LET'S TALK ABOUT DEATH!

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Introduction

This project is all about death, and how humans might make better decisions concerning the environment if we were to remember our own mortality. The United States is squeamish about death – we don't talk about it much (though it permeates throughout our media), and because we are a highly Christian country [sixty-three percent, (Smith 2021)], we don't believe our mortality is a permanent condition. Even for those that don't adhere to Christianity, the immaterial afterlife is a common belief. So, how do we act in a world that is only our *temporary* home? I personally don't believe that substantive environmental work can be done through this framework. On top of that, I think this framework shortchanges our deathcare practices and grieving processes.

Though there is still a *very heavy* Christian influence in this country, we are trending towards secularization (Smith 2021). Religion has historically provided us with funerary rituals and community support (Bennett 2021). I believe that if we lose sources of ritual and support in our deathcare practices, our population of grievers will be left wanting. In changing our burial practices (or simply adding to them) to reflect the possibility of a *material* afterlife, I think we could create new traditions that honor the dead, the survived, and the Earth.

I was (and still am) one of those grievers left wanting. A close friend of mine died early and suddenly in 2017. It was my first experience with unexpected traumatic death. This experience reshaped my entire world and I wanted to talk about it – all the time! I didn't feel that I had a welcoming avenue to grieve the way I wanted. So, I began down the path that so many others who have experienced death (and subsequent lack of support) have traveled – researching support services and nontraditional deathcare options. At the same time, my environmentalism

was just beginning to bud, and I was particularly interested in the ways that earth material (like us) doesn't just disappear, but rather reformulates.

In the last five years, I have fashioned an alternative burial practice that I think would facilitate community building, tangible grieving experiences, and a robust environmentalism. At first, bringing this alternative burial practice to life was my goal for this project. I wanted to craft a solid research plan, form a team, and begin scouting locations and applicable grants. But the more I talked to professionals in the relevant fields, the more I was told that getting the public on board with my particular plan was going to be the biggest hurdle I would face. To me, this is encouraging! The burial alternative I have been putting together seems practical and probable (scientifically), but does the public want it? And how might I better communicate how this burial practice might help us fulfill the important values of community building, supported grieving, and Earth-tending?

Communicating with the public on an important topic like deathcare, especially when I feel that my contribution to the field could help form a better environmentalism, seems like a fitting task for philosophy! So, I've shifted gears, and moved my project towards, *first*, engaging the public in conversations about our values as they surround topics in human death. Having conversations like this are never for nothing, because they connect people in a way that is desperately needed in the times we live in! Moreover, these conversations allow the community (and myself) to engage personally (on a very intimate topic) with academic material. The melding of personal experience and philosophical thought is something I strongly support and value.

Lay people discussing philosophical matters is the crux of philosophy for me. To hide such an important and informative subject in an ivory tower is a shame. We should be making

philosophy as accessible as possible, and with proper communication skills, I believe we can bridge the gap (on the truly important matters) between academic philosophers and lay philosophers. This is even more true in regards to environmental philosophy, a subject which should be *as* accessible and on-the-ground as it gets in philosophy.

Family and friends have asked me what I consider "environmental philosophy" to be. My go-to answer is normally, "thinking about the environment." But philosophy is also deeply practical. The topics philosophers deal with have a real impact in the world. As I said before, out of any philosophical genre, environmental philosophy is arguably the one most in need of being practical. The climate crisis is real and tangible, so our solutions must be too. My project is an attempt to empower people (in an accessible manner) to consider their mortality, the values they have surrounding death, and their ability to re-imagine themselves in the world. I'm hoping that between having important and intimate conversations surrounding death and dying, and toying with what my burial practice-to-be could offer, we can come to see how our mortality affects our lives and how the values we hold in life should affect our respective deaths.

Background Context & Plan

Where/When – Situatedness

It has been argued both empirically and socio-historically that the Earth has entered a new epoch, namely the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene signifies "the age of the human," where human dominance on Earth is both seen and felt. Empirically, we may be able to justify this new epoch via geological markers found in rock layers and ice sheets (Waters et al. 2016). Socially and conventionally, there is disagreement on whether using the term "Anthropocene" to describe our current state of affairs is appropriate. Should we be celebrating the Anthropocene?

Should we be disgusted at the Anthropocene? It's quite obvious that we humans (*which* specific groups of humans is a site of contention, and rightly so) have changed the planet in a myriad of ways, but what now? Do we embrace our power and dominance and plow forward? Or do we pull back and ease up on the reins?

I see the Anthropocene as a "moment" of self-reflection. It is a great time to acknowledge our immense presence on the planet (and what that means for other life forms and the system at large), and consider how that power might be best situated. I believe we can begin to answer these questions of "what should we do in the Anthropocene?" by taking the time to increase our self-knowledge as a species and diagnose ourselves in the way anyone in power should be diagnosed. The questions we should be asking (before we ask questions about what we should *do* in the Anthropocene) are questions about who we *are*. Who/what are we? How are we situated in regards to the rest of Earth? What do our relationships look like? What do our practices say about us as a species?

I think that looking at U.S. death culture and burial practices could be overwhelmingly useful in answering these questions. And in answering these questions about ourselves through the lens of death and burial, we may come to some informative suggestions on how best to act in the Anthropocene. We might consider what we find to be a "new" environmentalism, one informed by human death, burial, and decomposition.

A Philosophical Glance at Conventional U.S. Burial

What we think of (and see in the media) as typical modern-day burial in the U.S. is what I'll call "conventional burial" throughout my project. The deceased person is embalmed, placed in a treated wood casket, entombed in a concrete vault, and buried six feet deep. Each of these

burial "tools" has its own practical purpose. We embalm so that we can move the corpse over a distance or lay the person out over a length of time. We first used burial vaults to prevent grave robbers, but now use them to keep the soil from sinking in, which makes land management more difficult (Kelly 2015, 47). But as these purpose-filled tools merge together to form a practice, we are called to philosophically investigate how that practice reflects our values, our definition of the human, and our relationships.

The combination of tools that form the practice of conventional burial say a lot about what it means to be human. Our bodies are "protected" from other natural elements via the use of elaborate and hardy caskets and the thick concrete slabs placed between us and the soil. Our bodies are "preserved" by embalming and burying at a depth where not much life can be sustained. I place "protected" and "preserved" in quotations, because these measures are temporary, and only stall the process. What this burial practice depicts (when looked at philosophically) is that the human and the rest of nature are very separate entities (different in *kind*, one might say) and *should* be kept that way, even after death. If we assent to the definition of the human offered to us by the practice of conventional burial, how might that affect our actions in the world?

