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Intrinsic Value

Will the Defenders of Nature Please Rise BY ARNE NAESS

The venerable German philosopher Immanuel Kant insisted that we never use a human being *merely* as a means to an end. But why should this philosophy apply only to human beings? Are there not other beings with intrinsic value? What about animals, plants, landscapes, and our very special old planet as a whole?

I hope you all answer yes. Is it my privilege as a philosopher to announce what is of intrinsic value, whereas scientists, as such, must stick to theories and observations? No, it is not—because you are not scientists as such; you are autonomous, unique persons, with obligations to *announce* what has intrinsic value without any cowardly subclass saying that it is just your subjective opinion or feeling. On the other hand, it does not follow that you are entitled to “beat up on” those who dis-

agree with you. The rational solution of value conflicts is not something that is impossible to achieve.

But what is intrinsic value?

Expressions such as “this should be preserved for *its own sake*” are very common: but pseudoscientific philosophers and scientists find them objectionable when they are applied to natural phenomena. They insist that there must be a being valuing things—that is, there must be humans in the picture. In a sense this is true. Theories of value, like theories of gravity and rules of logical or methodological inferences, are human products. But this does not rule out the possibility of truth or correctness. The positions in philosophy often referred to as “value nihilism” and “subjectivity of value” reject the concept of valid norms. Other positions accept the concept. I accept it.

Reference to original publication: Naess, A. (1993). Intrinsic value: Will the defenders of nature please rise. In P. Reed & D. Rothenberg (Eds.), *Wisdom in the Open Air* (pp. 70–82). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. This article is based on a keynote address at the 2nd International conference on conservation biology, Univ. of Michigan, May 1985, and was first published in M. Soulé (Ed.), (1985). *Conservation Biology: The Science of Scarcity and Diversity*. Sunderland, Mass.: Sinauer Associates. Permission for publication on OpenAirPhilosophy generously granted by the University of Minnesota Press and editor David Rothenberg.

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The world of experience is the only world with which we are firmly acquainted. The world as spontaneously experienced, including appropriateness and truth, cannot be denounced as less real than that of scientific theory, because we always ultimately refer to the immediate reality. Recent developments in physics substantiate the primacy of immediate experience. As long as atoms were conceived of as small, hard things, physical reality could be conceived of as the real world. Recent developments in quantum theory, however, offer us a picture so abstract, so mathematical, that it is reasonable to see it as furnishing only the abstract structure and outline of the real world, not its content. Color hues are real in their own way, just as electromagnetic “waves” are real in their function as abstract entities. We experience good old friends as values in themselves on a par with ourselves, and we do things for their sakes as naturally as for our own. Our friends may be useful to us, but that is not all. Why shouldn’t this also apply to living beings other than humans? We are forced by modern science back to nature, basically as the earlier naturalists conceived it. And it is, in its essential features, worth protecting for its own sake.

The position that nothing in the natural world has intrinsic value, that the whole conservation movement is motivated only by narrow utilitarian aims centered on human health and prosperity, corrodes in the long run the public image of the movement. Highly dedicated persons who cannot help but work for conservation and for whom it is a vital need to live with nature are confused by what they take to be the utter cynicism of scientists and experts who use purely utilitarian, flat language in their assessment of environmental risks, “genetic resources,” and extinction. These experts are often seen as traitors.

There is an important philosophical argument against talking about protecting natural entities for their own sake. Is there not always, in any sort of valuation, a human subject that projects value into an object? Therefore, is not everything we do basically something we do for our own sake? I may answer “yes” insofar

as we may use the expression “for our own sake” in a very abstract way. But everyday use of the expression is also legitimate. We undertake a hike for the sake of ourselves and our dog, but sometimes, in bad weather and having pressing things to do, we take the dog for a walk for its own sake. There are cases of doubt, but to announce that we do everything for our own sake, that is, that we, each of us, are the sole intrinsic value, is plain rubbish from a semantic point of view. In short, the argument against the *possibility* of doing things for the sake of others is untenable.

Spontaneous value experience is something to be conveyed to others even in our capacity as scientists. What we feel spontaneously has weight when we decide how to act, for instance, in regard to conservation policies. And the public and politicians should know what carries weight for biologists.

