

Central Planning: Also a Bad Idea for the Environment

Today I learned (or was reminded) that whale sharks regularly migrate thousands of miles across their oceans to feed and give birth. They will travel incredible distances for food – far further by natural means than most humans who have ever lived.

This is just one of those little things about nature that makes me shake my head in wonder. This world is so big and yet is just the right size for the needs of creatures like whale sharks. So when I consider the environmental issues which are so popular today, I have to hand it to the environmental advocates – they are right to praise Earth's uniqueness and its goodness for life.

The natural response even I felt when I heard about whale sharks was a desire to protect their niche in biological life. I'd like them to continue to be able to migrate as they wished forever. Such fascinating things shouldn't come to an end. And that's about the level at which most environmental advocates argue: **1) protect something that exists 2) by imposing a protection policy.**

These are understandable reactions and assumptions. But environmental central planning (which is mostly what you get with illiberal environmentalists these days) ignores two facts.

First, things like whale shark migration patterns – and wolf populations and rivers and even whole climates – emerged through the process of evolution, which discovers and builds through creative destruction. New life and new forms move forward to the extent that old life and old forms go away. To believe that preserving a thing in its current state is necessarily the right goal would be a mistake. Others before me have noticed this, but it bears repeating.*

Secondly, imposing top-down protection policies (on the basis of assumption #1) draws on the same destructive thinking that causes most environmental damage: monoculture.

Monoculture – typically meant as an over-reliance on a single crop – shows up outside of agriculture, too. Monoculture can come from an over-reliance on a single fuel source, or an over-reliance on a single method of transportation or manufacturing, or from an over-reliance on a single way of thinking. As you can guess, monoculture is a major source of environmental problems from overfishing to pollution.

Monoculture is often a side effect of central planning. Say you're imposing policies for a large area. You're likely to pass over the need for variety, complexity, and spontaneity. Central plans can't adapt to the need for differences in environmental practices and priorities from one place to another.

Think about it. Even a few examples from my part of the world (the US) could suffice. Would we be farming so much of the earth's land for corn? People certainly found it easy to destroy the South's soil with over-farmed cotton when governments subsidized slavery. Would we have kudzu covering the South if not for the work of the 1930s Soil Conservation Service? Would we be so reliant on automobiles if interstates hadn't been funded and built at scale by Eisenhower and his administration?

Probably not.

Planting cotton, corn, or kudzu isn't bad. Driving cars isn't bad. These things become harmful when done at the scale of monoculture, which is also the scale of central planning. That many environmentalists want to set policy centrally at the global level – beyond even the already over-large national level – should concern people who care about life on Earth. Schemes like adding sulfuric acid to the atmosphere to stop global warming are concerning for the same reasons. A centrally-planned mistake becomes a mistake everyone has to live with (or die with).

The simple truth is this: we don't know what an ideal environmental balance looks like. We have an idea of what a good one is, though. We can work toward that. But doing it from the top down imposes far more risk and destruction than doing it from the bottom up. Central planning – and thus monoculture – is not the way forward for a healthy human habitat. So when it comes to the environment, I'm leaning toward "letting a thousand flowers bloom." Individuals and communities can each make a difference on a local level, with thousands of different attempts and experiments running alongside each other. Solutions to environmental problems should emerge in much the same way as whale shark migration: spontaneously.

Or, as a wise Friedrich Hayek impersonator once rapped:

I don't want to do nothing – there's plenty to do! The question I ponder is who plans for who . . . I want plans by the many, not plans by the few.

***Intellectual credits:** Isaac Morehouse on his critique of species conservation, Friedrich Hayek on emergent order, Alex Epstein on general environment things