A "New" Way to Approach Burial

How we define what it means to be human, greatly impacts our being in the world. Instead of embracing a burial practice that suggests we are separate from the natural world and do not matter or belong to it, I want to offer a new burial practice that might lend itself towards a better (and more truthful) environmental model. "Regenerative burial" is the name I've given to this practice, but I'm sure in some place, at some time, someone has buried in this manner. I have not found evidence of anyone utilizing this exact practice in any of the literature I have come

across, but I will gladly credit any prior knowledge I find. The main influence for this project, besides my personal experience, has been the Green Burial Council's guidance on "green burials" (greenburialcouncil.org).

A "green" burial (as deemed by the GBC) requires that the cemetery prohibits vault usage, toxic chemical embalming, and use of caskets that are not easily subsumed by the Earth (Green Burial Council 2019). While it is not listed in their standards, burying at four feet instead of six is typical in a green burial (greenburialcouncil.org, "Natural Burial FAQ"). To be designated "conservation" burial status, the standards are even more stringent. This is absolutely not an exhaustive list of the requirements, guidelines, or suggestions for green burials, but it is enough to guide us through the rest of the project.

What I want to do, regenerative burial, is a merge between regenerative agriculture and green burial. "Green" burial, also called "natural" burial, are somewhat problematic terms – but I will refer to the practice of more Earth-friendly burial as "green" because the GBC has clear stipulations about what makes a burial "green" (Green Burial Council 2019). I will use the term for ease of communication rather than philosophical significance.

In a regenerative burial ground (not yet existent), the GBC′s main requirements/norms for burial would be utilized (no embalming, shallower burial depth, no vaults, no elaborate burial containers), alongside regenerative farming techniques. The deceased human is a source of nutrition, and would be buried in depleted farmland soils to foster the plant and animal community above and within those soils. Food or flowers would be harvested from the land via a community supported agriculture (CSA) model, bringing the community together in life and death. As I asked previously (for conventional burial), what might a *regenerative* burial practice

say about the human? And how might that understanding of the human affect our actions in the world?

Previous Related Work

Environmental Philosophy

In environmental philosophy, the position of the human in the environment is often considered. Many philosophers have argued that embracing the earthly belongingness of being human is key to creating a sustainable environment (ex. Cronon 1995). While examining deathcare practices seems like a great place to investigate human-environment relations, I haven't come across many philosophical pieces using death as a location to investigate environmental matters. Two authors, whose ideas I will work with, focus on re-imagining the human in the environment through our mortality and/or edibility (Val Plumwood and James Hatley). Plumwood and Hatley both remind us of our ability to be positioned within the food chain, and Plumwood specifically refers to burial in her work (2008).

I'd like to contribute to the field of environmental philosophy by using my model of regenerative burial (a practice that doesn't yet exist, but very well could) as a heuristic tool in developing better relationships with each other, other beings, and the Earth in general – arguably the focus of good environmentalism and/or environmental philosophy. This is different than what other scholars or activists have done because I am philosophically investigating a specific practice, and how participating in that practice might shape our worldview, and thus our environmentalism. Secondly, I am bringing the philosophical conversation about what we value into the community in a casual and accessible setting. Even though no one may be able to go out today and practice regenerative burial, we can start by engaging in community discussions about

our very real experiences with death and how they might reflect our values – which is certainly on the way to opening the public to this new burial practice that might improve relationships all around.

Environmentalism

In environmental activism at large, deathcare hasn't received its fair share of attention. The Green Burial Council (GBC), in my opinion, has been the driving force to bridge deathcare and environmentalism. They not only recognize the environmental harms perpetuated by the modern-day U.S. burial system (and seek to repair them), but they have also found an avenue for humans to have a better relationship with the land. The environmental harms are fairly clear – conventional burial is an immensely resource intensive practice (concrete, wood, metals, *land*) and the use of toxic embalming fluid hurts our morticians, other organisms, and the land (greenburialcouncil.org, "Disposition Statistics"). The Green Burial Council seeks to address these harms through their rigorous standards for green burials and conservation burials. But beyond this, forging healthier, reciprocal relationships with every part of our environment seems to be a deeper goal that environmentalists, and green burial advocates alike, embrace.

This larger project that the GBC is mixed up in (I would argue), is this project of relationship building, specifically between humans and the land. The first standard required to qualify as a green burial is to "provide clients and families with the opportunity to participate in the burial and ritual process" (Green Burial Council 2019). Deathcare has become more medicalized and industrialized (Kelly 2015, Chapter 3), and we mourners are left out of the processes and are not intimately engaged with our loved ones' final disposition sites. The GBC is facilitating the deceased's return to the Earth, while also encouraging the survived to form a relationship with the deceased's flourishing interment site. So, even though we have many

options for our final dispositions past burial, burial is the most likely candidate to tie us to *place* – and (if done responsibly) this could have long-term value for environmental relations.

My project is different than what already exists because it adds on to the well-established practices of green burial and conservation burial. Regenerative burial is a *working relationship* between humans and the land, not just a place to visit. It fully embodies the life cycle in a very visible way. The vegetation won't look like a manicured lawn or a wild landscape – it will look like a cultivated site of human labor with thriving, intermingled crops fed by the human buried below. Also, though I think environmental considerations (like pollution, resource use, etc.) are very important when making end-of-life decisions, I think the bigger-picture goal of my project stretches far beyond this. I'm not just concerned with offering another burial option that is more Earth-friendly, but more so with providing a practice and an atmosphere where we can rethink our environmental entanglements on an intimate level. I am hoping to aim for the roots and not just the symptoms. Pun intended.

Death Positivity

Most people I meet do not know about the burial options offered by the GBC. It seems that conventional burial and cremation are the only options on people's radars. The GBC is doing awesome activist work to bring deathcare into the circle of environmental concern, and some philosophers have dabbled in this arena, but I think the lack of extensive discourse and awareness on the topic is due to our cultural squeamishness around death. Many groups have popped up to address this issue, like Death Over Dinner, Death Café, and Order of the Good Death. These entities are starting conversations that aid in the public acceptance of death.

