

## Should we Save Nature's Hidden Gems?

### Abstract

Aesthetic preservation is the idea of sparing natural areas from development because of their aesthetic value. In this essay I discuss a problem for aesthetic preservation that I call the 'hidden gems problem': in certain cases, the natural area under consideration is so remote and/or fragile that very few people can actually experience its aesthetic value. In these cases, it becomes unclear how nature's aesthetic value can serve as a logical justification for its preservation, when development promises practical human benefits. After rejecting three potential responses to the hidden gems problem, I offer a different solution. I argue that we have an aesthetic reason to preserve nature's hidden gems because they are required to produce 'true judges' of aesthetic value, who are capable of improving the general quality of taste for landscape. In developing this argument, I offer a critique of some recent preservationist efforts to save the isolated landscape of Sable Island, Nova Scotia.

Aesthetic preservation is the idea that, although the development of some natural area could provide economic benefits, we should forgo these benefits and preserve the area in its natural state because of its aesthetic value. Many preservationists and environmental philosophers have found this an appealing idea.<sup>1</sup> However, the notion of aesthetic preservation faces difficulty when the natural area in question is inaccessible or fragile, preventing all but a few from aesthetically appreciating it. In this paper, I aim to lend some support to the idea of aesthetic preservation, by arguing that it can be extended to these difficult cases.

I begin by introducing, in a general way, the concept of aesthetic preservation, discussing some of its attractions and also some potential problems with it (§§1-2). Then, in the main part of the paper (§§3-5), I discuss the aforementioned cases, which I call cases of 'hidden gems' in nature, which present special difficulties for aesthetic preservation. Drawing on some aesthetic theory, and particularly on some of the ideas of David Hume, I argue that even in these cases it makes sense to consider preserving nature on aesthetic grounds. I conclude by discussing a potential objection to my argument (§6).

## 1. The Appeal of Aesthetic Preservation

As mentioned, aesthetic preservation is the idea of sparing natural areas for their aesthetic value, or their beauty.<sup>2</sup> In actuality, debates over the preservation of natural areas are rarely, if ever, couched solely in aesthetic terms. To make their case, preservationists typically appeal to a range of factors: economic, ecological, moral, and so on. Nonetheless, the aesthetic value of nature is a recurrent theme in preservation debates. As the environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston once put it, 'Ask people, "Why save the Grand Canyon?" and the ready answer will be "Because it is so beautiful. So grand!"'<sup>3</sup> So although it is by no means the only rationale for preserving nature, aesthetic value is an important one.

As an illustration, consider the case of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in northern Alaska. ANWR is located on the northeast coast of Alaska, bordering on the Yukon Territories of Canada. The refuge was designated a protected area by the United States government in 1960, and today spans over seven million hectares (roughly the area of Belgium). It is home to many animal and bird species, including the large, migratory Porcupine Caribou herd. The refuge has virtually no human inhabitants, although a native group, the Gwich'in people, live near the refuge and have traditionally relied on the Porcupine herd for food and clothing. The refuge also contains oil deposits, which has led to proposals to open it to petroleum development. Opponents of drilling in ANWR have appealed to many considerations, including potential harm to the Porcupine Caribou herd and, thereby, to the Gwich'in who depend upon it. But aesthetic motivations are front and centre in their campaigns: the various "save ANWR" websites all prominently feature striking photographs of the refuge. One group's website speaks of 'the unique beauty' of the area, calling it 'a crown jewel' of the North.<sup>4</sup> The National Resource Defense Council's website describes it as a 'one of our true wilderness gems'.<sup>5</sup> Another website calls it 'a wilderness jewel... one of the most beautiful and breathtaking places on Earth.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, not only preservationist advocacy groups find this idea appealing. When asked why he opposed drilling in ANWR, during the 2008 Presidential election, Republican candidate John McCain replied: 'This is one of the most pristine and beautiful parts of the world.'<sup>7</sup> Aesthetic preservation, then, is clearly an attractive notion to many people.

But why is this idea so attractive? Clearly, one reason is simply that we care about aesthetic value in general: it can be as disturbing to think about sacrificing an aesthetically outstanding natural area, such as the ANWR, for oil as it is to think of burning Da Vinci's canvases for firewood. A second reason involves the fact that aesthetic value presents itself to our senses, and is something we can see. Because of this, appeals to aesthetic value can have a strong rhetorical impact in preservation debates. Photographs showing beautiful nature, and images showing the potential aesthetic impact of proposed developments, have an immediate, visceral impact that isn't generated by talk of moral duties to nature or charts and tables detailing long-term ecological impacts. This is surely why the websites mentioned earlier feature such images so prominently in their preservation campaigns.

