

Bioethics and Biodiversity: The Case of *Caretta caretta* in Greece

Katerina Psarikidou

Abstract

Aim of this paper is to show why nature and biodiversity conservation should be an issue of bioethical concern. My thesis discusses the different theoretical frameworks which shape the human-nature relationship worldwide. Based on a discourse analysis of the conflicts arising from the *Caretta caretta* case in Greece, I work out the aspirations and the values attributed to nature of the various engaged interest groups. Assuming that the value of life remains of critical importance, I aim to address the ways in which Bioethics might operate as a new forum for the discussion of issues related to biodiversity conservation. I argue that bioethical dilemmas on nature and biodiversity conservation presuppose a moral evaluation of human agency. And I conclude that this must be the basis on which human rational and moral autonomous agency, human rights and duties are to be discussed.

The multi-disciplinary field of Bioethics aims to explore, discuss and analyze the moral dilemmas arising from the techno-scientific development (Jonsen, 1993). Bioethical concerns, however, are not only restricted to issues directly related to the notion of the human life ('bios'), but also to issues related to the general sphere of every living being's life. Hence, biodiversity conservation has become a focal point of both the international, national and local societal concern and also central in the bioethical debate. The neologism "biodiversity", which dates back to 1985, when Dr. Waltzer G. Rosen coined the term (Wilson, 1998), entered the political agenda with an unexpected force. Biodiversity conservation had been viewed as a big environmental crisis-driven issue (Haila, 2004).

Biodiversity is a dynamic social construction that has become 'the organising center' of a variety of environmental and social concerns (Haila, 2004). Biodiversity still lacks a universally agreed-upon definition and is often redefined depending on the context and the author's goal (Markku Oksanen, 2004). The different understandings of the term "biodiversity" (Koricheva & Siipi, 2004) are of great interest, because they result from different values, human purposes and aspirations, hidden behind each interest group's choice of biodiversity index and definition, since "both what you are measuring and how you are measuring, reveals something about what you most value" (Gaston & Spicer in Koricheva & Siipi, 2004).

My thesis explores the theoretical (philosophical and socio-political) frameworks which shape the human-nature relationship worldwide and aims to contribute to the gradually increasing societal environmental concern at several levels of negotiations. In addition, the goal of 'nature conservation history', is to assess why nature and biodiversity conservation should be an issue of bioethical concern. Data come from secondary sources (ancient Greek, Christian, and modern philosophical

theories, socio-political theories and legislature of the 20th century), but also from the EC funded project on 'Participatory Governance and Institutional Innovation'. The material drawn from internet sites, interviews, press releases assist in the undertaken investigation of the values. Following discourse analysis, I focus on interest groups related to a conflict arising from the implementation of EC's Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC on the protection of the endangered species *Caretta caretta* ('Mediterranean loggerhead sea turtle') in Greece (Haila et al. forthcoming 2007 – see www.paganini-project.net).

More specifically, the *Caretta caretta* case has emerged with an unexpected force since the 1980s, when two significant, though conflictual, events took place in Greece. First, the drastic change in people's economic activities at a sub-national level (e.g. the development of tourism in protected areas with endangered species) and secondly, the intense europeanisation of the country and, thus, the inevitable change in the legal framework as far as the protection of this endangered species is concerned. Consequently, a series of conflictual relationships, perspectives and attitudes towards the protection of *Caretta caretta* emerged in the Ionian island of Zakynthos, where a National Marine Park was eventually established. Discourse analysis highlights the reasons which enflamed this conflictual dimension in people's attitudes, but also identifies the deeper aspirations of the engaged interest groups as well as the values attributed to nature and its contents. My thesis explores the values which have shaped people's attitude towards nature and attempts to answer the question whether there is a real conflict of values, or there are any values which could operate as a common framework. In other words, the question is whether we could explore through a discourse analysis both the value of nature and the way in which the latter potentially human-nature relationship towards a more sustainable future for both people and the endangered species.

The analysis I offer in my thesis shows that 'nature' plays an important role in the discourse of several philosophical, scientific and sociocultural theoretical discussion since antiquity. Nature has been a focal issue in topic debates, concerns and interests related to human life and well-being. In spite of the differences revealed at the theoretical and the interpretive framework adopted by several agents, all agree on the significance of the notion of nature and its conservation. Within this context, human beings have a pivotal role to play in both evaluating the notion of nature and biodiversity and shaping their attitudes towards them.

Human needs, purposes, preferences, interests and intentions play a central role in discussing issues of nature conservation. The extent to which humans acknowledge nature as a value shapes the human-nature relationship as well and has serious consequences for human well-being. Most of the time, an instrumental value is attributed to nature and its contents, which is indicative of an utilitarian approach.