Let me mention a rather touching sentence I found in a standard handbook of how to treat our domestic animals. It was extensively used in the 1920s and 1930s. The author talks about caressing pigs. The sentence reads approximately like this: “Those who have experienced the satisfaction of pigs stroked in this way cannot but do it.” How can *the author* experience the satisfaction of a *pig*? The question is badly posed. It assumes a cleavage between the human subject and animal object. Actually such a cleavage does not belong to spontaneous experience, and should not be introduced in order to make the sentence more scientific. Much that passes for objectivity in scientific talk is really pseudoscientific and renders the language of scientists gray and flat!

The quoted sentence is instructive in another way. The last part, about compulsion, is marvelous: “Those who have experienced the satisfaction of pigs stroked in this way *cannot but do it*.” The farmer may say to himself, “Dear pig, I don’t have time to stroke you today,” but in vain. He just goes on stroking the pig. Here also a so-called scientific textbook writer would object: of course the farmer *can* refrain from stroking the pig.

Of less importance but perhaps worth mentioning is the way the sentence reminds us that when we talk about technical progress in the agricultural sector, we do not include techniques for caressing. Why? Better to be incomplete than to be accused of being sentimental or unscientific.

Back to Immanuel Kant and the use of a human being merely as a means to an end. What makes possible a vivid experience of intrinsic value corresponding to a vastly generalized Kantian maxim? In short, what makes intense personal appreciation of diversity of life forms and the whole ecosphere possible?

There is one process that perhaps is more important in this respect than any other: the process of so-called

identification.^[1] We tend to see ourselves in everything alive. As scientists we observe the death struggle of an insect, but as mature human beings we spontaneously also experience our own death in a way, and feel sentiments that relate to struggle, pain, and death. Spontaneous identification is of course most obvious when we react to the pain of persons we love. We do not observe that pain and by reflecting on it decide that it is bad. What goes on is difficult to describe; it is a task of philosophical phenomenology to try to do the job. Here it may be sufficient to give some examples of the process of identification, or “seeing oneself in others.” A complete report on the death struggle of an insect as some of us experience such an event must include the positive and negative values that are attached to the event as firmly as the duration, the movements, and the colors involved.

There is nothing unduly romantic or poetic here. Given our biological endowment, each of us has the capacity to identify with all living beings. In addition, given the physiological, psychological, and social basis of gestalt perception and apperception, humans have the capacity to experience the intimate relations between organisms and the inorganic world—that is, between the biosphere and the ecosphere in general. So we have natural expressions such as “living landscapes” and “the living planet.” There is nothing here that goes against the scientific attitude.

I take it therefore to be an empirically testable hypothesis that the attainment of well-rounded human maturity leads to *identification with all life forms* in a wide sense of “life” and including the acknowledgment of the intrinsic value of these forms. The process of maturation is here conceived as something different from the mere learning of new skills. It encompasses the realization of different kinds of capabilities inherent in human nature. These capabilities are not necessarily related to increasing one’s biological fitness.



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1. For details see: Naess, A. (1985). Identification as a source of deep ecological attitudes. In M. Tobias (Ed.). *Deep Ecology*, pp. 256–670 (San Diego, CA: Avant Books).

Through this conception of identification and maturity, ecologically sound policies gain a basis of justification that is not entirely homocentric, but is biocentric in the wide sense of *bios*.

Let me eliminate a couple of misunderstandings of this hypothesis about maturity. Even if 90 percent of humanity developed a high degree of identification with other life forms and openly acknowledged their intrinsic value, this might not stop governments from implementing policies resulting in large-scale extinctions and further destruction of wilderness and habitats. Social conditions such as hunger, war, and power conflicts on individual or group levels, along with mismanagement, may override considerations that spring from the genuine feelings and value priorities of the majority.

A tragic situation may arise: that attitudes toward nature show a high degree of maturity, but that social and political chaos make the forceful expression of these attitudes impossible. Or, biologists may conclude that the biological programming of *Homo sapiens* simply is such that human overpopulation and cruel dominance of other life forms are inevitable. In other words, mature realization of the social and political potential may not make a “live and let live” attitude realizable.