But there is also a deeper, more philosophical motive for appealing to aesthetic value, if you are a preservationist. As mentioned, there are other reasons why we might preserve nature—the economic, the ecological, and so on—but it can be argued that these must boil down, in the end, to practical human interests. For instance, someone might insist that we preserve a forest because it houses a species that is vital to some local ecosystem. But then the question is: Why do we need to preserve the integrity of this ecosystem? It seems that some connection to the maintenance of practical human interests, such as health or resource sustainability, must eventually be established. And some environmentalists think this approach won't be enough to prevent widespread destruction of nature. They believe that we must recognize that nature has a sort of value that does *not* rest upon its serving practical human interests. But what could this value be?

One possibility is to take into account the practical interests of other living organisms. We might argue, for instance, that creatures such as caribou have practical needs and interests (food, water, space), as humans do. As we take human practical interests into account when deciding what is valuable and worth preserving, perhaps we ought also to take into account the practical interests of non-human organisms such as caribou. Such organisms can suffer and be harmed, in some sense, when these interests are frustrated, as human beings can. This line of thought might provide a basis for attempting to preserve some natural areas. Thus, we might

say that we shouldn't drill for oil in ANWR because it would harm the animals that live there, such as the Porcupine caribou.

However, this line of thought seems not to take us far enough. For those who oppose development in ANWR, for example, would surely not be satisfied if the oil companies agreed to move the Porcupine caribou herd to some safe location, and *then* drill for oil in ANWR. Nor would they be happy even if it could be shown that building roads, erecting oil platforms and drilling would not substantially harm the caribou, or the other flora and fauna in the reserve, at all. It is *the place* itself, in addition to the well-being of the creatures it shelters, that they see as valuable and that, accordingly, they want to see preserved.

But at this point the preservationist is confronted with a very difficult question: if some area isn't really needed to satisfy the practical interests of any relevant creatures (human or non-human), why should we see it as valuable, and worth preserving? In response to this question, some philosophers have tried to argue that the mere fact that something is natural confers value on it. But the injunction to value nature is not likely to be compelling unless we are given further reasons for doing so. For much in nature simply seems bad, or at least regrettable: think about the omnipresent suffering and death that is a regular part of the animal world. If something in the—frankly, often quite horrific—realm of the natural is good and worth saving, surely there is a reason why.

This is where aesthetic value comes into the picture, promising to offer us a neat solution. If we say that nature should be preserved for its aesthetic value, we are offering a familiar and compelling *human* reason for saving nature. But at the same time, the aesthetic value of natural things does not reduce to the *practical* or economic benefits that they bring us. Their aesthetic value does not arise from our manipulating or using them, but only from our looking and listening to them. Aesthetic value, then, seems to be just what the preservationist wants: it is a good reason to preserve nature even when we gain no practical benefit from doing so. So if you are an environmentalist, you might think that this idea is, well—bliss!

## 2. Limitations of Aesthetic Preservation

As a rationale for preserving nature, however, aesthetic preservation also has its problems.<sup>8</sup> In this section, I consider five of these. As I have discussed them in detail elsewhere, I will not treat them in depth, or try to offer solutions to all of them here.<sup>9</sup> Rather, I will briefly table them in order to bring idea of aesthetic preservation into better focus and to introduce some ideas that will later play a role in the main argument of the paper.

The most obvious and immediate concern involves weighing aesthetic value against practical benefits. Say that an area is aesthetically excellent, but that developing it would deliver three hundred well-paying jobs for the next fifty years. Aesthetic preservation requires that the aesthetic value here outweigh the economic benefit. But is this really so? How do we weigh aesthetic pleasure against food on the table for families? The very idea of such a comparison raises many difficult issues.

A second problem with aesthetic preservation is the worry that aesthetic value is subjective, and that people will therefore have conflicting opinions about the aesthetic value of any given natural area. If this is true, then environmentalists may find that aesthetic value is not a very effective tool for convincing others that nature must be spared from development. A nice example of this disagreement in taste occurred during a debate about drilling in ANWR several years ago. Responding to calls to save the beauty of the area, the late Senator Ted Stevens from Alaska thundered: 'I defy anyone to say that that is a beautiful place that has to be preserved for the future. It is a barren wasteland, [a] frozen wasteland ....it is just constant, constant, constant tundra, no trees, no beauty at all.'<sup>10</sup>

