CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, while summarizing the result of this study, I attempt a critique of Passmore’s use of the word ‘responsibility’ in his thesis of “Man’s Responsibility for Nature.” This book, despite its title, is not primarily concerned with philosophical discussion of man's responsibility 'for' nature (as opposed to his obligations to other humans), but rather with some philosophical aspects of a set of contemporary problems, which can be loosely classified as 'environmental' (or perhaps, less accurately 'ecological'). The notion of ‘Responsibility’ is nowhere explicitly analyzed therein. This draws us to the question - does it then make sense to speak of taking ‘responsibility for nature’, or being responsible for nature, or to appeal to nature as any basis for justifying environmental responsibilities? Passmore thinks that our primary, essentially our only, responsibilities are to humans and directly only for humans, not directly to or for nature at all. Nature only enters as the indirect object of the responsibilities. Thus, Passmore’s position is that of ‘to ourselves’ or ‘for ourselves’ and not for nature.
Many of Passmore's main arguments for pollution control measures; population control and conservation are based on man's own self-interests, on the damage we will conflict on ourselves unless we take measures to protect the environment. This attitude is taking responsibility for man's own actions, not for the environment. Pollution produces poisoned drinking water and food, damages recreational forests and so on. Tropical forest destruction removes opportunities for new medicines and improved food crops, increases the pace of greenhouse warming and so on. These are all very good reasons for considering action to protect the environment, perhaps the only effective reasons for doing so. In any event they play a leading role in current environmental concern; they are leading us to develop a very important set of environmental mitigation policies.

But they do not stem from, nor lead to, any intrinsic concern for the environment as such, whether ethically based or otherwise. Instead, these considerations are what C.A. Hooker calls 'prudentially' based.¹ This position, he claims, is in fact the commonest position and it provides the minimal basis from which we might try to justify taking some (indirect) responsibility for nature. And in justifying reasons, he continues, we can cite all of the widespread environmental damage and

ecological destruction with which we currently threaten the biosphere and, through that, threaten ourselves and our children. Against this backdrop, I have tried to show what ethical basis there is for an environmental responsibility. The environmental crisis raises certain ethical questions. It poses radical questions regarding our relationship to and responsibility to the environment. This demands an equally radical response. There is an urgent need for a radical commitment to the earth and the development of an ecological ethic that is capable of protecting the earth and everything in it. Thus the environmental crisis as such becomes a problem in ethics.

The rejection of classical understanding of ethics is a move that has currently come about as a way of extending ethics to the non-human world. In most traditional ethical systems human beings have been given the central position assuming that the non-human world— the environment— is material to be used by humans as they see fit. Environmentally concerned critics argue that this framework, by overestimating the importance of human beings, fails to show the appropriate limits of human behavior toward non-human beings. Lacking such a sense of limits, man is destroying the biosphere needed to sustain both human and non-human life.
Different views have been generated as displeasure with the classical traditional system of ethics thus giving birth to environmental ethics as a distinct discipline with environmental philosophers drafting and vigorously defending a variety of revolutionary theories to bring nature within the purview of ethics. These theories aim primarily at extending ethical concern beyond traditional limits—human life, health, and welfare—to include a large number of entities and collections of entities—such as species and ecosystems that have not been given moral consideration previously. J.Baird Callicott says that an environmental ethic is supposed to govern human relations with non-human natural entities. It would, for e.g., prohibit or censure as wrong, certain modes of conduct affecting animals and plants. According to an environmental ethic, he adds, it may be wrong to mutilate a tree, or pollute a river or develop a wilderness. Passmore provides no room for a 'new', environmental ethic as such. There is no need, for him, for the rejection of the basic ethical value systems of western civilization.

There are stark inconsistencies in his handling of the concepts of 'conservation' and 'preservation'. Passmore devotes consecutive chapters to 'conservation' and 'preservation'. He starts the former with the definitions: 'To conserve is to save....I shall use the word to cover

2 Refer chapter III

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only the saving of natural resources for later consumption." He continues: "Where the saving is primarily a saving from rather than a saving for, the saving of species and wilderness from damage and destruction, I shall speak rather of 'preservation'."^4

Passmore notes that conservationists and preservationists often work together on particular issues, but "their motives are quite different: the conserver of forest has his eye on the fact that posterity, too, will need timber, the preserver hopes to keep large areas of forest forever untouched by human hands." Thus the key to Passmore's definitions of conservation and preservation is the motive of the environmentalist.