Let us not take such a pessimistic view too seriously—though it does point out the fact that an increase in the breadth and intensity of the identification process in large numbers of individuals does not automatically increase the political strength of the conservation movement. The fight for basic policy changes is a necessary corollary of the effort to assist the development of identification through education and otherwise.

Let us look more closely at the complex relationship between basic value positions and concrete environmental policies. It has been encouraging for me to lead a project of systematic interviews of so-called ordinary people on the rights of animals, plants, and landscapes, and on their intrinsic value. In spite of what one would guess from the way they vote (and I am speaking now as a Scandinavian), there is a substantial majority with quite far-reaching ideas about the rights

and value of life forms, and a conviction that *every life form has its place in nature* that we must respect.

On the other hand, there is one widespread opinion among ordinary people that should be disturbing to biologists. This is the opinion that scientists and so-called environmental experts have largely deserted them. It is not difficult to see some of the causes of this feeling. For example, people read about an expert who favors Plan A over Plan B as to where to place a dam, or how to increase the production of energy. The public has no available information about what the expert thinks in his heart. He may be of the opinion that both plans are irresponsible, that to increase energy production is sheer nonsense, and that the implied interference in natural processes is a calamity. But he or she (rarely a she, I am sorry to say) has been asked only to compare plans. If the expert publishes his real opinions, he will not be asked by authorities to function as an expert in the future.

In any case, whatever the causes of widespread silence, many people would give up their own passivity if offered more support or leadership by those whom they consider to be experts, or at least more knowledgeable and articulate than themselves.

Let me mention the questions raised in the interviews. The first part asks whether the interviewee thinks we have duties or obligations toward animals, plants, rivers, and landscapes. The great majority of persons interviewed maintain that we do have duties and obligations toward the nonhuman world, organic and inorganic. The second part asks analogous questions about rights. Answers have the same positive character. The third part concerns intrinsic value, or value in itself. Most people think they understand these expressions. Things may have value, people say, without having value for humans.

The last questions concern population, extinction, and territorial conflicts between humans and nonhumans. “Animals *have* equal rights but humans take away the right” is a common answer. When asked what they think about the prediction that a million species

may be wiped out if policies are not changed, it is pathetic to see how this idea elicits horror, indignation, and despair. In short, the answers of so-called ordinary people were such that one might, perhaps naively, expect them to press for substantially different conservation policies.

Are the experts really narrowly utilitarian in their views, and are they really in favor of present environmental policies? In an attempt to find out I recently sent a long personal letter to 110 people who influence national environmental policy in Norway. About one out of four has responded, some with long, interesting essays. The respondents include high-level personnel in the Departments of Finance, Justice, and Energy—persons with comprehensive educations in various branches of natural science and technology. The experts were asked to react to the following eight points, which, incidentally, I call “the platform of deep ecology,” or rather, one formulation of such a platform.

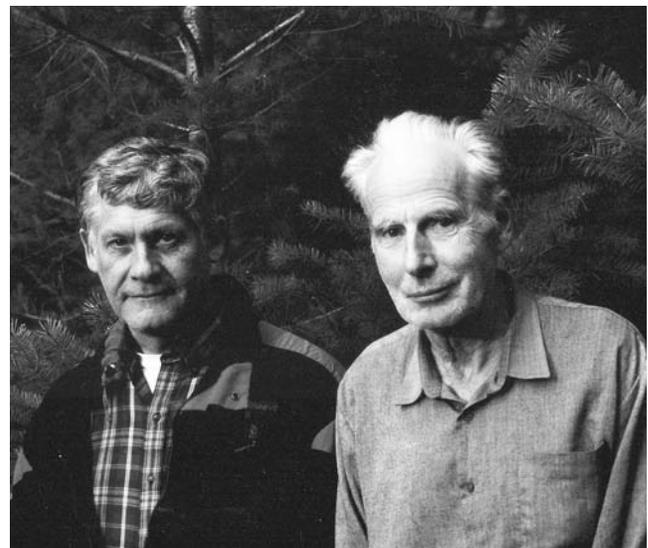
1. *The flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth has inherent value. The value of nonhuman life forms is independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.* The great majority indicated their agreement.
2. *Abundance and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth.* The great majority agrees.
3. *Humans have no right to reduce this abundance and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.* The great majority tend to agree. Many comment on the term “vital.”
4. *The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease in the human population, and the flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.* The great majority agree.
5. *Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.* The great majority agree.
6. *Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs would*

be deeply different from the present and would make possible a more joyful experience of the connectedness of all things. The great majority tend to agree. Some find the last sentence rhetorical and doubtful.