Stevens' comment nicely illustrates the worry about disagreement over the beauty of nature, even the so-called 'wilderness jewels'. But perhaps his comment also answers it as well. For Stevens' claim seems wildly idiosyncratic, a bit like the claim that Shakespeare couldn't write. It is hard to deny that wilderness, such as the landscape of ANWR, has become a paradigm of beauty for our culture. Perhaps aesthetic value is subjective, but even if it is, there is probably enough agreement on the beauty of wilderness to make aesthetic preservation a viable strategy.<sup>11</sup>

This leads us on to a third problem, however, which is that we find this sort of general agreement only about the aesthetic excellence of *some* parts of nature (ANWR, for example). Other parts of nature seem to be commonly viewed as aesthetically *bad*. Of wetlands, for instance, Rolston goes so far as to suggest that, in our minds, these places ‘have ‘ugliness’ built into them’: phrases like ‘beautiful bog’ and ‘pleasant mire’ are, he notes, ‘almost a contradiction in terms’.<sup>12</sup> Yuriko Saito describes such parts of nature, with tongue in cheek, as the ‘scenically challenged’.<sup>13</sup> The existence of the ‘scenically challenged’ means that, if we base preservation on aesthetics, we will tend to get a skewed selection of protected landscapes. What we get is the preservation of ‘nature’s crown jewels’, but not of more homely environments that might need preserving, such as wetlands.

A fourth concern arises in regard to the aesthetic appreciation of development that replaces nature. Aesthetic preservation assumes that there will be a *gain* in aesthetic value from saving nature, rather than exploiting it. But this assumption is open to question. Might one not argue that strip mines, urban sprawl, and massive dams are actually as aesthetically good as—perhaps better even—than the nature they replace?

At a first glance, a strip mine might appear aesthetically bad—a huge gash in the earth, emitting a terrible din and spewing black smoke into the sky. But if we consider it not simply as a gash in the earth, but as a large industrial mechanism, it might look quite different. The billowing smoke, loud noise and roaring fires, rather than looking obtrusive and jarring, may seem indicative of its power and vitality. Such developments could also be viewed as expressive of certain positive values: hard work, ingenuity, determination and vision, for instance. If we see them in these ways, strip mines and their ilk might not look so bad after all.<sup>14</sup>

A fifth and final worry about aesthetic preservation involves its relation to natural change. In some cases, a natural area is threatened with destruction, not from human development, but by nature itself. A nice example of this sort of case, which has been well-described by Keekok Lee, is Yew Tree Tarn, a small lake in the English Lake District.<sup>15</sup> Several years ago, it was discovered that this particular lake happened to be draining due to the (natural) opening of an underground fault. The National Trust, a charitable organization that protects important natural areas in the United Kingdom, intervened in order to prevent this

draining from occurring. The Trust described its actions as aiming to preserve the beauty of the lake and the surrounding area; in their words, 'the area has been landscaped to ensure its beauty is permanent'. The worry here is that in preserving a natural thing or area against natural destruction, in this way, we effectively turn it into something that is no longer natural. In the case of Yew Tree Tarn, blocking the natural geological processes that were destroying the lake turned it into something that exists because of the voluntary and intentional actions of human beings – that is, an artefact. So in this case, aesthetic preservation perhaps did not deliver what it promised: it preserved the beauty, but it failed to preserve the nature.

These, then, are some of the challenges facing the idea of aesthetic preservation. They are important, and much more could be said about them. But rather than discuss them further, I will assume here that we can address them. Let us assume, then, that the natural area we want to preserve is widely agreed to be aesthetically outstanding, and is threatened, not by natural change, but by human development. Let us assume that its aesthetic value outweighs whatever economic benefits might be reaped by developing it, and that the development that would replace it is aesthetically inferior. Let us imagine that we have, in other words, an ideal case for implementing aesthetic preservation. There is an additional problem that can arise even in such ideal cases, and it is to this difficulty that I now turn.

### 3. The Hidden Gems Problem

The problem I want to discuss is this: the natural area that we want to preserve is so inaccessible and/or fragile that actually visiting it to enjoy its aesthetic value is either impossible or else imprudent, because it would irrevocably harm or destroy the area. Since no one can actually enjoy the aesthetic value of the natural area, this aesthetic value seems to become useless as a justification for its preservation. This is what I call the 'hidden gems problem' for aesthetic preservation. No doubt the problem rarely, if ever, occurs in the simple form I have described. But I think that the general problem is a feature of many real life instances of aesthetic preservation.

