots of such values in the public mind are likely to be founded, at least in part, on basic humanistic intuitions such as respect for other human beings, justice for all, and even love of one’s neighbor – all very important values in their own right and none of which can ever be ‘sacrificed’ for other values, environmental or oth-

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<sup>121</sup> This variety is increased even further if Third World and “subaltern” variants of environmentalism are taken into account, see e.g. Guha and Martinez-Alier (1998) and Gottlieb (1993; 2001).

<sup>122</sup> Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning (1991): “Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics: Democracy, Pluralism, and the Management of Nature”, pp. 197-198.

<sup>123</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 199.

erwise. This result or consideration that *both* ecocentric and anthropocentric values matter, is thus only an added challenge to scholars and the public alike to think critically about the values that they want to protect and foster, both in human society and with regard to nature.

From the preceding pages it should be quite clear that values very much occupy the central stage in much of contemporary environmental scholarship, and, furthermore, that they do so largely regardless of disciplinary boundaries. A large and increasing interest in values is, in other words, perhaps the most important thing that all the different socio-cultural (or ‘humanistic’) disciplines have in common. Values are also the ‘red thread’ running through all of this thesis. To be sure, there are still considerable differences between the traditional methodologies of e.g. environmental ethics and environmental politics, as well as in terminology and general conceptual frameworks. The origin and development of these two fields, however, have many important parallels, and the same could in general be said of other ‘sister’ disciplines, whether from the humanities or social sciences. It furthermore seems to me that most, if not all, of these disciplines have in recent years been moving closer together, and that a more or less common vocabulary is gradually being developed. In my opinion, this is a very positive development, not only because it opens all sorts of possibilities for multi- and trans-disciplinary research projects, but also, and more importantly, because the problems at hand are simply too multi-sided to be adequately tackled from the perspective of any one discipline – a ‘pluralistic’ approach is thus absolutely called for, both in terms of methods and theories.

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