7. *The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.* The great majority tend to agree.
8. *Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation, directly or indirectly, to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.* The great majority agree.

The eight formulations are of course in need of clarification, elaboration, and comment. In the letter to the experts more than two pages of comments were added. One may suspect that some of those who did not answer my letter largely disagreed or at least did not find the formulations acceptable as expressions of their personal views. But the main point is clear: a tendency among respondents to concur.

These results do not confirm the belief of ordinary people that “the experts” have deserted them in their



George Sessions and Arne Naess, who together crafted the first version of the Deep Ecology Platform while they were camping in Death Valley in 1984. PHOTO: JORDAN FISHER SMITH

basic views on the man/nature relationship and in their views as to the necessity of fundamental changes in policy. *There is no pronounced technocratic philosophy of value.* The concrete governmental decisions that ordinary people find lamentable are rather based on priorities of a nonfundamental character plus the conviction of those experts that “people” can have *both* a steadily higher (material) standard of living *and* unspoiled nature. At least this is a general impression, though there is no scientific evidence that it is the case.

It is easy to accept lofty principles verbally. Hundreds of wars that we now consider more or less crazy were glorified by reference to God, patriotism, love of mankind, and supreme justice. Likewise it is easy to agree upon the intrinsic value of the richness and diversity of life on the planet Earth. What is needed is a methodology of persistently connecting basic value judgments and imperative premises with decisions in concrete situations of interference or noninterference in nature. What I therefore suggest is that those who are thought to be experts and scientists should repeatedly and persistently deepen their arguments with reference to basic value judgments and imperative premises. That is, they should announce their normative philosophy of life and discuss environmental problems in their most comprehensive time and space frame of reference—ultimately in terms of millions of years of evolution and most intimate and profound global interactions.

Neither the so-called deep ecology movement nor any other movement that attributes intrinsic value to the richness and diversity of life forms today meets antagonists with an opposite *articulated* philosophy.^[2] The movement to institute responsible, respectful treatment of nature is up against much more formidable forces than well-articulated antagonistic philosophies. Strong economic, social, and political forces are oper-

ating against it, as well as lifestyles, habitual attitudes, and the preferences of individuals who are encouraged to adopt a consumerist style. Old habitual attitudes find expression in such phrases as “fight nature,” “improved land,” “push back the jungle,” or “conquer Mt. Everest.”

To some it may appear that there is a conflict between what I have said about identification and what might be called fundamental human nature as it is understood by evolutionary biologists. Let us consider the hypothesis that all-around maturity among human beings inevitably fosters a high level of identification with all life forms. It is justifiable to doubt the compatibility of such a view with the contemporary theories of evolution and ethology. One may ask whether a rather impartial “live and let live” attitude implies a kind of altruism incompatible with the egoism or very narrow altruism of the human genetic heritage. Before answering we should agree that the concepts of egoism and altruism as understood by evolutionary and genetic theorists are not those shared by most people in everyday life. No criticism of either concept is implied by saying this; there is room for many concepts, each useful within its limits.

Without going into detail I will venture to say that deep changes of environmental policies in favor of nonhumans do not imply anything definite about any particular view of biological fitness. What is good for nonhumans obviously may also be good for humans; furthermore, there is nothing in the current theories about the evolution of behavior that contradicts the possibility of human management of the human population size.