Consider, for example, the case of Sable Island, a small sandy outpost, barely 25 miles long, about 180 miles off the coast of Nova Scotia. Its fame rests chiefly on the threat it poses to shipping: Atlantic storms drive ships onto its treacherous shoals, and there are more than three hundred known shipwrecks off the island's coast. But it is also a starkly beautiful place. A mariner who came to the island in 1916 said '[It was] the most striking landscape I had ever seen; the island appeared to be made of burnished gold and the hills, which faced me, had the angularity of waves in a storm'.<sup>16</sup> The sailor had the impression that the island was made of gold because it is composed entirely from sand (hence the name 'sable', derived from the French word for sand). Adding to its mysterious allure is a continual shroud of fog, populations of rare migrating sea birds, and perhaps most famously, the island's population of wild horses. The origin of the herd is uncertain, but it is thought that domesticated horses were brought there at some point in the eighteenth century, and their feral descendants have roamed the island ever since.

Although it seems odd to think of such a deadly place as fragile, the island's landscape is very sensitive to human activity. Lighthouse keepers who manned the island found that the removal of even small amounts of the native vegetation could cause entire sand dunes to be washed away by storms. To date, human intrusion hasn't posed much threat to the island, due to its remote location and the fact that the Canadian government has strictly restricted access. However, this is changing. Well-heeled tourists have recently been spotted on sightseeing excursions to the island. Also, in the 1970s it was discovered that Sable Island sits directly on top of one of the largest natural gas fields in North America. Development of the field began in the 1990s, and currently there are several drilling platforms operating just off the island, pumping gas onshore via an underwater pipeline.<sup>17</sup>

Apparently in response to these developments, in October of 2011 the Canadian government announced that it was turning Sable Island into a national park.<sup>18</sup> The move, however, was greeted tepidly by Sable enthusiasts, with many taking issue with Parks Canada's stated intention to 'manage the current and likely increased interest and ability of the public to access the Island with programs to facilitate visitor experience.'<sup>19</sup> Canada's parks, after all, have a mandate to 'facilitate visitor experience' in natural areas, by creating trails, accommodation,

and so on. The 'Hands off Sable Island' Facebook group, however, insists on precisely that: a complete ban on sightseers, whose presence would jeopardize its unique landscape.

'Hands off Sable Island' might be right that allowing visitors will irreparably damage the island. But in their position lies precisely the hidden gems conundrum. This is brought out nicely by two online comments on a recent news story reporting the decision to turn the island into a park. One commenter remarked that the island 'sounds very beautiful ....our government made the right decision to protect it.' But another said 'So the government will spend millions of taxpayer dollars establishing and maintaining a park, but no taxpayers will ever be able to see and enjoy it. Not much of a deal for the taxpayers.'<sup>20</sup> This last remark hits the nail on the head: it seems impossible to say 'Save Sable Island for its beauty!' when no one, outside a handful of government-approved scientists, will ever experience this beauty. Doesn't the fact that no one, or only a very few people, can enjoy it aesthetically destroy the logic of preserving it *on aesthetic grounds*? This is the question I now want to explore.

#### 4. Three responses

One reply that the proponent of aesthetic preservation might give to the hidden gems problem is that the amount of enjoyment we get from Sable's aesthetic value is irrelevant, since the aesthetic value of natural areas is independent of such enjoyment, and indeed of any of the area's effects on human beings. We can call this the 'non-anthropogenic value solution' to the hidden gems problem. If this claim is true, then a part of nature can have aesthetic value even if it is unable to produce any actual aesthetic enjoyment.

Unfortunately, this view has the serious drawback of making the idea of aesthetic value difficult to grasp. A more common approach takes all value to be anthropogenic: on this approach, value is not 'out there in the natural world', so to speak, but rather attaches to things only in virtue of their relations to desirable human experiences. This is the more common view about value, surely, because it is fairly easy to understand. If it isn't right, and aesthetic value *is* 'out there in the natural world', then many uncomfortable questions loom. What exactly is aesthetic value? Is it a property that, like other natural qualities, we can measure in some

objective fashion? How does aesthetic value fit into the scientific picture describing the rest of the natural world?

Of course, these questions have not deterred some philosophers from trying to inject value into the natural world.<sup>21</sup> But this move is a particularly awkward one for the proponent of aesthetic preservation to make. The reason is that, as mentioned earlier on, one of the most attractive things about aesthetic preservation is that aesthetic value—the capacity to produce aesthetic enjoyment—is familiar and easy to understand. Turning aesthetic value into a creature of darkness destroys one of its main virtues as a rationale for nature preservation. Thus, I will assume that the proponent of aesthetic preservation will not favour this rather radical response to the hidden gems problem.

