

# Is There a Place for Environmentalism in Humanism?

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**T**here is no escaping the accusation anymore: humanism, we hear over and over, can't help the environmental movement. Sure, humanists can say that they love the environment, want to "go green," and treasure their animal friends. Humanists can even script such devotion into their declarations and manifestos. Yet environmentalists frequently doubt that humanism can form a sound basis for genuine environmentalism. Can the principles of humanism really help protect environmental resources and the earth's fragile ecologies?

Over at the website [climate-resistance.org](http://climate-resistance.org), for example, there's not much love for humanism. An article titled "Eco-Humanism?" (posted September 23, 2009) squarely confronts the tough question: If humans are part of the problem, can humanism really be part of the solution? This article answers that question uncompromisingly in the negative:

... There is a fundamental idea operating within environmentalism which is incompatible with humanism. It proposes that our principle [*sic*] relationship is not with each other, but with the natural world. Accordingly, "duty to each other" exists principally as a duty to the planet, and "societal cohesiveness" comes from without humanity, being predicated on a sustainable relationship with the natural world. In other words, human relationships are—and must be—mediated by the "environment." These precepts operate prior to the humanist ethic. ... A failure to recognize these environmental precepts is, according to environmentalists, equivalent to wanting to destroy humanity in an environmental catastrophe.

The editors conclude:

There is no such thing as eco-humanism, nor progressive environmentalism.

Given the working definition of humanism in their argument—one in which human values and relationships are assigned primary importance—this tough conclusion seems justified. It is ultimately irrelevant whether humanists can rewrite manifestos and feel motivated to save the environment. Could humanism prevent catastrophe? To environmentalists, humanism seems like just a slow alternative to the fast death of unrestrained globalization. If human needs ultimately come first, the environment always loses in the long run. A robust environmentalism, it seems, cannot grow from a narrow foundation of humanist values.

But is humanism really as narrow and unhelpful as environmentalists fear? Let's review humanism's position. Humanism is a lifestance or ethical view that prioritizes (1) this mortal life and (2) the ethical responsibilities we must share to best enhance this life for all. Humanism is often confused with human-centrism, which holds that only human beings have moral value and ethical priority. Many definitions and declarations of humanism do sound precisely like human-centrism, especially those dating from before 1980. Since that time, many humanists have realized that humanism should seek the preservation and enhancement of all life, not human life alone. Over the centuries-long history of humanism, humanists certainly have demanded that more and more of humanity deserves moral dignity and ethical priority. Humanists have struggled in every century to "expand the circle"—to enlarge the

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range of beings that deserve respect and humane treatment. Many humanists nowadays aren't halting at the boundaries of the human species.

Environmentalists can recognize how humanism is adding "humane-ism" to its list of priorities. Humanists may want to become more humane by becoming animal lovers, vegetarians, and environmental activists, but the concerns of environmentalists go deeper. Humanism says that humanists are supposed to try to enhance this life for "all"—but who counts among the "all"? Just some people, all people, or more species than just ours? Does "all" include the entire biosphere?

Humanism has changed, and continues to change today. Varieties of humanism are competing for attention. Three versions are noticeably vibrant in the secular world.

1. Humanism means taking responsibility to create ethically without religious or philosophical guidance your own values with which to live your life. Humanists are atheists at liberty to enhance their lives however they can, restrained only by political principles of equal rights and procedural justice.

2. Humanism means ethically taking responsibility to conform your values to the community's pursuit of the good life, independent of dogmatic authority. Humanists are freethinkers who participate in society's quest to enhance life for all by applying reason rather than religion.

3. Humanism means ethically taking responsibility to center your values on primary virtues like compassion and beneficence to all, regardless of heavenly reward. Humanists are progressivists who push society toward fulfilling high moral ideals, while feeling accountable to the future of life itself.

Rather than needlessly worrying about which version or combination is the "true" humanism, let's look at matters from the environmentalist perspective.

Type 1 humanism is of little help to environmentalism. Type 1 humanists would not deplete Earth's resources because that is an unintelligent way to manage matters. But valuing other species and ecologies is entirely a personal issue—protecting any-

thing is optional for everyone. Those who have the money or power to exploit nature in some way should have the right to do so unless that use violates some other *person's* rights. Type 1 humanism leads most obviously toward the management model of environmentalism: nature should be wisely used and carefully modified to serve human needs. Environmentalists who think that resource management isn't enough mostly aim their complaints about humanism at Type 1 humanism.

Type 2 humanism can be of more help. Type 2 humanists take communal living seriously because trying to live the good life with utter disregard to community welfare is the opposite of ethics. By expanding the notion of community to its logical conclusion, community-oriented humanists can see how human communities are thoroughly interlinked with the health of their ecological environments. Humans will not flourish unless their environments flourish, especially in the very long run, so any exploitation of nature must be very thoroughly justified. Many environmentalists are humanists who can perceive how human values must simultaneously be Earth values. Type 2 humanism receives less criticism from environmentalists.


Type 3 humanism can be a lot of help to environmentalism. Type 3 humanists take all life seriously because life itself is the basis for value and the human species is no more special than any other. Type 3 humanists can recognize how other species and entire ecologies have value in themselves, regardless of whether humans actually value them. All the same, human values remain involved. Type 3 humanists orient and apply their values to the protection of everything that has value, and they enact these values in social and political activism. Hard-core environmentalists who stress the "intrinsic value" of all life are practically indistinguishable from Type 3 humanists, so there doesn't seem to be much open conflict between these groups.

We can leave environmentalists to their decision about whether to ally with one or more of these types of humanism. When a humanist declares an interest in supporting environmentalism, look at the details. Which type of humanist is this per-

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son, and what sort of environmentalism is being talked about? 

### PULL QUOTES

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### ABSTRACT

*Humanism comes in many flavors that vary in their embrace of environmental concern. Some may find more favor among environmentalists than others.*