In the conclusion of his book *Natural Selection and Social Behavior*, Richard D. Alexander says:

2. Various forms of Hegelianism conceive of humanity as “spiritualizing” nature, and allow that only through the agency of humankind can nature partake in the realm of intrinsic values. Such views are today still a step removed from representing an articulated, antagonistic philosophy; for instance, they don’t negate any of the Eight Points. Another potentially antagonistic philosophy is the Marxist “labor theory of value,” which has been interpreted to negate the intrinsic value of life forms. Only things transformed through labor acquire value, is one interpretation. But today, Marxists who work for the protection of wilderness propose a much wider concept of “labor” than that of gross material transformation.

We are, then, hedonistic or selfish individualists to the extent that such behavior maximizes the survival by reproduction of those copies of our genes residing in our own bodies; and we are group altruists to the extent that this behavior maximizes the survival by reproduction of the copies of our genes residing in the bodies of others. At least this is what we have evolved to be—and to all accounts it is all that we have evolved to be.

It is paramount to realize, however, that—as opposed to what we have evolved to be—what we actually are or become is whatever we can make of ourselves, given our history, and our propensities and talents, which are great, for creating novelty in our environments, at rates and of kinds that the process of genetic evolution has no possibility of controlling or keeping up with. Nowadays we are closer than ever to being able to become what we wish to be, if for no other reason than because we know about ourselves the things I have just mentioned.^[3]

Personally I would perhaps be a little more cautious about whether we are today more able than before to become what we wish to be. But at least we have more knowledge about the practical obstacles we face, and one obstacle is lack of articulate leadership.

How do environmental experts express themselves when they are hired to take part in vital environmental decisions, or when they are asked their views about what is going on on this planet? Not like the poets, and I think that is good. But the predominant way the experts express themselves in public needs some comment.

The so-called language of metaphors, used to a certain extent within the old naturalist tradition, is not competing, nor should it be competing, with the language of tough modern biology. On the other hand, there is not a single theorem in natural science that can

undermine the reality of any person's wealth of spontaneous experience. But biologists have the precious privilege to be acquainted with certain worlds, and in a vital sense to feel at home in these worlds, largely outside the experiences of others—worlds of microscopic living beings, and of life processes that amaze us all. These are sources of joy and wonder that the biologists should be able to expose and communicate, not only in the form of textbooks, but also through the direct language of spontaneous experience.

Spontaneous experience is not limited to so-called pure sense experience. It has cognitive elements, elements of acquaintance and insight rather than of abstract knowledge. These must not be left unexpressed in the name of science. There may of course be biologists who suspect that an expert who uses spontaneous language is incapable of scientific rigor, but we should not neglect our linguistic abilities out of a fear of such misunderstandings. When biologists refrain from using the rich and flavorful language of their own spontaneous experience of all life forms—not only of the spectacularly beautiful but of the mundane and bizarre as well—they support the value nihilism that is implicit in outrageous environmental policies.

The high-level experts I asked to comment on the eight points of deep ecology answered in a way favorable to a remarkably strong conservation policy. But they answered a personal letter from me, and I guaranteed not to reveal their names. These experts and most others do not propagate their strong views on conservation in public. Why? Here are some of my suggested reasons:

1. Time taken away from professional work.
2. Consequent adverse effects of this on promotion and status.
3. Feeling of insufficient competence outside their “expertise.”
4. Lack of training in the use of mass media and in facing nonacademic audiences.

3. Alexander, R.D. (1981). *Natural Selection and Social Behavior* (New York: Clarion Press), p. 276.

5. Negative attitude toward expressing “subjective” opinions and valuations, or violating norms of “objectivity”; reluctance to enter controversial issues.
6. Fear that colleagues or bosses think that they dabble in irrelevant, controversial fields, and that their going public is due to vainglory and publicity seeking.
7. Fear of fellow researchers, institution personnel, or administrations; fear of the stigma of being “unscientific.”

For example, when Barry Commoner says “Nature knows best!” and explains what he means, some philosophers who like to be scientific tend, nevertheless, to class this as rubbish because nature, not being an organism, cannot “know” anything. For some of them, to speak of “destruction” is taken to be unscientific because ecosystems only *change*, man’s interaction with the system being a factor of change on a par with all others. And one should not in serious discussion use a slogan such as “Let the river live!” because it affirms old superstitions of vitalism and animism. “Mysticism” is bad, they say; when somebody exclaims, “This place is part of me,” and points to a place along a river, it is assumed to be nonsense from the strict point of view of logic and physics.