Passmore asserts that we have seriously to ask ourselves whether it constitutes a genuine problem that at an ever-increasing rate men are converting wildernesses into tamed landscape—into farms, towns, suburbs, tourist resorts—and destroying the plants and animals which once shared the earth with him. There are two ways, he says, of trying to answer these questions i.e. by assigning instrumental and intrinsic values. One set of answers is couched in terms of instrumental values to humans of preserved ecosystems and species, the second in terms

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^3 Passmore, p 73
^4 Ibid.
^5 Ibid
independent of human interests: "As it is sometimes put, they have a 'right to exist'. The first view can easily be incorporated within the traditional Graeco-Christian picture of the world, the second view presents greater difficulties."^6

Passmore notes the "usefulness" in fulfilling human interests need not be construed narrowly,^7 and mentions the value of wilderness for protecting biological diversity, for science, recreation, human solitude, moral uplift, and aesthetic experience. At the crucial juncture of the chapter, he however notes that these arguments "would not be considered adequate by the more uncompromising preservationists," because, as Fraser Darling says, "the essential attitude (in such arguments) is not far in advance of that of a timber merchant."^8 Passmore calls these arguments "essentially conservationist in character," and moves directly to a discussion of saving for nature’s sake:

It is at this point, indeed, that the cry grows loudest for an new morality, a new religion, which would transform man's attitude,

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^6 Ibid 101
^7 Ibid 101-102
which would lead him to believe that it is intrinsically wrong to destroy a species, cut down a tree, clear a wilderness.⁹

His analysis of arguments for preservation is summed up by referring again to the first group as “primarily conservationist in spirit,” and implies that the only true preservationist arguments are ones that rest on the premise that “destruction of species and wildernesses (is) intrinsically wrong.”¹⁰

It now becomes very clear why environmental ethicists, to the extent that they accept Passmore’s conceptions of conservation and preservation, find these terms of little use. If the conservation-preservation distinction is a distinction in motives, which reflect a difference in theory of value, and if conservation motives derive from concern for sustaining the availability of future human resources, preservationists must be attributed opposed motives— they hope to save nature because of its intrinsic value.

Passmore does admit that the West needs, to some extent, “a new concept of nature” and “a new set of moral principles to act as a guide in its relationships” to nature. The West must learn an “active cherishing”

⁹ Ibid, 111
¹⁰ Ibid, 125.
of nature. However, while Passmore grants these points, he places a stronger emphasis on the sufficiency of traditional Western concepts, and he clearly implies that this sufficiency rests upon the strengths of anthropocentric principles:

The traditional moral teaching of the West, Christian or utilitarian, has always taught men, however, that they ought not so to act as to injure their neighbors. And we have now discovered that the disposal of wastes into sea or air, the destruction of ecosystems, the procreation of large families, the depletion of resources, constitute injury to our fellow men, present and future. To that extent, conventional morality, without any supplementation whatsoever, suffices to justify our ecological concern our demand for action against the polluter, the depleter of natural resources, the destroyer of species and wildernesses.

Bryan G Norton has put an alternative definition of conservation and preservation forward. Bryan thinks Passmore could have defined conserving and preserving as motive-neutral activities: to conserve a resource or the productive potential of a resource-generating system is to use it wisely, with the goal of maintaining its future availability or productivity. To preserve is to protect an ecosystem or a

\[^1\] Ibid, 186
\[^2\] Ibid, 186-87
species, to the extent possible, from the disruptions attendant upon it from human use. Armed with these definitions of activities, he suggests, one could define a conservationist policy as one that recommends conserving the resources and productive potentials of ecosystems in all or most cases for future consumption. A preservationist policy would recommend that most ecosystems not yet seriously altered by human management should be maintained in their unaltered state by excluding disruptive human activities from them. A conservationist would thus be an individual, who, faced with concrete choices regarding resource use, usually advocates a conservationist approach. A preservationist is someone who, faced with concrete choices regarding what to do with a pristine ecosystem or area, usually advocates preservation of it. Bryan claims that these definitions make the classification of individuals as conservationists or preservationists a 'matter of degree'. The designation generalizes over their policy recommendations for concrete choices.

