[*JSRNC* 5.2 (2011) 121-125]
doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i2.121

JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Guest Editors' Introduction: Imagining Ecotopia*

Evan Berry

Department of Philosophy and Religion,
American University, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW,
Washington, DC 20016, USA
berry@american.edu

James D. Proctor

Environmental Studies Program, Lewis & Clark College,
0615 Palatine Hill Rd., Portland, OR 97219, USA
jproctor@lclark.edu

We dedicate this series of articles to Jim Kopp, gentle bear of a man and utopian scholar, who patiently introduced us to the immense related literature and key figures in Oregon's history. Though Jim did not live to see the fruits of our collective labors, his influence shines throughout these writings. We also acknowledge financial support via the John Templeton Foundation.

Though only occasionally labeled as such, ecotopias feature abundantly in contemporary environmental discourse. Popular films, such as *Avatar* and *2012*, address the desire for a more perfect union between the human and the nonhuman, and do so by imaginatively depicting what such a union might look like. Abiding and ephemeral gatherings of people across the United States (and globally as well) attempt to syncopate the communitarian impulse with ecological well-being. This dynamic—the deployment of ecological ideals as tools of social and economic organization—is widely cited by journalists working to

* The publication of this and a number of future issues of the *JSRNC* focusing on religion, nature, and science are being facilitated by a grant from the Metanexus Institute, with additional support from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Office of Research, and the Departments of Anthropology and Religion, at the University of Florida. The International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture, and the editors of this journal, gratefully acknowledge this support—Bron Taylor, *JSRNC* Editor-in-Chief.

capture the changing landscape of environmental practices. For example, Ernest Callenbach's influential novel *Ecotopia*—properly credited as the source of this neologism—has been described as 'the novel that predicted Portland [Oregon]' (Timberg 2008). Similar claims are widely circulated: the planned community of Serenbe, Georgia has been hailed as 'the New Utopia' (Nygren and Hanes 2011); the effort to redevelop Treasure Island in San Francisco, California was aimed at creating a 'Super-Green City of the Future' (Ward 2009); and planned cities in the People's Republic of China and in the United Arab Emirates were explicitly labeled 'ecotopias' (Loder 2008). What is the significance of the prevalence of ecotopianism in contemporary environmental discourse? And how can scholars of religion and nature better understand it?

As a term popularized in the mid-1970s by Callenbach's novel about a breakaway republic in the western United States, ecotopia echoes Sir Thomas More's emphasis on the question of place (*topos*) in articulating political and social ideals (Callenbach 1990). Following More's *Utopia*, *Ecotopia* speaks of a place that is both 'good' and 'unreal': etymologically derived from '*oikos*' and '*topos*', 'ecotopia' might be literally translated as 'home place', a conjunction that calls for thoughtful reflection about how human communities imagine themselves to inhabit places. But beyond its playful invocation of More's famous discourse, Callenbach's novel is drawn from a deep current in utopian thought. Many earlier expressions of the desire to perfect or correct society, both in literature and in experimental communities, were also grounded in a concern about human impacts on the natural world and framed nature in religious or spiritual terms. Classic utopian visions—from ancient texts such as Hesiod's *Works and Days* or Virgil's *Eclogues*, to early modern works like Tomaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* or Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*—share what might be called the ecotopian impulse or tendency. Previous scholars have contributed significantly to understanding this tendency—variously describing 'utopias of sufficiency' (de Geus 1999) or lauding the 'transgressive potential' of ecological utopias (Pepper 2005). Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, then, need not be taken as belonging to a marginal subgenre of utopias, but rather, as a focused meditation on the ecological dimension of utopian thought. *The Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* offers an ideal forum in which to analyze the ways in which this deeply rooted cultural quest for a more perfect union between humans and the nonhuman realm is often characterized by distinctively religious overtones.

The collection of essays gathered in this special issue addresses these questions and advances the scholarly discussion of ecotopia and ecotopianism. This area is significant to the study of religion and nature because

it helps situate the hopes and desires that animate contemporary environmental politics within the rich cultural history of utopian aspirations for better lifestyles, landscapes, and polities. In an era where local social movements grapple with the impacts of global climate change and where 'place-based spiritualities' are lauded because of their implications for an ecologically interconnected world, questions of place and place-making remain as compelling and complex as ever. The importance of place in environmental discourse is difficult to overstate: critics regularly cite the 'rootlessness' of the modern age as a chief cause of ecological ills and, conversely, suggest that 'rootedness' is vital for environmental solutions (e.g. Vitek and Jackson 1996). Because the widespread ecotopian desire for a renewal of small scale, place-based societies runs in tension with equally common egalitarian aspirations for global justice, it remains far from clear what kinds of 'placed societies' contemporary environmental discourse envisions (Heise 2008). How, but through an apocalyptic return to the local, can there be hope for our global cosmopolitan civilization? In the face of such concerns, there remains a lacuna of academic work that critically engages how 'roots', as well as other kinds of cultural place-makings, are established, lost, recovered, and imagined. Ecotopianism affords scholars an appropriate point of entry into such conversations about the meaning of place—that is, about the linkages between nature and culture. The issue opens, therefore, with David Barnhill's analysis of the category 'ecotopia'. Barnhill ventures a theory of ecotopianism and examines the small but dynamic field that has coalesced around questions related to harmonizing social organization with ecological well-being.

