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Environmental Consciousness:
Human Motivation for Thinking Ecologically

By Rob Pigue

Environmental Project

Professor John van Buren

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“Till now man has been up against Nature; from now on he will be up against his own nature.”—Dennis Gabor, *Inventing the Future*, 1964

“To know this world is to gain a proprietary attachment to it. To know it well is to love and take responsibility for it.” —Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life*, 2002.

What is the motivation for acting environmentally? Why do people care? What is the reason for buying fluorescent bulbs and hybrid cars, energy efficient appliances and reusable water bottles? Why is it that people turn off the lights when they leave a room, turn off the faucet while brushing their teeth, and go through the inconvenience of recycling?

Humans are known to act out of self-interest. Regardless of what people do or why they do it, their motivation can always be traced back to personal gain.

So why go green? Nothing about reducing, reusing, or recycling has any direct impact on one’s quality of life. Throwing an empty wrapper into a garbage can as opposed to tossing it on the street doesn’t have any direct impact on the person doing the throwing.

Perhaps it is a consumer trend then? Maybe it is a moral standard we hold ourselves to? Do people act environmentally purely out of habit? Does big business influence environmental consciousness; does the media?

How can it be that people are attempting to do so much good to solve a problem that likely won’t turn up in their lifetimes, or their children’s, or even their children’s children? Where does the need to do the right thing intersect with the need to improve our lives? There seem to be more questions than answers when it comes to

environmental consciousness and motivation. The explanation lies in a combination of philosophical, economical, and environmental theories.

Though it is a cynical view, it isn't difficult to understand how self-interest fuels human action. Every decision we make is meant to benefit ourselves in one way or another. The challenge is to think of a truly selfless deed, and then to determine whether that deed does not, in fact, provide a benefit to he or she who performs it.

Charity and other generous acts would undoubtedly be one of the first things to consider. People give of their money, their time, and their efforts to support good causes and certainly this has no benefit to those performing the altruistic tasks. Or does it? These acts of kindness are well-intended, but they also provide a feeling of accomplishment for those who complete the benevolent undertakings. It makes people feel virtuous to contribute to a worthy cause. Those who give in these ways are benefiting from a sense of accomplishment on a level of self-actualization.

Religion and faith are other human behaviors that are perceived to be unselfish. While devoting time and energy to the belief in higher powers, there are no direct advantages gained by having religious conviction. However, similar to charitable endeavors, religious deeds can be meant to secure our positions in the afterlife (depending on religion). If the concern isn't of heaven and hell, then it is for the connection of body and soul. Religion allows for people to feel whole, and provides a feeling of fulfillment for those who follow.

This argument isn't new by any means, and it has been debated by some of the world's most well known philosophers. John Stuart Mill's theory of utilitarianism asserts what is known as 'The Greatest Happiness Principle.' Mill posits that, as humans, we

consider an action to be right when its result is happiness. This claim is complemented by arguing that all unhappiness should be avoided by any means necessary.

Mill states in his work, aptly titled *Utilitarianism*, that “pleasure and freedom from pain, are the only things desirable as ends’ and that all desirable things...are desirable either for the pleasure inherent in themselves, or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain,” and that there is no higher end than pleasure¹. Mill is also cognizant of his cynical viewpoint, and realizes that it can disturb people’s conceptions of a greater good.

In contrast to Mill’s work and viewpoint is the philosopher Immanuel Kant. In Kant’s text, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the focus is on the quality of actions and their morality, and for what reasons actions should take place. Kantian ethics can be broken down into two forms of imperatives, categorical and hypothetical. Hypothetical imperatives demonstrate how actions can be taken as a means to achieving something else, while categorical imperatives describe actions themselves as being the determining motivation. Kant writes “the true vocation of reason must be to produce a will that is good, not perhaps as a mean to other purposes, but good in itself,” meaning that one’s reason for acting should be based on the particular act².

Kant’s supposition challenges Mill’s argument in that Kant believes people act based on what is morally correct, not simply based on what benefits them. However, the critical disparity between the two theories lies in the purpose of the philosophers.

While Kant builds an outline for *how* people *should* be acting, Mill defines *why* people *are* acting. Kant’s theory explains what moral action is, and how humans should

¹John Stuart Mill and George Sher, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2001) p. 10. Print.