My Goals

What I have sought out to do in the present project is engage philosophical thought, about the human's place and role within the environment, with real practices that could have a positive environmental effect, both in the short-term and long-term. In this way, I am merging the philosophical history of re-imagining the human, with the environmental activism of facilitating an Earth-friendly burial practice. I will attempt to add to the discourse in environmental philosophy and environmental activism, while supporting the goals of death positivity.

Firstly, I will hold up my model of "regenerative burial" throughout each theoretical section of this portfolio, and see how this practice could shape our definitions of self and thus how we act in the world – specifically in a concerning time for the environment at large. Secondly, I will facilitate a Death Over Drinks event – a spin on the more popular "Death Over Dinner" (deathoverdinner.org). I will discuss the ins and outs of the event at greater length later in the paper (in "Actions Taken"), but it will serve as a wonderful way to encourage people to investigate their mortality and values in a safe, community atmosphere!

Theoretical Applications

Value Theory: Animal Studies

One of the main goals for this course was to gain "a richer (but NOT definitive) notion of what we mean by a 'fellow creature'" (Slicer 2020a). Cora Diamond utilized the term "fellow creature" to move away from the "like-us" arguments that characterized popular animal ethics discourse (1978). Moral considerability was (and still is) often extended to nonhuman beings in as much as they were similar in capacities/faculties to *us* (Calarco 2015). Thinking of more-than-human beings as fellow creatures, instead of enough-like-us, allows our investigation to be about

the individual creatures (or species of creature) in themselves, rather than how they relate to us and our existence in the world.

From viewing fellow creatures as *they are*, and not how they are like us, we (humans) can learn about our fellow Earth inhabitants, and also about how our species might better act as fellow creatures to others. While one of these tasks is appreciating other beings in and for themselves (intrinsically) and the other task is appreciating these creatures for how we might learn from them (instrumentally), I don't believe these tasks are mutually exclusive. Learning *about* and *from* others are both practices we should be embracing in the Anthropocene. And, as a disclaimer, though I will be using language like "us" and "them" throughout this paper, these lines are blurred and tangled – as James Hatley will help us to see later in this section.

About Them

Out of principle and respect, I will start by discussing how learning about "them" as nonhuman species/beings/entities-in-themselves may be a great thing for the Anthropocene (and my project). The majority of this course on animal studies was about decentering the human and opening ourselves to noticing the stories and perspectives of other beings all around us. We read Rick McIntyre's stories (in *The Rise of Wolf 8)* about the wolves of Yellowstone – how they have cinematic life stories playing out constantly, and seemingly completely independent of ours (2019). We also read Carl Safina's *Becoming Wild*, and learned about the lively sounds of whale language below the ocean's surface (2020). There are an incalculable number of lives living out their stories all around us, all the time. Considering these other lives, stories, and perspectives opens the door to considering what the human realm might look like to an outsider.

We humans are always ranking other forms of life in terms of how much they are *like us*, or by how much *we like* them. When we shift, and think of other beings as "fellow creatures," the vertical hierarchy becomes a horizontal spread. Other life forms are not better or worse, cuter or grosser, more or less intelligent – they are individuals or species with specialized forms of knowledge and being that don't necessarily map out over ours (or any other species') knowledge and being. This allows us to consider more fully the lives of beings quite different from us.

If we think about the story of human death and decay from a human perspective (this is very general, and will obviously vary by culture and individual), it is filled with sadness, discomfort, and maybe even disgust. But what does the human story of death and decay look like for other beings? What is their perspective on our decay? Specifically, this is referring to beings that eat the dead, which we would typically put at the bottom of our hierarchy of human likeness (and likeability). These are beings that we wouldn't typically consider as having stories and perspectives because we quickly brush them off as gross or "inhumane" as James Hatley might put it (2004).

Just like above ground or under water, there are a plethora of lives and stories playing out underground, seemingly separate from our human society. For example, "A single teaspoon (1 gram) of rich garden soil can hold up to one billion bacteria, several yards of fungal filaments, several thousand protozoa, and scores of nematodes" (Herring 2010). That's a lot of life. We may not consider all of these microorganisms morally, or as subjects, but I think we would be remiss if we cast their lives off all together. They are eating, living, and contributing to the world with their own specialized skills. Besides the many microorganisms, there are also worms and insects living beneath the soil's surface. These beings might be harder to ignore. Frans de Waal mentions that arthropods, the phylum that includes insects, might feel pain – which for some

thinkers, would classify arthropods as sentient and as having "subjective feeling states" (2019, 249).

Regardless of whether these below surface beings are conscious, sentient, or morally considerable, they are surely positioned in the world differently than (not necessarily less than) humans. I'll call this different positionedness their "perspective," although I understand that we might not consider all of these beings to be subjects. Nonetheless, the perspectives these beings have on human death and decay is quite different from our own. To us, it is a tragedy, and to them, it is sustenance. So, in stretching *our* perspective to include other beings' perspectives, what stories might we see unraveling underground at a human burial site?

Val Plumwood reminds us that "the body does not just 'end' – it decays or decomposes, its matter losing its prior organizational form and taking on or being incorporated into new forms in a sharing of substance/life force" (2008, 328). She goes on to say, "the story goes on, although no longer mainly a story about human subjects" (2008, 328). The story at the human burial site, for those beings living inside the deceased person's gut or the microorganisms in the soil, is a story of feasting and nutrition. Shortly after my father died, I remember feeling a sense of comfort that parts of him (the microorganisms living inside of him) were still alive and would actually thrive from his dying – it was their time to shine. This is a truly radical retelling of the human death story. Our death is "an opportunity of life for others in the ecological community" (Plumwood 2008, 323). This is true within our guts, within the soil, or in the cases of aboveground predation.

Hatley focuses on the instances of aboveground predation in his piece "The Uncanny Goodness of Being Edible to Bears" (2004). He says that while we initially consider the edibility of humans by predators as "inhumane," we might later come to respect the hunger of our

predator by not "[interpreting] its hungered approach toward me in the first instance as violence" (Hatley 2004). Instead, "their hungers, even if that hunger is directed toward our own flesh, is virtuous" (Hatley 2004). This hunger is virtuous because it's what the eater needs to survive! For, "No being who lives comes to be except through its gestation in a flesh, in which not only a particular edible other but also all the other others are also already implicit in its being" (Hatley 2004). This eating of flesh would also include herbivores, as Hatley has a broad definition of flesh that includes plants (2004, note 15).

