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Considering nature and de-extinction

A philosophical enquiry session for teens and adults, designed by Michelle Sowe
using materials from credited sources.

Duration: 1.75 hours (i.e. 105 mins).

Resources needed:

- Audio set-up (amp/speakers).
- Audio clip for Part 3.
- Visuals: Slide show (optional) **OR** printed resources for Part 1 (see page 8) and printed images for Part 2 (see pages 9 – 14).
- Easel, corkboard, butchers paper & bullclips, and markers for taking notes during discussion.

[Time from start: 00:00]

Part 1: Intervening in nature

Stimulus: I pluck a leaf...

(1 min)

This stimulus and the discussion plan that follows both come from the book Provocations by David Birch.

Facilitator: Please read the following narrative stimulus:

I leave the house and I take a walk. This is what I do:

I pluck a leaf.

I break a branch.

I chop down a tree.

I burn down a forest.

I flood a continent.

I freeze the earth.

Use a visual aid to display the six actions described above. You may wish to print the A4 page at the end of this document.

Discussion: Intervening in nature

(29 mins)

At which point do my actions become wrong, if at all?

When is it OK to intervene in nature, and when is it not OK?

Are we part of nature, or separate from it?

Do trees have rights?

Does nature have value in itself?

Are all living things sacred?

Do only sentient things have rights?

Do some things have more rights than others?

Is chopping down a tree murder?

Are humans the only creatures that can violate nature?

[Time from start: 00:30]

Part 2: What is nature?

Stimulus: A Thousand Years Into the Future

(2 mins)

This stimulus features a comic by Jerel Dye, used with permission.

Facilitator: Begin by nominating two students to play the roles of 'brother' and 'sister', in the comic frames that will follow. The students will only need to read some lines aloud, slowly and clearly, when the time comes. But it is the facilitator who begins the narration.

Show Image 1. Facilitator – read aloud the following:

1000 years in the future, after the collapse of life on Earth, survivors of the apocalypse have made Mars their new home.

They grow genetically-modified crops in a terraformed landscape.

One day, a sister and brother return to Earth.

(The 'brother' and 'sister' now get ready to read, in turn.)

Show Image 2.

Brother: **The trip out took most of the morning, but we passed the time easily enough with conversation.**

Show Image 3.

Sister: **I wonder what this must have looked like once.**

Brother: **Like covered in plants and green.**

Sister: **Yeah.**

Brother: **It was all white once too, covered in snow during the Ice Age.**

Show Image 4.

Sister: **It's hard to imagine, when you're looking at it.**

Brother: **It's all nature though, right. Even though it's empty. I mean, this is more natural than the plants back home.**

Sister: **What? You're crazy. What do you mean?**

Brother: **Crop plants have been under human thumbs from way before the collapse.**

Show Image 5.

Sister: **Anyway, this is like real nature, raw, brutal... beautiful.**

Brother: **It is beautiful.**

Tell students that's the end of the story. Thank the 'sister' and 'brother'.

If working with younger students, refer back to Image 4 and make sure that everyone understands what it means:

- 'back home' refers to Mars.
- 'under human thumbs' refers to people doing agriculture.
- 'the collapse' refers to the apocalypse that ended life on Earth.

Discussion: A Thousand Years Into the Future

(28 mins)

Show Image 6 again.

The sister says that this Earth is more natural than the plants back home (on Mars). Do you agree?

Show Image 5 again where the sister says "this is like real nature, raw, brutal..."

What is real nature?

Further questions (by David Birch):

What makes something natural?

Is Mumbai as natural as the Nile?

Is an email as natural as a storm?

Is a spider's web natural?

Is a beaver's dam natural?

Is anything more natural than anything else?

[Time from start: 00:50]

Part 3: De-extinction

Stimulus: An argument in favour of de-extinction

(7 mins)

> *Play the audio clip accompanying this workshop plan.*

Discussion: De-extinction

(28 mins)

Is de-extinction a good idea?

If we could resurrect all the extinct species, would that make the world a better place?

Would it be more biodiverse? If so, would this be a good in itself?

Is de-extinction natural or unnatural?

Could de-extinction be a way of making reparations for the destructive actions of our ancestors? Is it our responsibility to reverse the environmental damage they caused? (E.g. by hunting to extinction, or destroying habitats)

If so, how far back in history should we go to correct past mistakes?

Is de-extinction a way of achieving environmental justice?

If we *should* seek de-extinction, which animals should we resurrect first? Are we tempted to focus on the cute/dramatic?

Can we ever anticipate all the adverse side-effects of technological innovations? If not, is that a reason to deliberately avoid using new technologies?

Is all technology inherently flawed or evil?

[Time from start: 01:25]

Part 4: The Right to Life

Stimulus: Smallpox narrative

(2 mins)

This stimulus and the discussion plan that follows are both adapted from the book Provocations by David Birch.

Facilitator: Please read the following narrative.

Smallpox has existed for at least 3000 years. Its rash has been found on the faces of Egyptian mummies. In the 20th Century alone, an estimated 300 million people died from it. It's a disease caused by the variola virus and its most conspicuous symptom is blistering, which develops all over the body, even in the mouth and throat, but mostly on the face and arms. It kills about a third of all those infected.

Though there is no cure, smallpox was officially eradicated in 1979. The variola virus, however, still exists. It is preserved in two high-security facilities, one in Russia and the other in the US. The World Health Organization, which was instrumental in eradicating smallpox, has for decades been calling for the complete destruction of the variola virus.

The request by the World Health Organization has raised concern. It has been argued that if the virus were to be destroyed, it would be the first instance of a human intentionally acting with the explicit goal of eliminating another life form from the planet. It would constitute an unthinking disregard for nature. In arguing for the conservation of species, the biologist David Ehrenfeld has said, "they should be conserved because they exist and because this existence is itself but the present expression of a continuing historical process of immense antiquity and majesty."

The deliberate extinction of a species – the total annihilation of a life form, is perhaps an act worthy of moral scrutiny.

Discussion questions overleaf.

Discussion: The Right to Life

(18 mins)

Does the variola virus have rights?

Should the variola virus be made extinct?

Does it deserve extinction?

Are rights based on desert?

Do harmful things not deserve rights?

Do we have the right to deliberately make a species extinct?

Should we be humbled by nature? Is it greater than us? Is it majestic?

Is all life intrinsically valuable?

Do all beings have a right to life?

[Time from start: 01:45]

END OF SESSION