The anthropocentric approach dictates the need for preserving the value of nature. Biodiversity loss had been considered as a negative phenomenon, which drew public attention towards the adoption of the radical and convincing political instruments and strategies, based on a more rational, limited use of the natural sources (Lee, 2004). However, the acknowledgment of nature's independent value as a basic element of the health of the biosphere is necessary. Thus, the need for nature conservation was associated with sustainability on earth and, in turn, with human autonomy and personal satisfaction.

Nevertheless, there have been several interpretations of the notion of human autonomous agency. Within this watershed of conceptualisations, we conclude that, independent of anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric approaches to the issue, that is, the instrumental or intrinsic value attributed to it, human rationality attains a central role in the discussion. As Hargrove argues (2002), humans are the only living beings known as owners of the capacity of rational critique and moral agency. Thus, any kind of value attributed to nature is a result of human deliberations. According to Rolston, ecosystem may be considered as the producer and the holder of values, in which the value of human life is included, whereas human beings are the beholders, capable of investigating, evaluating and using these values.

These symbolic dimensions of nature and its components, the human-nature interdependency and the value of life currently play a decisive role in debates related to the environmental crisis and the emerging conflicts. Thus, human understanding of the value of life and human-nature relationship remain of critical importance in our discussion. On this basis the identification of several interpretive frameworks related to nature conservation may help us investigate a common thread, which could operate as a new starting point for discussing this issue. Within this context, I aim to address the following question: Could the multi-disciplinary field of Bioethics contribute to this emerging discussion on 'value of life'- laden issues, and, finally, suggest and provide a universally accepted ethical principle towards biodiversity conservation? Finally, is biodiversity conservation an issue of bioethical concern?

As I have already pointed out, rationality is the basic characteristic leading to the distinction between humans and the rest of the living beings. That particular feature gives humans a superiority over the rest of nature, that is, the capacity of autonomous moral agency, but also charges them with a range of responsibilities and duties towards every other living (human or non-human, rational or irrational) creature. Autonomous agency focuses on a range of duties towards the rest of the mankind. Consequently, this kind of human rationality, based on the human moral agency, may constitute the basis of an anthropocentric approach which could shape human attitudes towards nature and biodiversity conservation. Considering that humans are the only living beings known as capable of rational and also moral agency, we conclude

that, within the framework of the bioethical concern over the nature conservation issues, an investigation of a commonly accepted/ absolute principle should center upon both the individual and the collective human (direct and indirect) duties towards humanity (human individuals, human community, but also their own selves). This parameter could act as a constraint of their attitude towards the rest of the living beings. However, human dignity is the basic motive for a moral agency based on responsibilities and duties towards others, even if these others are not owners or capable of defending their rights (e.g. future generations) (O'Neil,1997). Such a kind of a human duties-based approach may be the basis for discussing issues of uncertainty, where we are not able to foresee the grade and the way in which populations/individuals will be finally affected by our current practices.

As regards 'biodiversity conservation', we assume that bioethical concern does not focus on the physical extinction of the species per se, but, mainly, on human agency and its impacts on the natural environment and its contents. In other words, the human-induced changes on nature, mainly due to the modern revolution of human knowledge and the emerging techno-scientific development are the ones to be examined and redefined. On the basis of our argumentation and the 'fundamental undefinability' of the term biodiversity, the evaluation of biodiversity *per se* could not be the focal point of the bioethical discussion. Neither could be any kind of rights attributed to the non-rational living beings. On the contrary, human rational and moral autonomous agency, human rights and duties are to be analyzed, criticized and discussed.

Bioethical dilemmas on nature and biodiversity conservation require a moral evaluation of human actions. The multidisciplinary field of Bioethics and the long established moral principles (autonomy, justice, beneficence, non-maleficence) is a good basis for discussing issues concerning the intrinsic value of human life and the intrinsic or non-intrinsic value of the non-rational nature (ecosystems and biodiversity). The intrinsic value of human life, the notions of human dignity and personal autonomy, as well as the emerging capability of leading a life with dignity prove to be highly significant in the discourse of both the political, legal and scientific proceedings towards a conservation strategy. The issues of autonomy and dignity of every rational moral agent must be given priority in such a discussion. Furthermore, human moral duties towards nature and humanity have to be investigated and specified. Every moral agent's duties as an end in itself should be the basic parameter for shaping one's action and attitude towards nature and its contents. Thus, an international strategy towards biodiversity conservation should be centralized on the fundamental principle of 'respect towards human dignity'.

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