²Immanuel Kant and Christine M. Korsgaard, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998) p. 10. Print.

adhere to moral law. Instead of providing a framework for how people should act in order to improve society, Mill evaluates the actions that characterize the society in which we live. Mill acknowledges that “genuine private affections, and a sincere interest in the public good are possible, though in unequal degrees, to every rightly brought up human being,” but ultimately argues that even these acts are done out of self-interest³.

Having established that, one must consider now how these philosophers have anything to do with environmental consciousness.

With Mill’s theory expressing how there is no such thing as a selfless act; one must question the benefits of acting in an environmental manner. Certainly some environmental actions have obvious advantages; many people are sold on the idea of saving money. Hybrid cars like the new Volt by Chevrolet which boasts “a total range of up to 379 miles before having to recharge the battery or fill up the gas tank,” will attract many financially mindful consumers⁴. Fluorescent tubes and energy efficient appliances can cut costs on utility bills. But not every person is simply thinking of his or her wallet when choosing to go green. There is a huge range of environmental thinkers; from the casual aluminum water-bottle user to the passionate ‘composter’ to those who don’t care at all.

Gísli Pálsson breaks down the different forms of environmental thinkers into even simpler categories: Paternalists, orientalist, and communalists. Pálsson’s theories are recognized in a collection of essays on the relationships between the environment and culture in Philippe Descola’s work *Nature and Society*.

³John Stuart Mill and George Sher, Utilitarianism (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2001) p. 21. Print.

⁴Jonathan Welsh, "Chevy's Volt Is Headed To Dealerships - Driver's Seat - WSJ." WSJ Blogs– WSJ, (December 2010): Web.

According to Pálsson, orientalism is the concept that nature's resources are there to be exploited by mankind. "Orientalism not only establishes a fundamental break between nature and society," Pálsson states, "it also suggests that people are masters of nature, in charge of the world."⁵ Orientalists are the kinds of people who aren't chasing after the trend of environmentalism. In believing that nature's sole purpose is to provide for humans, they see no reason for any duty owed to the environment. Pálsson continues to describe this classification of people as those who value "domestication, frontiers, and expansion—of exploring, conquering, and exploiting the environment," with no sense for protecting nature as it has been provided⁶.

One whose ideas of the environment can be likened to orientalism is William Baxter. Baxter, in his text *People or Penguins: the Case for Optimal Pollution*, believes strongly that humans should have no regard for any element in nature unless it provides a benefit to humans. Baxter's extreme perspective on human relationships with the environment can be recognized when he states "I reject the proposition that we *ought* to respect the 'balance of nature' or to 'preserve the environment' unless the reason for doing so, express or implied, is the benefit of man."⁷ People with Baxter's point of view don't recognize the significance in the defense of the environment; rather they see the potential that nature provides for human society.

While Baxter later argues that what is good for humans is also good for non-humans, his central point is still based on the accomplishment of the human race by using non-humans as ends rather than means.

⁵Gísli Pálsson, "Human--Environmental Relations: Orientalism, Paternalism and Communalism." in Nature and Society (Routledge, Aug. 1996) p. 67. Web.

⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

⁷William F Baxter, People or Penguins: the Case for Optimal Pollution (New York: Columbia UP, 1974) p. 382. Print.

This group of people is countered by those with a more defensive outlook on nature's offerings; paternalists. According to Pálsson, paternalists believe "humans have a particular responsibility, not only to other humans but also to members of other species as well as to fellow inhabitants of the animal kingdom, and the ecosystem of the globe," and clearly express the opposite outlook on the values of nature from orientalists⁸. Paternalist thinking is a much more modern reflection on how humans view the environment. While paternalism contends that humans are superior beings, it suggests that human superiority translates to worldly responsibility.

Communalism is Pálsson's final category of environmental thinking, and perhaps the most difficult to exemplify. Communalism is separate from orientalism and paternalism in that communalist thinking has no distinction between nature and society. For Pálsson, the focus of communalists is on "generalized reciprocity, an exchange often metaphorically represented in terms of intimate, personal relationships," and the complete unification of society and nature⁹. Due to the complexity of this theory, it can best be illustrated with a graphic created by Pálsson(see *Figure 1 in Appendix*).

This diagram pictured above demonstrates how continuity is the isolating factor for communalism in comparison to orientalism and paternalism. Stability motivates communalist thinking instead of protection or exploitation.

With the knowledge that these distinct groupings of people exist, the next stage is to dissect the perspectives of the relevant categories of people. In the case of this essay, those most resembling paternalists and communalists are the green thinkers that are pertinent to this study.

⁸Gísli Pálsson, "Human--Environmental Relations: Orientalism, Paternalism and Communalism." in Nature and Society (Routledge, Aug. 1996) p. 70. Web.

⁹Ibid., p. 72.

One reason for the growth in the trend of environmental consciousness is the development of scientific findings on environmental issues. Problems related to global warming, carbon emissions, and resource depletion, to name a few, have been a mainstay in the news for several years now. Those who are aware of the advancements in the field of environmentalism often believe themselves to be superior in thinking to those who aren't. In David Pepper's text, *Modern Environmentalism*, chapter five focuses on the concept of ecocentrism in postmodern science. Pepper questions the need for legitimacy for environmental thinkers in postmodern science. Mainly, he critiques the way that environmentalists wish for nature to be recognized for its intrinsic value as well as its worth in a classical scientific sense. Essentially Pepper asserts that environmentalists want to be purists as well as pragmatists in order to achieve mass appeal.

David Pepper believes that if environmentalists are recognized in both senses, they will be perceived as being worthy of greater respect within society. In his essay he writes "if environmentalists can show that their cause is supported by scientific evidence and research, and scientific experts, following scientific method, then the public will be more likely to see them as above sectional interest, legitimate, respectable and worth supporting," and seemingly boosting environmental ego¹⁰. Pepper's statement declares that people whose beliefs are supported by scientific findings claim a sense of superiority and legitimacy over those who don't. This is one clear motivation for those with environmental habits; it simply makes them feel smarter than others.

Some may argue that this kind of thinking shouldn't qualify as moral. King-TakIp's work called *Environmental Ethics: Intercultural Perspectives* goes into detail on

¹⁰David Pepper, Modern Environmentalism: an Introduction (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 241. Print.

what must be done in order for environmentalism to sustain. Ip believes that “if people want to make any environmentally-ethical practice durable, they need to develop a non-egocentric...sense of virtue in following environmentally-friendly conventions,” and also create a standard for punishing acts that violate that sense¹¹. Ip’s concept of environmental virtue is one that he admits is difficult to regulate, but ultimately necessary for environmentalists to grasp. Ip, however, doesn’t describe the way that environmentalists are acting, but rather what they need to do in order to achieve their goals.

In contrast, J.S. Mill would argue against the purity and genuineness of environmental virtue. Mill’s position would emphasize that every action is meant to benefit the person performing the action. According to Mill, it would be impossible for anybody to do something with the sole purpose of improving the environment unless it provided an advantage to that person.

Another critic of Ip’s argument is environmental ethicist Baird Callicott. Callicott has utilitarian ideals similar to Mill’s, and he applies them to environmental consciousness. Callicott establishes a utilitarian paradigm that claims human beings receive utility either directly or indirectly from the services that ecosystems provide¹². Callicott has two fundamental components to his contention of ecosystem utility. The first is that “the use that an individual human being derives from a given ecosystem service depends on that individual’s motivations,” for example “his or her needs and personal preferences,” and the specific usefulness to each human being needs to be

¹¹ King-Tak Ip, Environmental Ethics: Intercultural Perspectives (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) p. 4. Print.

¹² Joseph Alcamo and Baird Callicott, Ecosystems and Human Well-being: A Framework for Assessment (Washington, DC: Island, 2003) p. 130. Web.

measured¹³. Callicott's second element for his argument deals with the monetary valuation methods normally used to measure utility. He believes that considering the benefits provided to humans from the environment, one must find the benefits that "have no directly observable monetary benefits," that are generally used to quantify happiness¹⁴.

Callicott then introduces the idea of total economic value, a framework created by Pearce and Warford in their 1993 book *World Without End: Economics, Environment, and Sustainable Development* (see Figure 2 in Appendix)¹⁵. Callicott uses this model to discuss the direct, indirect, and option values that the environment provides to human beings. While the direct and indirect values in the framework describe the different benefits that natural resources can offer, option values pertain to the environmental benefits that humans are preserving for the future.