But why choose this very particular way of interpreting these exclamations? Let us recognize that whereas some terms and phrases are scientific and others unscientific, most are neither. That is, the context is such that the distinction is irrelevant. The expression “the life of a river” may be introduced in a scientific text by using the terminology of ecosystemics. And the slogan “Let the river live!” has had an important function in situations of social conflict. When biologists participate in such conflicts they generally use the language of social conflict as others do, but if challenged they should be willing and able to clarify their use of this language. They may point out that exclaiming “Let the river live!” does not imply that the river is a biological organism, and that “Nature knows best!” does not imply that nature “knows” in the same sense

as a person “knows.” It is up to the challenger to justify the claim that there is a relation of implication.

What can be done to counteract the tendency to public silence among the experts who are in sympathy with strong conservation measures? Here are some suggestions:

1. Find them.
2. Listen to their explanations about why they are silent.
3. Find out whether they are willing in principle to expose their views publicly. If they are:
4. Help find suitable occasions at which they can enter public discussion, or:
5. Suggest themes of articles they can write or how they might add certain paragraphs to what they are writing. (We presuppose that they, as experts, touch upon problems of relevance to the intrinsic value of natural richness and diversity.)
6. Propose that they talk to their colleagues about the social and political issues discussed at their professional meetings.
7. Propose special sessions on these issues at their professional meetings.

In environmental conflicts today, deep motivation is necessary for dedication and persistence. Philosophical views encompassing ethical views are therefore relevant. The way we experience reality largely determines our ethical norms, including our environmental ethics.

What I have said so far is not meant to invalidate or make unnecessary narrow, utilitarian, short-range arguments. We need them in order to get things done. Let me end by mentioning an example of one such narrowly utilitarian proposal: There are wolves in many European countries. Controversies abound. Protection of all habitats is extremely costly and is often energetically fought against by the local communities affected. Recently wolf specialists have started to work out a plan for the conservation of wolves within the framework of a market economy. One simply tries to *sell* the idea that protection of wolves in large, thinly populated areas in many countries has local commer-

cial advantages. Hunting, photography, and viewing safaris are recommended. The chorus of howling wolves should be “sold” as nature’s most intense, most wild wilderness experience. (Actually, musical composers are already studying and using the howling structure.)^[4] An essential point is that the local population, not urban capitalists or the state, should earn the money. At least in this century, local people will shoot the wolves if they cannot make any money off them. The wolf specialist Ivar Mysterud, with whom I collaborate,^[5] uses the term “experience product,” and the source of the product is termed “experience resource.” It is the idea of Mysterud and others that we must adapt to the prevalent market economy, and not rely indefinitely on public funds. Wolves require extensive territories, and in Europe there are no more large uninhabited areas. The fight against shrinking habitats must use commercialism as a regrettable but necessary means of our present age.

Is this a “shallow” solution? I have mentioned this in order to emphasize that “romanticism” and “cyni-

cism” must be combined. By this I mean that philosophical or religious views, labeled romantic and sentimental by some, must be combined with what others will label cynicism and opportunism. But even the use of all these means may prove insufficient, and we may face the decision to give up protecting some wolf territories. There is much work to be done.

In short, biologists endowed with the necessary energy and enthusiasm should talk and act on the basis of a normative total view—what I call an *ecosophy*, or wisdom of household, not mere ecology, or knowledge of household. The biologists will combine philosophical, including ethical, fundamental positions with practical arguments. If they do this full of trust in doing the right thing, and without too many negative utterances against the opponents of strong conservation, they are unlikely to be hurt in their capacities as experts and scientists.

You know, Socrates was not popular among the Athenians. He pestered them, but in a way that made them respect him. That is all we can hope for as devoted conservationists: to be pests, but *respected* pests.

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4. For example, listen to the work of American jazz musician Paul Winter, Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer, or Norwegian composer Egil Kapstad.
5. See Naess A., & Mysterud, I. (1987). Philosophy of Wolf Policies. *Conservation Biology*, 1(1&2), 396–409.