A less radical response than the ‘non-anthropogenic value response’ would hold that value is anthropogenic, but that nature’s hidden gems have value, not because they give us aesthetic enjoyment, but because they afford us a different satisfaction: the satisfaction that comes just from knowing that such beautiful places still exist. Thus, although very few get to enjoy Sable Island’s beauty, we can all enjoy the thought that the island exists. We could call this the ‘just knowing solution’ to the hidden gems problem.

The trouble with this response is that rather than providing a solution to the hidden gems problem, it presumes one. For according to the just knowing response, what we enjoy (or, perhaps, take solace in) is the fact that, in certain cases at least, our species has not been selfish or wantonly destructive, but rather has been wise, and has made a good decision. But ascertaining this ‘fact’ takes us back to the fundamental question of preservation: *Is it wise to spare nature rather than reap the practical benefits that developing it could provide?* Of course the aesthetic preservationist will say that the decision to forego development on Sable Island is wise because the area is extremely beautiful. But now we only find the hidden gems problem emerging again. Why is it wise to forego real material benefits to safeguard something that will give no aesthetic benefit at all? Without an answer to this question, we cannot know that we have, in fact, made a wise decision in choosing preservation, and thus the satisfaction of ‘just knowing’ that Sable Island still exists evaporates into nothing.

A third, and perhaps more promising response might be based on the idea that we *can*, in fact, enjoy nature's hidden gems, despite not being able to directly experience them. We can call this the 'Indirect experience solution'. For instance, one might say that it doesn't matter that we can't actually get to Sable Island, since we can aesthetically appreciate it indirectly via the imagination. Even based on my rudimentary description of it, you could probably construct some version of the island in your imagination. Perhaps in this way we can aesthetically appreciate Sable Island in our imaginations without actually going there.

No doubt the exact nature of this appreciation would require some clarification. But however exactly we understand it, the problem with this response is that it proves too much: if we *can* appreciate Sable Island via the imagination, it no longer seems to matter, so far as aesthetic enjoyment goes, whether it actually exists or not. We can also use imagination to aesthetically appreciate Tolkien's Middle-Earth, or Dante's Hell, and not only do these places not exist now, they never existed at all. What the indirect experience solution really requires, then, is a way of aesthetically appreciating Sable Island that doesn't require going there, but does require the island's continued existence.

The obvious candidate here is appreciation via visual representations produced through some suitable causal chain terminating with Sable island: films or photographs of the island, for instance. The Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History maintains a website on the island which states: 'As it is a place most of us will never visit, this web site brings Sable Island to you.'<sup>22</sup> So it does, in a way, by displaying photographs of the island. There's no question that these photographs have some aesthetic value. Perhaps, then, we should preserve Sable Island in its natural state because it is needed to produce a set of visual representations that can provide widespread aesthetic enjoyment.

Some will object here that experiencing the aesthetic value of photographs of Sable Island is not the same as experiencing the aesthetic value of the Island itself. More strongly, it may be said that such representations do not allow us to experience the location's aesthetic value at all. For example, Allen Carlson has argued that photography is incapable of adequately capturing the aesthetic qualities of natural environments, which are three-dimensional and multi-sensory environments, in which we are immersed as active viewers.<sup>23</sup> To appreciate a

photograph of a natural area is, therefore, not to appreciate that area. These claims may be true, but they need not destroy our suggested rationale for aesthetic preservation. For even if these claims are true, it remains true also that such photographs do bring aesthetic enjoyment of *some* kind, and given that they do, the enjoyment they provide might be a basis for preserving the 'raw material', as it were, for their production: namely Sable Island.

Nonetheless, this response to the hidden gems problem seems ultimately unsatisfactory. One difficulty lies in the threat of diminishing returns. It may be worthwhile to spare a natural area so that its aesthetic excellence can be used to produce an aesthetically excellent set of photographs. For instance, some years ago the New York photographer Roberto Dutesco received permission to go to Sable Island and photograph its wild horses: his striking, deeply moving images are indeed aesthetically excellent.<sup>24</sup> But once such a visual record has been produced, and is made available for enjoyment, is it worthwhile to preserve the area in question so that *additional* visual records can be produced? This depends, obviously, on how comprehensive a photo record we possess, but at some point we must ask: How many different pictures do we need? There may come a point at which the new visual records generated no longer produce sufficient aesthetic payoff to justify foregoing the practical benefits of developing the area.