Continuing further, throughout his book, Passmore characterizes Eastern thought as mystical, and warns that it will undermine Western science and technology – and thus endanger the future of Western civilization as a whole. To permit Eastern influence on Western environmental philosophy, Passmore claims in the final chapter, would expose Westerners once again to "one of the most dangerous illusions to
which [Western civilization] has been subject, the mystical, totalistic illusion." According to Passmore the German Idealism and American Transcendentalism of the nineteenth century were only a small step away from "the truth of Zoroastrianism." And in the twentieth century, the West is in equal peril from ecology, as exemplified by the views of Fraser Darling and Aldo Leopold — which Passmore believes, can most properly be thought of "as being in essence mystical, as anti-scientific, or as entailing 'a philosophy of wholeness'."

Like Cobb¹⁴, Passmore argues that there is no point in turning to Eastern philosophies and religions because, even if they do putatively endorse ecologically congenial attitudes and values, they were ineffective in preventing environmental degradation in the East. Eastern reverence for nature, he notes, 'has not prevented Japan from developing an industrial civilization second to none in its offensiveness to ear, eye and nose.' He goes beyond Cobb, however, in recommending that we not tamper at all with our inherited Western ethical and religious framework — doubting, on the one that it is possible deliberately to change the direction of Western traditions in any significant way, but expressing

¹⁴ John B Cobb, Jr in his *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, published in 1972 examines the possibility that non-Western views of nature be adopted by the West. He argues that the Chinese worldview, (represented by Taoism) has many of the environmental assets but he contends that they were not able to prevent deforestation and other ecologically destructive practices in ancient China. Given the historically demonstrated ineffectiveness of these worldviews, he concludes that it is more prudent to fix the Western tradition than to try to graft on to an alien one.
concern, on the other hand, that a successful change in direction of any kind could mean the demise of Western civilization as we know it. With regard to the former he writes, "'needing a new ethic' is not in the least like 'needing a new coat.' A 'new ethic' will arise out of existing attitudes, or not at all." And with regard to the latter, he argues that taking environmentalists' concerns seriously will inevitably bring an end, among other things, to Western-style political freedoms; and he concludes, "better a polluted world than this!"

It is in man's own very self-interest, either as individuals or as a community of species, to take these actions. There is no ethical obligation to the environment as such. Rather Passmore offers some ethical basis for assuming general environmental responsibilities, which derive from obligations to our future selves or our future children. He says out of justice and out of love, we should hand over to our next generation a world whose condition makes it impossible for them to fulfill themselves as human beings. But though these are clearly ethical responsibilities, they are not necessarily intrinsically responsible ones.

To the question of religious influence on the way we treat nature, he raises three criticisms. Firstly, for him, it is not necessary to cultivate spirituality in order to address our treatment of nature. We need only apply, in a new context, moral principles that have long served
successfully to regulate our behavior towards one another - e.g. tolerance, concern for suffering.

Secondly, it is spiritual and religious ideas that, historically, have been the problem, not the cure. While Passmore rejects Lynn White’s claim that Judeo-Christianity, with its doctrine of man’s ‘domination’ of nature, is the culprit, he himself pins the blame on another religious/philosophical tradition - Stoicism - that got grafted onto Christianity. It was the Stoics, says Passmore, who were responsible for the idea that nature is created by God for man, to do with as he will.