The impetus for this special issue was the 'Ecotopia Revisited' research project headed by Jim Proctor of Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon during 2008 and 2009. This collaborative endeavor sought to shed light on how environmental yearnings (and anxieties) shape contemporary Pacific Northwestern communities. The regional focus of Callenbach's utopia—very much in line with the bioregionalist vision shared by many of his contemporaries (e.g. Biehl 1996; Snyder 1995)—pushed scholars involved with 'Ecotopia Revisited' to consider carefully the scale at which ecological ideas are invoked. The Pacific Northwest is frequently lauded as a lush expanse of mountains and forests, reverberating colonial discourses about the New World and nineteenth-century celebrations of the American frontier (O'Connell 2003). But the Pacific Northwest, like other regions of the continental United States, is today plagued with ecological challenges such as urban sprawl, pollution of marine ecosystems, habitat destruction, and the rampant spread of non-native plants and animals. What does it mean that a particular

region is closely associated—whether correctly or not—with agricultural fecundity, sublime grandeur, and an ecologically progressive social order? What are the historical sources and cultural implications of such ecotopian associations? These questions provide points of departure for a better understanding of the modern environmental imagination and are taken up most explicitly in the essay by Berry and Proctor.

Mark Shibley's article continues this line of analysis by documenting the religious features of the environmental movement(s) in the Pacific Northwest. Shibley demonstrates the eco-spiritual characteristics shared among diverse social groups in the Northwest, from New Age seekers to secular non-believers, from environmental activist communities to devoted fishermen. In particular, his attention to 'myth' and 'experience' contribute to an onging scholarly conversation from the pages of this journal.

The issue concludes with a pair of articles comparing and analyzing the tensions that animate twentieth-century ecotopianism. Adrian Ivakhiv explores a quartet of films from the 1970s through the lens of critical theory. Using Michel Foucault's notion of 'heterotopia' to reveal the cultural work performed by ecotopian imagery, Ivakhiv sharpens the toolkit at the disposal of scholars working at the intersection of environmental theory and film studies. Sam Deese provides an intellectual history of the ecotopian strains running through the work of Julian and Aldous Huxley, intellectual giants whose work in a variety of areas (eugenics, utopian and dystopian novels, scientifically grounded social planning, etc.) continues to inform contemporary environmental discourse.

This special issue of *The Journal of Religion, Nature and Culture* engages a spectrum of important questions latent in ecotopian discourse. By using the term 'ecotopia' to explore how specific histories orient the environmental imagination, the following essays share a focus on theory and on the social processes through which place is imagined, articulated, and inhabited. The dialogue emergent among these essays works to 're-place' nature in contemporary environmental discourse well within its rich religious and spiritual valences.

References

Biehl, Janet. 1996. *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books).

Callenbach, Ernest. 1990. *Ecotopia* (New York: Bantam Books).

de Geus, Marius. 1999. *Ecological Utopias: Envisioning the Sustainable Society* (Utrecht: International Books).

Heise, Ursula K. 2008. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York: Oxford University Press). doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335637.001.0001.

Loder, Natasha. 2008. 'Building Ecotopia', *The Economist*, 19 November. Online: http://www.economist.com/node/12494612.

Nygren, Marie, and Smith Hanes. 2011. 'The New Utopia', *House Beautiful*, December/January. Online: http://www.housebeautiful.com/decorating/serenbe-community-1210?click=main_sr.

O'Connell, Nicolas. 2003. *On Sacred Ground: The Spirit of Place in Pacific Northwest Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).

Pepper, David. 2005. 'Utopianism and Environmentalism', *Environmental Politics* 14.1: 3-22. doi:10.1080/0964401042000310150.

Snyder, Gary. 1995. *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint).

Timberg, Scott. 2008. 'The Novel That Predicted Portland', *The New York Times*, 12 December. Online: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/fashion/ 14ecotopia.html.

Vitek, William, and Wes Jackson. 1996. *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Ward, Logan. 2009. 'Why Treasure Island is the Super Green City of the Future', *Popular Mechanics*, 1 October. Online: http://www.popularmechanics.com/science/environment/4239381.