A deeper problem with the indirect experience response, though, lies in the assumption that the continued existence of the natural area is required to produce these visual representations. This probably was true in the past, when techniques for 'doctoring' and enhancing visual representations were limited. But with current technology, it seems highly doubtful that the only way we could produce beautiful Sable Island photos and films is by photographing or filming Sable Island. To return to the Tolkien example, Peter Jackson's popular *Lord of the Rings* films provided a stunning visual record of Middle Earth, contrived largely through digital effects. There seems no principled reason why the nature photography industry could not employ similar techniques to produce photos of Sable Island after the island itself has been destroyed. One could argue that these images would not really be images of Sable Island, and that's fair enough: we could call them 'Sable-ish' images instead. Indeed, we might come to regard these representations as a new form of Art: 'imaginary landscape

representation', as opposed to nature photography. The point is that they can apparently yield as much aesthetic pleasure as real photos of Sable Island can.

One might deny this, however. One might insist that Sable-ish images just wouldn't be the same: we wouldn't respond to them as we would respond to actual photos of Sable Island. This may be true; many philosophers have argued that we have different aesthetic responses to representational images when we have different beliefs concerning their causal history. Dennis Dutton, for instance, argued that when we know that a painting is a forgery, our appreciation shifts from the artistic elements of the work toward its technical aspects.<sup>25</sup> When you think that a particular work is a Vermeer, you might approach it in a certain way, focusing on what Vermeer was expressing in his composition of a certain biblical scene, for example. But when you learn it is a forgery, your attention shifts to technical matters such as: How did the painter imitate Vermeer's treatment of light so effectively? How did he know which elements to copy and which to change, in order to fool the experts? Perhaps a similar shift in appreciation would occur when we move to imaginary landscape representations, as opposed to traditional nature photography.

But even if this is the case, the hidden gems problem remains unsolved. For our question then becomes: Why should we insist upon appreciating nature photography rather than appreciating imaginary landscape representations? The reason for insisting on the former seems not to be purely aesthetic, since we can obviously derive aesthetic satisfaction, albeit a different aesthetic satisfaction, from imaginary landscape representations, such as computer generated Sable-ish images or Peter Jackson's digital depiction of Mordor. The purely *aesthetic* case for preservation has, once more, slipped between our fingers.

##### 5. Another approach

No doubt there is more to say about these responses, but perhaps enough has been said to motivate a different approach. A problem with the responses covered so far is that all of them focus only on the impact of natural destruction on the *quantity* of aesthetic enjoyment produced. The basic problem is that, since so few people can take aesthetic enjoyment from the island, its destruction seems not to have a significant impact on the total amount of

aesthetic enjoyment. Perhaps we would do better to focus instead on the impact of the loss of the island on the *quality* of aesthetic enjoyment.

In switching focus in this way, we will need to introduce into the framework of aesthetic preservation a stronger assumption than we have been using so far. I have been assuming that aesthetic appreciation is subjective, but if we are to discriminate between aesthetic responses not just in terms of their *intensity* (or the quantity of pleasure they involve) but in terms of their *quality*—in terms of how correct or appropriate they are—then we must see aesthetic responses as having an element of objectivity. We need not hold that aesthetic value is present in objects in the way that mass and shape are. But we do need to see aesthetic responses as objective in sense that some responses to a particular object will be better or more correct than others. A useful analogy is with colour—colours are subjective in that they involve certain perceptual experiences, but they are also objective insofar as some colour responses to a particular object are better or more correct than others. Thus we say that stop signs are really red, even if colour blind individuals, or people who have taken LSD, see them as green.<sup>26</sup>

So let us adopt as our assumption, then, that some aesthetic responses to an object can be said to be better or more correct than other responses. My claim is that we should preserve nature's hidden gems because, if we do, we will be more likely to have better or more correct aesthetic responses to nature in general. We can develop an argument for this claim by turning to a classic text on the quality of aesthetic responses: David Hume's essay 'Of the Standard of Taste'.<sup>27</sup> In that essay, Hume singles out those with superior taste—in our terms, those who tend to have aesthetic responses of superior quality—whom he calls the 'true judges'. Hume describes these 'rare characters' thus: 'Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.'<sup>28</sup>

In this passage, Hume lists a number of qualities required for making correct aesthetic judgements. For our purposes here, the pertinent characteristic of the true judge is the fourth: being experienced in making comparisons between the different 'species and degrees of excellence'. Hume says that 'a man, who has had no opportunity of comparing the different

kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him'.<sup>29</sup> The basic idea is plausible enough: someone who only ever read drug store romance novels would probably have a rather skewed standard of literary excellence, being unaware of many of the more impressive things that can be achieved with the novel form.