Callicott subdivides option values further into option value, bequest value and quasi-option value. He describes option value as the awareness that a resource's value may not provide any advantages presently, but that possibly in the future they can supply important gains to society. Bequest value is described as the recognition that future generations may have use for the earth's resources. This answers the query of why people recognize the needs of their children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and so on. Quasi-option value is explained by Callicott as "a related kind of value: it represents the value of avoiding irreversible decisions until new information reveals whether certain ecosystem services have values that are currently unknown," and while this contradicts

¹³ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁴ Joseph Alcamo and Baird Callicott, Ecosystems and Human Well-being: A Framework for Assessment (Washington, DC: Island, 2003) p. 130. Web.

¹⁵ D. W. Pearce and Jeremy J. Warford. World Without End: Economics, Environment, and Sustainable Development (New York, NY: Published for the World Bank [by] Oxford UP, 1993) Print.

David Pepper's notion that environmentalists are legitimized because of the strong scientific support they are backed with, Callicott realizes how the mystery of not having a complete understanding of the world can have an effect on those living in it¹⁶. The fear of tampering with an organism as complex as the earth can drive mankind to do things they believe will not disrupt the equilibrium of the world as we know it.

Can the fear of upsetting the balance of the earth make somebody spend \$40,000, the MSRP of a 2011 Chevrolet Volt¹⁷? Maybe one part of environmentalism is the anxiety over "What could happen to the world?" while another part of it is simply that it's a trend, like political correctness, that defines what society finds acceptable at this time. There is no doubt that the market for green products and services is expanding every year, and the lifestyle requirements aren't always economical.

"That vision of an eco-sensitive life as a series of choices about what to buy appeals to millions of consumers and arguably defines the current environmental movement as equal parts concern for the earth and for making a stylish statement," writes Alex Williams of *The New York Times* in an article about green consumerism¹⁸. Williams believes that many people are purchasing items labeled as 'green' or 'environmentally friendly' not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the chic thing to do. Williams continues by critiquing the motivations of green consumers, and explaining how often buying the earth-friendly product can be causing the earth more harm. Instead of acting out of a truly environmental motivation and conserving and limiting consumption, people are purchasing green products and thinking they're a part of

¹⁶Joseph Alcamo and Baird Callicott. Ecosystems and Human Well-being: A Framework for Assessment (Washington, DC: Island, 2003) p 133. Web

¹⁷"2011 Chevrolet Volt | New Chevrolet Sedans," Yahoo! Autos, 2010
<http://autos.yahoo.com/2011_chevrolet_volt/> (8 December 2010)

¹⁸"Buying Into the Green Movement," The New York Times, 1 July 2007, Fashion and Style sec.

a solution. One of those interviewed by Williams was Paul Hawken, a longtime environmental activist; he is quoted as saying “Green consumerism is an oxymoronic phrase,” and that “we turn toward the consumption part because that’s where the money is...we tend not to look at the ‘less’ part,” which is the key to real environmental action¹⁹. While people cling to the trends they read about in magazines and see their favorite celebrities following, their behavior doesn’t constitute genuine environmentalism. Those who are concerned with style and appearance are concerned with creating the greatest possible utility for themselves. Despite thinking that their actions are benefiting the earth, most green consumers are seeking personal benefit through the environmental movement.

Though many will see the trend of environmentalism as a means to make a profit, there is reason to believe that some businesses and consumers have pure intentions in the emergence of a more ecological economy.

One group known as LOHAS, an acronym for Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability, is an online service founded in 2000 for the purpose of “educating and building community around the central theme of healthy and sustainable lifestyles for individuals and societies,” as expressed in their mission statement²⁰. LOHAS claims to represent a market worth \$290 billion, capturing 19% of all adults in the United States²¹. This market is comprised of all goods and services with a focus on sustainability, health, and general well-being. LOHAS breaks down their market into six distinct sectors

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

²⁰ “Mission – LOHAS,” LOHAS: Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability, 2008
<<http://www.lohas.com/mission.htm>> (17 Nov. 2010)

²¹ Ibid., p. 1.

including personal health, natural lifestyles, green building, alternative transportation, eco tourism, and alternative energy.

In 2007, LOHAS conducted an analysis of consumer values backed with research done by the National Marketing Institute. Much like in Gisli Pálsson's examination of human and nature associations, the LOHAS article identified different groups of environmental consumers. In the article, consumers are labeled as LOHAS, Naturalities, Drifters, Conventionals, and Unconcerned. With the LOHAS segment having the highest concern for environmental sustainability, and the Unconcerned segment caring the least, the numbers indicate an increase in the more environmentally minded consumer (*See Figure 3 in Appendix*). According to the graphic provided, the most significant growth from 2005 to 2007 was the Drifters segment. Drifters, which are defined in the article as those "motivated by the latest trends...young and impressionable consumers constantly shift[ing] their commitment to any issue, including sustainability," swelled 16% over the course of two years²². This is supported by Alex Williams' article from *The New York Times*, who noted the growth of environmental consumerism due to the recent changes in style. According to LOHAS, this is a key demographic to capture because "giving them a credible and long-lasting reason to believe in a brand or a cause will lead to a lifetime of returns," and environmental businesses can capitalize on the opportunity they're providing²³. LOHAS believes that this growing concern for the environment is genuine, and that the rise in green consumerism demonstrates a new focus on "sustaining the planet, improving the lives of people around the world, and protecting the ability of

²²"Connecting Values with Consumers," *LOHAS Journal*, LOHAS: Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability, Spring 2008 <<http://www.lohas.com/content/ConsVal.pdf>> (1 December 2010)

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

future generations to meet their own needs.”²⁴ This new kind of consumer wouldn’t exist if there weren’t a market for green products. Businesses that are creating environmentally friendly products and offering green services are necessary to establish the marketplace. With businesses responsible for so much of the surge in environmental consciousness it is critical to evaluate the motives for corporations going green.

It is implicit that businesses by definition are constructed for the purpose of making a profit. Every action that a business performs is ultimately meant to benefit the company. Going green is no exception to this rule. There are huge advantages for companies to be considered environmentally conscious, including the access to the \$290 billion market as described earlier by LOHAS. With the LOHAS segment of consumers strictly buying environmentally friendly products, and the Naturalities and Drifters categories having a proclivity toward selecting green over non-green products, companies stand to make a lot of money on this movement. In an article from the *American Chronicle* called “Clean, Green, and Not So Mean Can Business Save the World?” the benefits of corporate social responsibility are explained. Included in the article are examples of how corporate donations can improve public perception, and how sustainable business can provide “a balance between meeting the strategic goals of the company (serving stakeholders, making a profit, etc.) and respecting and understanding the social and environmental impact of the company's actions,” which demonstrates how at least part of the motivation for conducting business in a socially responsible manner is for financial gain and improving corporate image²⁵. Despite the fact that businesses are

²⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

²⁵ “Clean, Green, and Not So Mean Can Business Save the World?” *American Chronicle*, Winter 2010 <<http://www.americanchronicle.com/articles/yb/153722370>> (21 Dec. 2010)

becoming more aware of their social responsibility, ethically one must realize their motivations are still for a successful company rather than a healthy planet.

There are many motivations for humans to act environmentally. Advantages range from making or saving money, to protecting ourselves from the unknown, to making ourselves current with the trends and styles of today. Regardless of how these environmental actions benefit our lives, it is important to know that humans make all decisions to benefit themselves. That being said, when a supplementary outcome of human selfishness promotes a better environment, one must ask if motivation really matters? Isn't there something to be said for acting environmentally, though not genuinely, as opposed to the alternative? If people are performing deeds that are helping to save and protect the environment, is their reasoning all that important?

Perhaps not now, but in order for the progression of the environmental movement to be sustained humans need to be able to put their interest in the earth ahead of their own wellbeing. As Edward O. Wilson states in his book *The Future of Life*,

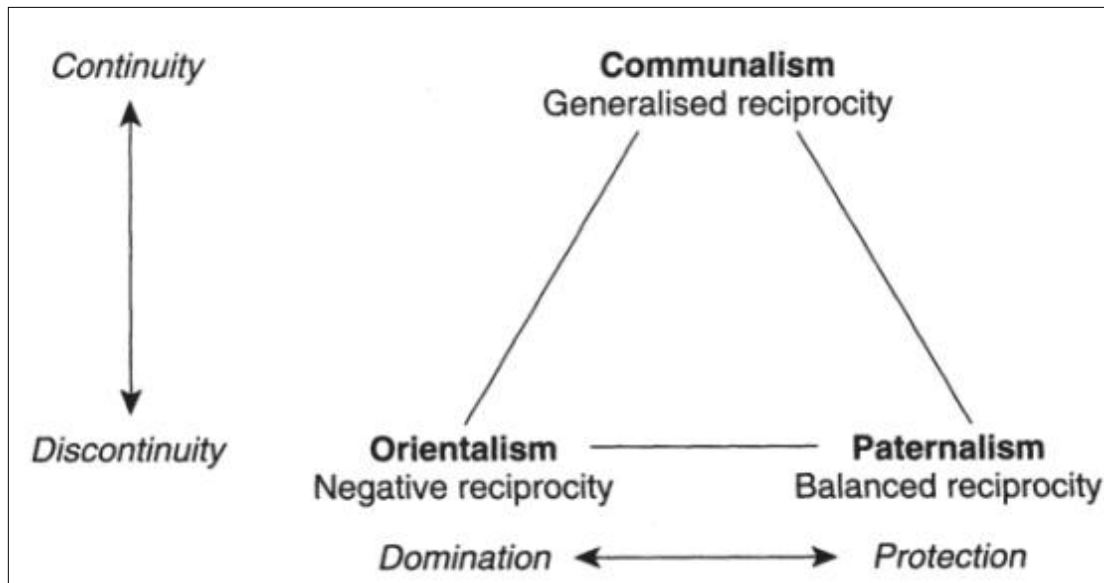
“The issue, like all great decisions, is moral. Science and technology are what we can do; morality is what we agree we should or should not do. The ethic from which moral decisions spring is a norm or standard of behavior in support of a value, and value in turn depends on purpose. Purpose...expresses the image we hold of ourselves and our society.”²⁶

Wilson understands that it isn't enough to simply do what is best because of moral standards; that our actions need to have purpose. With so many questions concerning our environment and with humans having the capacity to act ways that can make a difference, the environmental movement needs to be appreciated as more than just a trend.

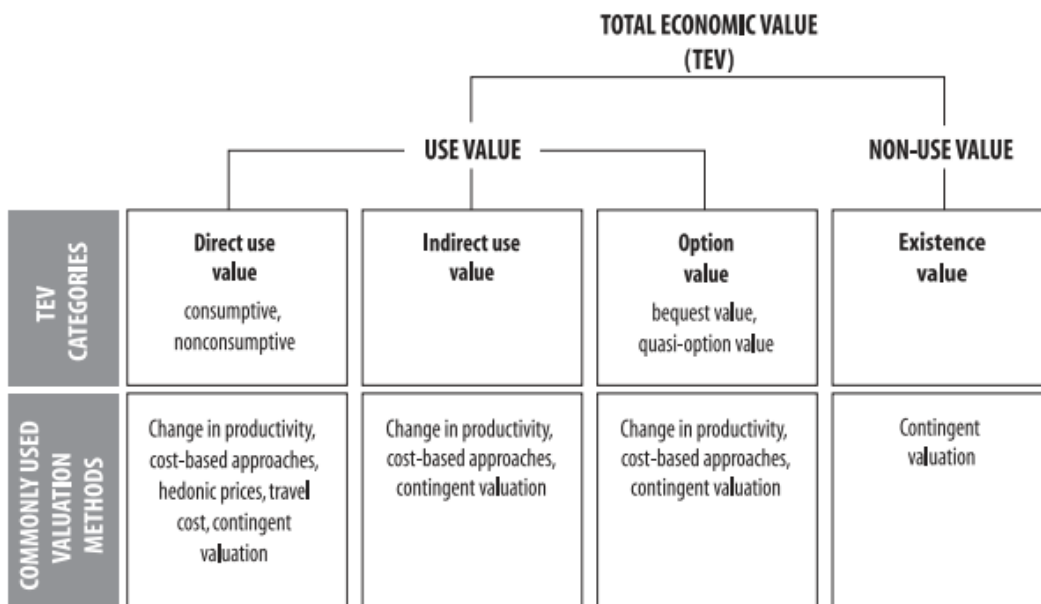
²⁶ Edward O Wilson, *The Future of Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002)

I. Appendix

(Figure 1) Gísli Pálsson's Kinds of Human-environmental Relation



(Figure 2) Pearce and Warford's Total Economic Value Framework



(Figure 3) LOHAS Segmentation Shifts

Trended LOHAS Segmentation Shifts

(% U.S. general population in NMI defined consumer segments)



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