Thirdly, spiritual traditions that are free from the Stoic, anthropocentric attitude, tend to be ‘quietist’, that attitude that preaches a contemplative relation to nature. He suggests an ‘activist’ one when he says, ‘if the world’s environmental problems are to be solved at all, it can only be by that old-fashioned procedure, thoughtful action’. For him, the ‘Hands off’, ‘Let Nature be!’ attitude will not do in an era when the environment has been severely degraded. He takes it as a derogation of our ‘responsibility for nature’ and our responsibility to our fellow human beings, present and future.

\[15\text{ Ibid p 194}\]
Retrieval of a spiritual sensibility towards nature may not be necessary for dealing with greenhouse effects and the like, but those who advocate this retrieval do not primarily have such particular, practical problems in mind. They are also concerned with retrieving the conditions for a more fulfilling human life. It should be stressed that by no means all advocates of a spiritual sensibility towards nature have in mind 'nature mysticism' or passive, aesthetic contemplation of mountains etc. For example, in the Zen Buddhist tradition, meditation and contemplation are not disjoint from, and indeed are primarily conducted in and through, one's everyday practical life.

Passmore's thesis that our only responsibilities are to humans and directly only for humans, and not to or for nature at all is evident in his 'treatment of animals'. This brings me to the discussion of Chapter V, which is the 'Animal Rights' debate that centers on arguments for and against the view that 'animals have rights for the same reasons that humans do'. Some say moral significance lies not in our differences as species but rather our commonalities as subjects of a life. The animal rights movement poses a fundamental evolutionary challenge to human beings in the midst of severe crises in the social and natural worlds. It is an assault on human species identity. It smashes the compass of
'speciesism' and calls into question the cosmological maps whereby humans define their place in the world. Animal rights demand that human beings give up their sense of superiority over other animals. It challenges people to realize that power demands responsibility, that might is not right.

People who support animal rights advance the most radical idea to ever land on human ears: animals are not food, clothing, resources, or objects of entertainment, experimentation. They believe that animals deserve consideration of their best interests regardless of whether they are cute to be kept as pets, useful to humans, or endangered and regardless of whether any human cares about them at all. They argue animals should have the right to equal consideration of their interests.

But I am not convinced, says Passmore, that it is appropriate to speak of animals as having 'interests' unless 'interests' are identified with needs- and to have needs, as a plant, too, has needs, is by no means the same thing as to have rights. It is one thing to say that it is wrong to treat plants and animals in a certain manner, quite another thing to say that they have a right to be treated differently. For him, "the idea of 'rights' is simply not applicable to what is non-human". He echoes

16 Peter Singer's usage.
17 Passmore, Attitudes, 1975,p 262).
18 Passmore1974,116
D.G.Ritchie by saying that animals cannot have rights, by not being members of the human society. Animals are viewed, thus, as means to our ends, as instruments for our development, our interests, our quality of life.

Passmore's attitude conforms to the views of many natural rights theorists, who no doubt recognize that there is an environmental crisis but claim that to solve it we need only reform current practices. No radical shift in our moral or metaphysical self-conception in needed. For example, we need to pay more heed to the rights of people than to clean air and water. Industries that infringe on such rights must be encouraged and if necessary, forced to clean up wastes. According to this humanistic viewpoint, it is morally acceptable to kill off millions of species, drastically alter the biosphere, and treat animals and plants like machines, so long as these activities do not interfere with human 'rights. To those who regard such treatment of non-humans as callous and even immoral, natural rights theorists reply that we can do moral evil only to beings that have rights against us as moral agents. And non-humans allegedly have no such rights.

Here I have shown that Passmore's view that rights cannot be applied to what is not human speaks for itself that it makes sense to
speak of rights only on the context of human beings or human society. This argument that the concept of rights derive exclusively from human society presumably rests on a social contract account of rights. Passmore’s account of animal rights comes close to the Social contract theory or contractualism, a theory, which has been ‘unfriendly towards animals’. Passmore would not allow animals into the morality parameters.

It is without doubt that animals and humans are different but what we can do is, at the least, transcend the comfortable boundaries of humanism and urge a qualitative leap in moral consideration. We should not only change our views of or towards one another within the species we share, but also realize that species boundaries are as arbitrary as those of race and sex. Our task is to provoke humanity to move the moral bar from reason and language to sentience and subjectivity. The distorted conceptions of humans as demigods who command the planet must be replaced with the far more humble and holistic notion that we belong to and are dependent upon vast networks of living relationships. If humanity and the living world as a whole is to have a future, human beings must embrace a ‘universal ethics of respects all life’.