Now in order for a true judge to engage in the sort of comparisons that Hume recommends, that judge must have access to objects spanning the full range of 'species and degrees of excellence'. If someone has nothing to read but drug store romance novels, he will be stuck with his skewed standard of literary excellence: he needs some masterpieces as a contrast. And it is here that I propose to offer the initial justification for preserving nature's hidden gems: they can serve as masterpieces with which aspiring true judges can compare the more common objects of appreciation. Thus, a man might come to over-rate the beauty of his mediocre local landscape, but viewing an aesthetically outstanding landscape, such as Sable Island, might jolt him out of his complacency, put his previous assessments into a better perspective, and improve his judgement, just as reading Tolstoy or Austen might do for the devotee of romance novels.

Of course, this point seems not much of an advance on our problem. For all we have established is that the hidden gems can enhance the quality of aesthetic experience of the happy few who get to experience them: these visitors are more apt to be true (or truer) judges than they otherwise would be. But the whole problem of the hidden gems is that the benefits to the few allowed to visit, real as they may be, are insufficient to outweigh the practical benefits that would accrue to the larger society from development. What we lack is any connection between the aesthetic benefit to the small group of visitors and the aesthetic welfare of society at large. I think we can draw such a connection, however, by reflecting on the question: What is so valuable about true judges, anyway?

In one sense, the question seems trivial. True judges are, well, true judges, and that is precisely what is valuable about them. They make better appraisals of the features of objects and of their aesthetic value—they are more able to get it right about such matters—and perhaps this is just obviously a good thing.<sup>30</sup> But there is another good thing about true judges: they also play a useful role in helping *the rest of us*, who are not true judges, to improve *our*

taste. This happens in a number of ways, but the key one here is the true judge's ability to deliver informed verdicts on the aesthetic value of particular things. Good literary critics, for instance, make appraisals of the aesthetic value of literary works that call our own preferences into question, help us to see key things that we've missed, and draw us toward works we may have unduly neglected. In doing these things, they lead us toward the improvement of our own aesthetic judgement. My suggestion is that true judges of aesthetic value in nature can help improve all of our tastes in landscape in a similar way. Since nature's hidden gems are often requisite training materials for true judges of aesthetic value in nature, we thus have an aesthetic reason to preserve them.

It is worth noting that my claim is not that experiencing nature's hidden gems is *sufficient* to make one a true judge. The visitor must first of all take an aesthetic interest in the landscape: a scientist who takes no such interest but only focuses on ecological matters may not improve her aesthetic sensibilities at all. And other qualities, such as those Hume mentions, will remain necessary for cultivating superior taste. My claim is only that experiencing nature's hidden gems is *necessary* for becoming a true judge of natural beauty: if this claim is true, then we have a reason for holding onto these landscapes, even if there remains more to do in order for us to reap their potential benefits.<sup>31</sup>

## 6. An Objection

To conclude I'd like to consider an objection to my solution to the hidden gems problem. It rests on the grounds that, when it comes to the role of true judges in improving the aesthetic responses of the general population, there are important disanalogies between the cases of art and nature. As mentioned, one of the main ways in which literary critics familiar with the masterpieces help improve our literary taste is by moving us to read those masterpieces *for ourselves*. To return to my earlier example, if the devotee of romance novels is moved by a good literary critic, she will probably read *Anna Karenina* or *Pride and Prejudice*. But when someone in a dreary corner of the Midwest reads a description of Sable Island, even if she is moved to go see it, she cannot, precisely because it is a hidden gem. Thus, one might

doubt whether true judges versed in the beauties of nature's hidden gems are capable of improving the general taste in landscape, since the masterpieces that they know remain inaccessible to us. However, I think that this does not follow, and we can see why by considering a hypothetical case involving artworks.

Imagine that something bizarre happens to Vermeer's paintings. One day, the images mysteriously disappear: the canvasses are now simply black. At first it is suspected that the canvasses have been stolen and replaced with black ones (perhaps as a joke), but this is ruled out by scientific analysis showing the canvasses to be Vermeer's. Furthermore, it soon comes to light that the images have not truly disappeared at all, because a handful of people are still able to view the images, in their original colour and condition: to them, the canvasses do not look black, as they do to the rest of us. Upon further study, it is discovered that some chemical oddity in Vermeer's paints has caused this change, and that a rare genetic quirk in the visual systems of a select few allows them to perceive the original image, despite the chemical change. These lucky individuals are described as having been gifted with 'Vermeer sight'. Furthermore, scientists reveal that the chemical change is now causing the canvasses themselves to rapidly deteriorate physically: although the original visibility of the image cannot be restored, this physical deterioration of the canvasses can be prevented, but only by an extremely costly treatment that must be applied to them continuously.