So, at the end of all this stretching of perspectives, we can come to respect the parallel lives of our fellow creatures, even those that eat us. We might understand how other creatures are benefited by our individual deaths. How does this fit with burial? Following the story I've just told, conventional burial would be an act of disrespect towards our fellow creatures. A way to keep them from going about their business. The process of embalming would keep the internal microorganisms from getting their fill, and the casket, vault, and depth of burial would keep out (somewhat) the hungry beings below the soil's surface. If we turn to regenerative burial instead, we facilitate decomposition at every level, allowing the story of our decay to continue throughout the ecological community. I think this story is embodied very nicely in this quote from Italo Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight*:

> As Gurduloo dragged a corpse along he thought, "Corpsey, your farts stink even more than mine. I don't know why everyone mourns you so. What's it you lack? Before you used to move, now your movement is passed on to the worms you nourish. Once you grew nails and hair, now you'll ooze slime which will make grass in the fields grow higher towards the sun. You will become grass, then milk for cows which will eat the grass, blood of the baby that drinks their milk, and so on. Don't you see you get more out of life than I do, corpsey?" (1962)

What's so great about this extended perspectivism is that we don't just conclude that regenerative burial might be a better alternative because of its human benefits, like cost, a beautiful place to grieve, and a site that facilitates relationships with the environment – but that it fulfills the needs of a wild amount of more-than-human beings.

About Us

From learning about our fellow creatures and stretching our imaginations to view ourselves as food, we are reminded that we're not all that different (vertically) from our cohabitants. In Cora Diamond's piece "Eating Meat and Eating People," she says "We learn what a human being is in – among other ways – sitting at a table where *WE* eat *THEM*. We are around the table and they are on it" (1978, 470). All animals are allowed to be eaten, whether by humans or other animal predators – but *human* animals are off the menu. We spend a lot of time debating which animals should be eaten by humans (if any at all), why, and how to do so ethically. But we don't often consider our edibility, and how embracing that might help us to strengthen our link in the food chain. *We* can be on *their* table.

There's something uniting about every creature being edible, including ourselves. This gets us out of the human exceptionalism we like to steep ourselves in. We are flesh and "flesh maintains itself by eating and being eaten" (Hatley 2004). James Hatley discusses how this flesh to flesh transfer dissolves distinction. My body feels to be mine, but in fact it's made of all the flesh (remember, Hatley has a very wide view of what constitutes flesh) that I have consumed, and subsequently, "my" flesh will be added to this "inextricably interwoven" articulation (Hatley 2004). For, "In the act of ingestion, one's body both is and is not one's own" (Hatley 2004). Hatley describes this dissolution as "What was most intimate [my own body] becomes strange, and what was most strange [other's bodies] becomes intimate" (2004). What a connection!

Thinking of ourselves as food for other animals not only forges our involvement in the larger food chain, but in a more general sense, reminds us of our connection to the natural world through death and decay. We die and decompose like any other living being on the planet. Of course, no matter how we are buried, our bodies will break down and be eaten – but we can either impede this process or facilitate it. I see it as an act of respect and acknowledgement, to both our fellow creatures and ourselves as an animal species, to facilitate the process of our becoming food upon our deaths. I don't mean to suggest that we should all be laid out on the forest floor upon our demise – this can raise some problems of its own – but I do think it would be healthy to consider the hunger of our fellow soil and inner gut creatures (upon our death) and bury, so that, finally, we are on their table.

Messy Spaces

These thoughts were inspired from some of the pieces we read (Cora Diamond's "Eating Meat and Eating People") and stories we discussed (Val Plumwood's violent crocodile encounter) throughout the semester in Deborah Slicer's Value Theory class. I have added other works too – to illuminate my thoughts on "human foodiness" (Plumwood 2008, 324). I want to end this section by zooming out and contemplating why human death and decay might be a good place to do environmental philosophy.

We started this course on animal studies looking at the presubjective and proto-ethical. In the section on Jacques Derrida, Matthew Calarco talks about the "interruptive encounters" that happen at the proto-ethical level (2008, 117). These are embodied responses to instances "that call for and provoke thought" (Calarco 2008, 117). In this case, Calarco is talking about encountering instances of animal suffering or Derrida's odd interaction with his cat's gaze. These interruptions "challenge our standard ways of thinking, and calls us to responsibility" (Calarco

2008, 120). They are “difficult to conceptualize much less articulate” and call us to “reconsider and revise [our] moral life” (Slicer 2020b).

This sounds strikingly familiar to what we undergo when experiencing the death of someone we love (and maybe our own dying too). Suddenly, our world is completely shifted. In the face of death, there is a reevaluation of almost everything we hold true. These encounters with other’s deaths remind us of our own mortality as well. Looking at our loved ones as corpses is certainly an interruption, and we surely feel a sense of embodied vulnerability in their presence. And in the temporal presence of death, our beliefs, values, ethics are all stretched, twisted, and tested. This becomes a time of reorientation and rebuilding. With the proper tools and support, I can’t imagine a better location to do the messy work of figuring out our places in the world. A place where we stretch and shape our values (in regards to who we are and how we’re positioned in the world) is a place where environmental philosophy is already happening.

Environmental Philosophy

While the Value Theory course was focused around our fellow Earth inhabitants, this course surveyed the human history (or lack thereof) in environmental philosophy. We began the course with a brief introduction into “early generation” environmental philosophy, as Christopher Preston (our professor for this course) calls it. In 1974, Richard Sylvan (then Routley) wrote “Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental, Ethic?” He argues, “The dominant Western view is simply inconsistent with an environmental ethic; for according to it nature is the dominion of man and he is free to deal with it as he pleases” (Sylvan 1974, 18). Sylvan further argues that we cannot base an environmental ethic around “basic (human) chauvinism,” where “people come first and everything else a bad last” (1974, 20). Instead, “some

worthwhile parts of the earth's surface should be preserved from substantial human interference, whether of the 'improving' sort or not" (Sylvan 1974, 19).

Sylvan says, "Human interests and preferences are far too parochial to provide a satisfactory basis for deciding on what is environmentally desirable" (1974, 24). While this decentering of the human is certainly valuable, it can quickly devolve into misanthropy – which now characterizes a lot of lay environmentalism. This debate about removing human interests and focusing on the "natural" out-there world, led to a *long* debate about intrinsic value versus instrumental value. Holmes Rolston III was (and still is?) a staunch advocate for the intrinsic value of nature. Nature is a convoluted term, but in the context of early generation environmental philosophy (1970s-early 2000s), nature is the pristine and pure opposite of humanity. Rolston III, along with others involved in the debate, argued that nature does not obtain value from human thoughts and feelings about it, rather nature retains its value from within itself (1991, 376). All of this discourse, in the beginning of philosophy's entrance into environmental topics, drove a wedge between humans and nature.

This wedge already existed in philosophical discourse, so it was ripe for the picking when the field moved into environmental matters. Philosophy had already been plagued with heavy Christian influence and constant favoring of the rational "mind." Val Plumwood noticed early on the connections between the already prominent dualisms in philosophical discourse, and how they were infecting a new environmental discussion in philosophy. She says, "Western thought has given us a strong human/nature dualism that is part of the set of interrelated dualisms of mind/body, reason/nature, reason/emotion, masculine/feminine and has important interconnected features with these other dualisms" (Plumwood 1991, 10). All of these divides leave us with a

highly valued, pure nature and a devalued human (because they seemingly only valued themselves) who has somehow "emerged" out of the natural (Rolston III 1991, 370).

In environmental policy, the divide between human and nature was (and is) easily felt. The best actions to take are those that keep nature away from human hands. 'Protect and preserve' is the mantra of early generation environmentalism. So, where does this leave the human? We certainly exist on quite a large scale, and have an awesome effect on the environment…but this early generation thought seems to only offer the advice of staying away from the rest of nature. Andrew Light critiques this problem in his piece "The Urban Blind Spot in Environmental Ethics" (2001). Light thinks that the hyper *non*anthropocentrism that has developed in environmental thought has left an "urban gap in environmentalists' theories" (2001, 8). The places where humans are, and the protected nature isn't, is a place of ambiguity for environmental theory.

Robin Kimmerer notices this effect as well. When Kimmerer asked her students "to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and the land…The median response was 'none'" (2013a, 6). She was "stunned" and "realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their spaces and others might look like" (Kimmerer 2013a, 6). And that's where our early generation environmental philosophy and environmentalism left us – with no place for the human. Now, in the Anthropocene, it's important to start finding and designing the human roles in Earth's ecosystems. I mentioned previously that the Anthropocene is a wonderful time for self-reflection and reimagination. William Cronon suggests that a "critical self-consciousness" must be present in all of our actions (1995, 25). What could this look like?

Firstly, we could work to mend the fabricated divide between humans and "nature." Changing our self-view will surely affect our worldview, and thus actions from it. Val

Plumwood, in “Being Prey,” tells her story of becoming prey for a crocodile (1996). In experiencing herself as prey, she reimagines herself as a true member in the ecological community. She was no longer an outsider, suspended from the food chain – instead, she was so much a part of the food chain that she was already inside a crocodile’s mouth! For her, “It [was] a humbling and cautionary tale about our relationship with the earth, about the need to acknowledge our own animality and ecological vulnerability” (Plumwood 1996).

In this way, Plumwood shows that the human is not someone who has climbed out of natural confines like Holmes Rolston III might suggest, or a being who was injected onto the Earth by supernatural forces, but is just another animal species, interwoven in the ecological community. This allows us to break free from the hyper-rational, mind privileging (or “soul” privileging) dualism that allows our embodied existence to take a back seat. If we can further embrace our embodied existence, maybe we can appreciate the human corpse in a different manner as well.

Deceased humans already matter to *us* as other human beings. This is clear in our funerary traditions and our emphasis on respecting the body. But because we are still wrapped up in thinking that the deceased human is no longer the ‘person’ it once was, we don’t necessarily see it as having a function or purpose any longer. Either the mind (that made the deceased individual the person that they were) is shut down, or the soul has left the body. So, all that is left is a shell of the human that used to be. If we began valuing the human corpse as mattering to *the Earth*, like Suzanne Kelly suggests (2012), we might shift our burial practices to recognize that fact. In conventional burial, there is clearly no acknowledgement that the body matters to the Earth community – in fact it’s quite the opposite. The body is both seen as too clean/pure/good to mix with the rest of Earth and too dirty/polluted/bad to infiltrate the larger community. This is a

confusing mix of human exceptionalism coupled with misanthropy – certainly a theme we've seen in early generation environmentalism too.

But if in using regenerative burial practices, we introduced the deceased human into the Earth in the most accessible way possible, couldn't we reaffirm ourselves as part of the ecological community? If we saw ourselves, in life, through this view, I believe we would take different actions in the world. Our actions could bud from the reciprocity or "returning the gift" as Robin Kimmerer characterizes it (2013b, 23). She says that "the Earth asks us…to meet our responsibilities and give our gifts" (Kimmerer 2013b, 23). We certainly take from the Earth more than we give, as we can see in the story of Kimmerer's students not being able to name a beneficial relationship between humans and land. So, why not give our last gift (that of our whole, deceased self) back to the ecological community?

This would show that "we are more the same than we are different…we are governed by the same ecological and evolutionary rules" (Kimmerer 2013b, 21). This is much different than the early generation environmental philosophers reinforcing the chasm between humans and nature. We are different as a specific animal species, but not different in *kind* from the rest of the animal kingdom. Standing on this ground, from a position where the human belongs to the Earth (as reinforced through our burial practices), we could get to a new environmentalism – one where the human matters to the system (not just taints it) and our actions in the world reflect this. This is environmentalism through the lens of human death and decay, and is a true reflection of our intimate positionedness on Earth. To answer Richard Sylvan (1974), from the beginning of this section, yes – we need a new environmental ethic. But this ethic needs to be one where humans are intimately involved.

Issues in the Anthropocene

This course brings us deep into the Anthropocene, where boundaries are crossed and merged. In the Anthropocene, human handprints are everywhere – but this doesn't *have* to be a bad thing. We can make better decisions if we seek to learn more about the human condition and positionedness in the world. In the last section, I mentioned that uncovering the truth about humans (that they intimately belong to Earth and her systems) through burial practices that embrace and facilitate decomposition and re-composition, might help us to make better decisions for the environment. In the present course, we honed in on the importance of **practices** in the Anthropocene, and spent a lot of time with Steven Vogel's book, *Thinking like a Mall* (2015).

Vogel asks us to "see humans as part of the world, as entwined with the world," and that "would be to see in each object in one's environment a history of human practice, and at the same time to recognize that humans don't think or intend or imagine or perceive or reason or even somehow magically constitute the world but rather *engage in practice within* the world, and use the objects, built by previous practice, that they find around them to do so" (2015, 94). The environment [replacing something like "natural world," because "it's always built and it's always natural, both at once" (Vogel 2015, 94)] is intimately built through human practices. We build "through socially organized practices of labor," and if we want to "build a better world, a better environment," we must adjust our practices (Vogel 2015, 163, 94).

Vogel suggests that we can change our practices and build a better environment through fostering the virtues of self-knowledge and humility (2015, 117-121, 231-233). For him, self-knowledge is "a recognition of our deep and active connection with the world we inhabit, and an acknowledgement of the responsibility that that connection means we have for the world" (Vogel 2015, 119). We mustn't keep ourselves alienated from our actions (and their consequences) in the world – we must acknowledge that we have built it, and we have built it together (with other

humans). Humility, for Vogel, is knowing that "the consequences of [our] actions always escape the plans and intentions of those who participate in them," and because of this, we must "acknowledge the unavoidable limitations in our abilities, and in our technologies as well" (2015, 119, 121).

Vogel has some limitations on *how* social he is willing to categorize our labors. Our work in constructing the environment most definitely includes all humans, and he readily admits that other lifeforms construct the environment too (Vogel 2015, 65, 110), but because his project is focused on political changes in human systems, Vogel doesn't go into the possibilities for entangled construction between species. Robin Wall Kimmerer, Donna Haraway, and Anna Tsing, all authors who's work we read in this course, investigate and illuminate the many ways human labor is reliant on and entangled with other species/entities in the world. Merging the works of Vogel and these multispecies thinkers, we can extend our definitions of self-knowledge and humility in our practices. Self-knowledge can also mean we are one actor among many, and humility can acknowledge our reliance on other beings, because we certainly don't know (and can't do) everything.

How might our burial practices embody these virtues? Well, in conventional burial practices, I would argue that these virtues are not present. There is no recognition that we belong to this Earth, for there are tools used to keep what's inside in and what's outside out. There's also no humility. After years and years of being supported by Earth and her systems, we fail to acknowledge this support and refuse to give back. We also continue to perform and embrace this practice, despite knowing how it harms humans, more-than-humans, and the land. Our burial practices *could* reveal a different story about the human being. If we adopted regenerative burial practices, we could show the belongingness of human beings – how they fit perfectly into the

systems that other beings inhabit. And how we can hold up our end of the bargain and give back after we die (and hopefully during life too).

So, the practices that might best serve us, and the rest of the planet in the Anthropocene, are practices that embody working relationships between species. Donna Haraway says "we have a mammalian job to do, with our biotic and abiotic sym-poietic collaborators, co-laborers. We need to make kin sym-cthonically, sym-poetically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with – become-with, compose-with – the earth-bound" (2015, 161). One really clear and important way we could this is with regenerative burial practices. We could foster relationships aboveground between humans, coming to tend the grounds of their loved ones. We could foster the relationship between human and land, as the survived comes back regularly to make sure the site of their loved one is thriving. And we could foster a beneficial relationship between deceased human and all the creatures underground (including roots) that are ready to take up the nutrients from the human and reconstitute them. This is truly "mak[ing]-with – becom[ing]-with, compos[ing]-with – the earth-bound" (Haraway 2015, 161).

How might this be better than environmentalism's previous goal of separating the human from the nonhuman in an effort to protect and preserve the nonhuman? Well, scholars at The Breakthrough Institute have said that "conservation [the preservationist's mission] is losing the war to protect nature despite winning one of its hardest fought battles – the fight to create parks, game preserves, and wilderness areas" (Marvier et al. 2012). "We are [still] losing many more special places and species than we're saving" (Marvier et al. 2012). And how much good can come from sanctioning off areas of land for protection when "what is clear is that those protected areas will remain islands of 'pristine nature' in a sea of profound human transformations to the

landscape through logging, agriculture, mining, damming, and urbanization" (Marvier et al. 2012).

The preservationist mission of conservation is being (and has been) attacked from several angles. Ben Minteer and Stephen Pyne mention three of these critics: the "familiar political foes" or "those who argue that the preservation of nature requires unacceptable economic sacrifices and reflects a radical philosophy far outside of the American mainstream," those that argue against the need or even possibility of "a nature independent of human influence and impact," and the "new wave of environmentalists" or "post-preservationists" who want to "promote a vision in which human interests and needs take center stage and in which we actively embrace our responsibility as shapers and builders of the planetary future" (Minteer and Pyne 2015, 5).

Instead of an environmentalism mainly focused on protecting the environment from humans, the authors of The Breakthrough Institute's piece, "Conservation in the Anthropocene: Beyond Solitude and Fragility," suggest that environmentalism must take the inclusion of people seriously and "demonstrate how the fates of nature and of people are deeply intertwined – and then offer new strategies for promoting the health and prosperity of both" (Marvier et al. 2012). This would mean abandoning the "[narrow focus] on the creation of parks and protected areas, and [insisting], often unfairly, that local people cannot be trusted to care for their land" (Marvier et al. 2012). We must focus on relationships, co-constructing, and the mutual benefit of all.

In the Anthropocene, we (humans and all other beings alike) are pushed into each other's "territories" and need to figure out how to best get along. One suggestion, offered by indigenous thinker Robin Kimmerer, is to build a gift economy. Kimmerer says that "many indigenous peoples share the understanding that we are each endowed with a particular gift, a unique

ability," and with that gift, comes responsibility (2013a, 347). We have many gifts as a species, but one of them is surely our nutrient-filled bodies that have been fueled by the gifts of other species throughout our lives. Gift-giving, under Kimmerer's terms, doesn't end with the giving of the gift – "A gift creates ongoing relationship" (2013a, 26). A gift comes with a "bundle of responsibilities" (Kimmerer 2013a, 28).

In the practice of regenerative burial, there are many gifts flowing. At first, there is the gift of the deceased's body to the soil and the underground creatures. But then, more relationships are sparked. There are reciprocal relations between the interred body and the creatures, the creatures and the soil, the soil and the plant roots, the roots and the aboveground plants, the aboveground plants and the humans that come to tend to them… Our persons are fully incorporated in the re-composition processes of agriculture and Life. And the humans who come to tend the burial grounds are forming a relationship with place, through regular tending. Building community with humans, other-than-humans, places – *and being intimately invested in the thriving of all involved*, is the crux of a healthy Anthropocene environmentalism. We could show Kimmerer's students, through regenerative burial, that there *are* beneficial relationships happening between humans and the rest of the environment.

Actions Taken

As stated previously, my original intention for this project was to get regenerative burial rolling in a real practical sense. I wanted to form a team and perform much needed research. So, I began by reaching out to the former president of the Green Burial Council, Lee Webster, in March 2021. Lee was unbelievably helpful and introduced me to several important figures in the green burial world – one of whom happened to be Mel Bennett. Mel is the founder and operator

of Life Forest, a tree burial grounds for cremated remains. I worked under Mel for the internship portion of our environmental philosophy master's program.

I began compiling a standard operating procedure (SOP) for Life Forest, performed a few interviews, attended events, helped with a few tasks on the burial grounds, and brought people together to form a "Women in Deathcare" planner. But the most important part of my experience was having wonderful, informative, and goofy conversations with Mel. Mel is a wonderful human being who has helped me network, spread my ideas/interests/goals, and has supported my burial plan from the first time I communicated it to her!

I think the best way to expand our knowledge and perspectives about a difficult and intimate topic, such as death and end-of-life care, is to talk about it with everyone we can! And that's what I've done. I talked about it with Mel, and with nearly everyone else Lee Webster put me in contact with. I've talked about it with my partner, my cohort, my family, and a lot of strangers! I've also attended two conferences on the subject matter: The University of Bath's Centre for Death & Society's virtual conference on "Death, Dying, Technology and Human Mortality" in the summer of 2021 and The Green Burial Council's virtual conference on "Green Life, Death & Future" in the fall of 2021. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it includes a lot of the "professional" encounters I've had with death conversations.

Due to the importance of conversation and community in deathcare matters, my public event for this project focused on facilitating these tough conversations with others. Since my friend died in 2017, I've been interested in establishing a Death Café (deathcafe.com) in my area. This is a recurring event, where members from the local community (interested in matters of death) get together and chat over coffee or a meal. It's low stakes, completely casual, and open to anyone. This fills an important niche, for people normally only talk about death in abstracted

academic settings or in moments of raw, utterly tragic grief. Death cafés provide an in-between – a place to discuss mortal matters over coffee without having to relive our most traumatic experiences, but also without having to remove our personal experiences all together!

I never formed a recurring death café in my town, but I did have the chance to host a Death Over Dinner (deathoverdinner.org) for my Death, Dying, and Grief course in March 2021. Due to COVID-19, this event was held over Zoom – but it was lovely and informative nonetheless. We logged on from our separate homes and chatted about all things death and dying for about three hours! I provided prompts for when we got stuck, but the conversation kept on rolling all the way through. I loved this model, and decided I wanted to host another event like this in the future, but in person.

When it came time to plan my public event for this Civic Engagement Project, a Death Café/Death Over Dinner event seemed like a great fit. Soazig Le Bihan (my advisor for the project) introduced me to Imagine Nation Brewery in downtown Missoula – and I reached out to their owner, Fernanda Krum. Fernanda responded almost immediately, expressing her excitement about the subject matter. After meeting with Fernanda at the brewery, I realized what a perfect match Imagine Nation was for my project idea. Imagine Nation is, first, a "center for community transformation," and second, a microbrewery (imaginenationbrewing.com). Fernanda was clear that the community fostering aspects of the brewery took precedence over the beer-making.

So, Fernanda and I decided on Wednesday, April 13th 2022 for my Death Over *Drinks* (DOD) event. I put a lot of work into planning this event, because I wanted the atmosphere of the event to honor the depth of the subject we would be discussing. I wanted to be clear that this wasn't a grief counseling session filled with tears (and walking away feeling yucky), but it also

wasn't a morbid comedy session where we fetishize or minimize the topic at hand. This would be a casual evening of small group conversations on death-related matters, where there might be some tears alongside some laughs. And that's exactly what it turned out to be!

The DOD event was a wild success. More than fifty people attended, and I received only positive feedback. I know this is partly due to how much planning went into each and every part of this event. Firstly, I wanted to guarantee a diverse range of participants, so I made sure to hang flyers in a variety of places, and I set-up a Facebook event for online shareability. I didn't want to limit the evening to just academics or young people. I hung flyers in different academic buildings (Liberal Arts, Psychology, Environmental Science), community centers and hubs in downtown Missoula, and ahead of time at Imagine Nation, where the event would be held. We ended up having a multi-generational funeral home owner and operator, a hospice professional, professors from different fields, and several very active grievers all in attendance. I even heard about the event from my own therapist in one of our sessions! She mentioned one of the flyers, and that it sounded like an event I might be interested in – and I got to tell her it was mine!

Secondly, I kept up with the Facebook event page and tried to make people feel comfortable beforehand. I shared my own story of grief and interest in deathcare, links to informative and accessible websites on deathcare, and sent regular reminders about the event leading up to it. I didn't have much online engagement from people interested in the event on Facebook, but I think the page definitely helped spread awareness and hopefully assuage apprehension. Also, due to the Facebook page, I was able to share the handouts and prompts from the event, via Facebook Messenger, to two interested parties that were not able to make it the night of the event. I'm hoping they were able to have engaging conversations at home because of it.

I wanted the night of the event to run smoothly and comfortably, so I did everything I could ahead of time to execute that plan. I made nametags, so that people had a chance to get to know their small group members. I made these using pins I created on the internet and seed paper that I ordered from Washington. The pins said "Mortal," and were a keepsake to remind the attendees of their mortality (and hopefully some of the conversations they had surrounding it) throughout their daily lives. I used seed paper in hopes that people would plant their nametags at home, and watch all the painful and beautiful conversations they had at the event blossom over time. I was very proud of the nametags – and I had just enough!

I planned the whole evening out scrupulously so that conversations wouldn't get out of control, but people would have enough time to gain trust in their groups. I recommended people mix up and not sit with only people they knew, but I didn't enforce this strictly because people's comfort (in discussing an intimidating topic) was my top priority. I introduced myself, explained the event and timeline, and we entered into the first of two twenty-five-minute discussion sessions. In between sessions, we stopped for breaks – to get up and move around, make sure we were supporting the brewery, and refresh ourselves before returning to conversation. Each time we returned to the same small groups, because I wanted people to grow comfortable enough to share with their fellow attendees. After our last break, we reconvened and had a group debrief, where people could ask questions in the bigger group setting.

I wouldn't have changed anything about that night. It went absolutely perfectly, and upon ending, I was asked to do a similar event for a professor's class at UM. And I did it that next week! When people approached me after the original DOD event, people said they cried, they laughed, and they shared more than they thought they would. My main goal for this event was to facilitate people thinking about their mortality, what they want for themselves, why they want

those things, and what options are out there for them. I think my prompts and handouts for the evening got us there.

I provided two types of handouts at the DOD event. One was a list of final disposition options – the ones available to Montanans, and the ones available in the United States, but not yet in Montana. The other handout covered legalities in the state of Montana, relating to end-of-life or deathcare. I hope that these opened the possibilities for people, and empowered them to take charge of their values as they relate to deathcare and the environment. One attendee asked in the debrief about which final disposition option (available to Montanans) was the most environmentally friendly. That's a win! At least one person began to think about their death and how it related to the Earth's future stories.

Death is a place of revaluing, and I believe many people revalued (or at least better understood their own values) and were opened to different possibilities in deathcare. From what I've picked up, two common responses to events like these are 1) I've never thought about this stuff before or 2) I think about this all the time but never have anyone to talk to about it! Number one hasn't quite figured out that there's more to the story after we die – it doesn't end there. Number two knows there is more to the story but has no one to talk to about it. Not only is it not fun to go through our end-of-life thoughts alone, but it doesn't make sense because we won't be around to perform our own last wishes anyway! We need to extend our stories beyond ourselves – to the Earth, to other humans or more-than-human creatures – and know that though our individual deaths happen alone, what comes after certainly does not.

Accomplishments & Challenges

After shifting away from trying to get regenerative burial out into the world as a real practice, I focused on community engagement with death topics. By getting people to talk and think about their own demise, how they want the story of their body to continue after death, and why they value certain things around this topic, I hopefully sparked further personal and philosophical investigation into how our deaths matter. This can range from how our deaths matter to us, our family and friends, and the Earth. I didn't want to simply preach about the environmental harms of conventional burial and try to convince people that something like regenerative burial is the better option. This is firstly because choosing our death plans (or our loved one's) is an intimate, personal, and (because a lot of people don't plan ahead) very difficult, tragic task. This is not the time for persuasion or swindling. I want someone to choose regenerative burial (or support its fruition) because they see the benefits I see in it, not because I guilted them or greenwashed them into thinking it's the more environmentally-friendly option.

Secondly, I don't want people to support regenerative burial or shun conventional burial solely because of the immediate environmental impact. There's something much deeper to the story. Yes, regenerative burial practices would not utilize embalming fluids, vaults, or treated caskets, but the relationships that blossom out of participating in regenerative burial are what is most important to me. Mourners forming relationships with each other, with the plants that spring forth from their loved ones, and with the land that they tend alongside their own grief. Working relationships that support a different self-view, and subsequent worldview, that lead to taking different actions and making better decisions within the environment are what I find to be the most important aspects of regenerative burial.

So, I hope that through my Death Over Drinks event, I provided an opportunity for people to stretch their imaginations and considerations of *material* life after death. I got a few

people from my public event to attend my academic presentation the following week, so that was a success to me. After the high wore off from such a successful evening and public presentation, I put together an account of the mistakes I made, what I would do differently, and what I would like to continue to work on in the future. I'll start with the mistakes I made.

Shortcomings

I left out too many stories. Cemeteries have stories and history and that should have been included in this project. In Suzanne Kelly's book *Greening Death: Reclaiming Burial Practices and Restoring Our Tie to the Earth* (2015), she charts out the development of cemetery design throughout U.S. history. This would have been really interesting to parallel to the history of environmental activism – and the move from conservation-only to beneficial human interaction and working landscapes. And adding on to the history that Kelly relayed, it would be important to include the burial history of BIPOC individuals throughout the United States. Discriminatory practices don't end at deathcare, so this should have been addressed. Additionally, there are indigenous burial grounds all over the U.S., and it's a well-known fact that many have been desecrated via colonialism. This should have been addressed as well.

Corinne Elicone wrote an illuminating piece titled "Whose Green Burial is it Anyway?" (2020) that covered the ways in which "green burial" practices can be problematic for different groups or individuals. She pointed out that the green burial movement is mostly run by white women – a trend that is glaringly obvious when you start down the rabbit hole. I fear that my project didn't do enough (or anything) to include experiences past my own. I recognize that this is due to the deeply personal origin this project had for me, but I still could have and should have done more to fill out the story of burial.

Adjustments

If I were to redo and expand this project, I would add more history of the wide variety of human experiences with death and deathcare in the United States. In my theoretical sections, I stretched perspectives on death well past the human species, but in doing so, I missed the chance to entertain multiple and various *human* perspectives on death. This would include other religious perspectives besides Christianity, which I lightly critiqued in the beginning of this portfolio. Jewish and Muslim burials already work within most of the standards now embraced by the Green Burial Council. This would be useful to acknowledge. Additionally, the culture around death in the U.S., and how we became so squeamish towards it, would be informative material to add to this project. Especially since my project aims to chip away at that problem.

Future Work

Down the road, I still want to perform the research needed to actualize the practice of regenerative burial. I want to find people with similar passion and interest, but different strengths, to team up with and make this project a reality. I'd also like to set up a recurring death meet-up in my town, so that people have a space to regularly process their thoughts and feelings around death. That was one regret of my DOD project – that I didn't have the time to keep doing them! With the success of my Death Over Drinks, I feel empowered to keep hosting them.

Conclusion

Overall, one of my favorite aspects of this project was that it reinforced the importance and benefit of intermingling personal experience with philosophical thought. Philosophy has been a meaningful and necessary tool in working through my own grief experience. And my grief experiences have strengthened and expanded my philosophical thoughts. For me,

philosophy is the cornerstone for living a fulfilling life. Our thoughts should inform our actions and our experiences should reevaluate our thoughts. My project was a microcosm of this circular process. Our values, like those we hold around death or the environment, can change through shifting practices. I hope I've shown that instituting a burial practice that embraces our death and decay can help to build values around expanded community and reciprocal relationships. Both of which are admirable environmental goals.

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