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19 Val Routley, 1975, p 175
20 Mark Bernstein, 1997, p 49
If we examine the human history and its religions we see that religiously and culturally evolved environmental ethics existed even in the past. This is evident if we see the place of nature in many indigenous cultures. In some cultures nature was represented as divine and therefore the direct object of reverence. In some traditional cultures and religions, nature was the creation of God and thus should be used with care and passed on intact to the future generations. This is explicitly presented in the Vedic concept of ‘rna’\(^2\) or the concept of ‘indebtedness’. We take from nature and it is our duty and responsibility to repay nature. We cannot take more than what we can repay. This debt is to God and the repayment requires regular prayers and worship, and selfless service to all of God's creatures. Perhaps this is the reason why Indians regard the river Ganges to be sacred and likewise worship her (although it by no means follow that Ganges is left untouched). The sacredness of the river is believed to manifest in various physical forms. It not only provides means of livelihood to the immediate inhabitants but also people from far off places come on pilgrimage to the holy water for physical healing, spiritual cleansing and renewal. Thus, mainly because of its providence, they revere it as sacred and they take care of it to show gratitude and indebtedness to it.

\(^2\) According to the Hindu concept, every individual is expected to pay three debts during his lifetime. (See Morgan, Kenneth, *The Religion of the Hindus*, Delhi: Motilal Benarsidass, 1953, p.135-36. The Taittiriya Samhita (6.3) of the Vedas outlines three types of debts- rsi-rna, deva-rna and pitr-rna.
In other cultures too, man is thought to be a part and parcel of nature, and thus is in harmony with nature. In still others a oneness of all life is envisioned together with an attitude of respect to all living things. 'All entities, man and even the rock included were joined together in a single animated whole.'

With the emergence of the industrial culture nature no longer enjoys the earlier status. The object of reverence has turned into an object of exploitation. The emergence of secularism, humanism and materialism of industrial culture has demystified and undermined the pre-industrial environment ethics, aggravating the destructive impact of the industrial technology. The irony is that just when we need environmental ethics most, global industrial civilization has, with its infinitely greater power for environmental destruction, eclipsed the environmental ethics that prevailed in the past and that served to restrain traditional human patterns of resource depletion.

The need of the hour is a global environmental consciousness that spans national and cultural boundaries. Solidarity of an international eco-centric environmental ethic with many and diverse traditional environmental ethics should include the realization that we inhabit one

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planet with the other non human beings in nature. Man also needs to 
realize that other plants and animals of this planet, if left alone by 
humans follow a natural order of things and remain one with, and a part 
of the environment. They do what evolution has programmed them to do 
and live in balance with the rest of the environment.

The discussion different religions and their attitude towards nature 
shows that religions help make human beings aware that there are limits 
to their control over the animate world and that their arrogance and 
manipulative power over nature can backfire. Religion instills the 
recognition that human life cannot be measured by material possessions
and that the ends of life go beyond conspicuous consumption. It helps 
the individual to recognition of human infallibility. While technology 
gives the individual the physical power to create or to destroy the world, 
religion gives the moral strength to grow in virtue by nurturing restraint, 
humility, and liberation from self-centeredness.

Summing up, Passmore's thesis as a whole does not offer a 
concrete model for sustainable development. Unless we give weight to 
non-human world and to future interests we are not giving full 
consideration to human needs of both the present and the future. His 
views are inimical to environmental values, arbitrary and morally
impoverished, because while exacting the value of human, rational beings, they deny moral consideration to non-human or non-rational beings. Passmore, in dismissing religion as a basis for rectifying the environmental problems, fails to grasp the significance of different religions in the treatment of nature. Thus in essence, Passmore's thinking does not bring much difference to what has already been man's essential attitude concerning nature. His thesis, emphasizing on the virtues of western science and it's advances, instead gives a somewhat subtle blessing to existing human-centered relationships with nature with it's component exploitation and destruction. To put it simply, the status quo has been upheld by Passmore's thesis of Man's Responsibility for Nature.