The question I mean to pose about this example is: Do we (the general public) have good reason to pay the cost of maintaining Vermeer's canvasses in existence, even though we can never enjoy them? I think the answer is yes. The reason to preserve them is that the opportunity to experience these masterpieces will allow the few afforded this opportunity—those with Vermeer sight—to become truer judges, which is a boon to us all. It is true that these critics will never get us to experience Vermeers for ourselves, since this is impossible for those of us lacking Vermeer-sight. But these critics are a boon to us nonetheless: their greater experience translates into more accurate and incisive verdicts about works we *can* appreciate. Facilitating this experience for the lucky few is, therefore, a prudent investment for any society that views as worthwhile the aesthetic dimension of life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I discuss some examples of appeals to aesthetic considerations by preservationists in the following sections. Philosophical defences of aesthetic preservation include: Eugene Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Denton, Tex: Environmental Ethics Books, 1996); Eliot Sober, 'Philosophical Problems for Environmentalism' in B.G. Norton (ed.) *The Preservation of Species: The Value of Biological Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 17-194; Mark Sagoff, 'On Preserving the Natural Environment', *Yale Law Journal*, 84, (1974): 205-267; Ned Hettinger, 'Allen Carlson's Environmental Aesthetics and Protection of the Environment', *Environmental Ethics*, 27, (2005): 57-76 and 'Objectivity in Environmental Aesthetics and Protection of the Environment', in A. Carlson and S. Lintott (eds.) *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 413-438; Janna Thompson, 'Aesthetics and the Value of Nature', *Environmental Ethics*, 17, (1995): 291-305; Sheila Lintott, 'Toward Eco-Friendly Aesthetics', *Environmental Ethics*, 28, (2006): 57-76; J.B. Callicot, 'The Land Aesthetic', *Environmental Review*, 7, (1983): 345-358, reprinted in , R. G. Botzler and S. J. Armstrong (eds.) *Environmental Ethics: Divergence and Convergence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998); Holmes Rolston, 'From Beauty to Duty: Aesthetics of Nature and Environmental Ethics', in A. Berleant (ed.) *Environment and the Arts: Perspectives on Environmental Aesthetics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Emily Brady, 'Aesthetic Character and Aesthetic Integrity in Environmental Conservation', *Environmental Ethics*, 24, (2002): 75-91; David Cooper, 'Aestheticism and Environmentalism' in D.E. Cooper and J.A. Palmer (eds.) *Spirit of Environmentalism: Religion, Value and Environmental Concern* (New York: Routledge, 1998). The Carlson and Lintott anthology mentioned above (*Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism*) collects many of these essays and other relevant writings, and is an excellent introduction to the topic.

<sup>2</sup> I will use these terms interchangeably in this paper. Also, except in two instances that I will note, I will make no assumptions regarding how we should understand or analyze nature's aesthetic value. For a recent survey of philosophical debates on this topic, see Allen Carlson, 'Environmental Aesthetics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition),

Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL =

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/environmental-aesthetics/>>.

<sup>3</sup> Rolston, op cit., p.127.

<sup>4</sup> See the Defenders of Wildlife sites at

[www.defenders.org/programs\\_and\\_policy/habitat\\_conservation/federal\\_lands/national\\_wildlife\\_refuges/threats/arctic/index.php](http://www.defenders.org/programs_and_policy/habitat_conservation/federal_lands/national_wildlife_refuges/threats/arctic/index.php) and [www.savearcticrefuge.org/learnmore.html](http://www.savearcticrefuge.org/learnmore.html)

<sup>5</sup> [www.nrdc.org/land/wilderness/arctic.asp](http://www.nrdc.org/land/wilderness/arctic.asp)

<sup>6</sup> [www.anwrphotography.com](http://www.anwrphotography.com)

<sup>7</sup> McCain's comment was recorded by Jim Geraghty in his blog 'The Campaign Spot', *National Review Online*, January 16, 2008 <http://www.nationalreview.com/campaign-spot/10699/john-mccain-im-raising-hundreds-thousands-day-new-hampshire>

<sup>8</sup> Critics of aesthetic preservation include T.J. Diffey, 'Arguing About the Environment', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40, (2000): 133-148; J. