

A letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* (August 9, 2019)

Sir, – In his review of *Green and Prosperous Land* by Dieter Helm and *Who Owns England?* by Guy Shrubsole (July 26), Nick Groom concludes that “We should all be entitled to breathe the fresh air of green spaces and the countryside”. Indeed, but the problematic assumption vitiating his entire article and, so far as I can tell, both books under review, is that “all” here plainly refers only to human beings. So long as our moral concern excludes all non-human others (who together constitute the great majority of life) except as they serve human needs and desires, and those are always placed first, the injustice that -underlies the actions of landed elites, government bureaucracies and unscrupulous corporations will remain: that humans are free to behave like an occupying power or master race, intent on killing, enslaving, exploiting and appropriating all of the Earth and its other creatures.

The crucial problem is recasting manifestations of nature as “resources”. The Canadian writer Neil Evernden pointed out decades ago that “by basing all arguments on enlightened self-interest, environmentalists have ensured their own failure whenever self-interest can be perceived as lying elsewhere ... The industrialist and the environmentalist are brothers under the skin; they differ merely as to the best use that the natural world ought to be put to”. That is why alongside human use of nature – good as well as bad – there absolutely must be provision for non-use. That is also why Groom’s rejection of rewilding is misplaced. Even attempts to found restraint on inherently unquantifiable good uses -(spiritual, aesthetic, cultural) are inadequate stop-gaps at best. In the not-so-long run, as Evernden concluded, “the only defence that can conceivably succeed is one based on the intrinsic worth of life, of living beings”. And that is the kind of -political solidarity we most need: with all life. As long as even the best-intentioned and considered schemes of protection or improvement value only other humans, they too will fail.

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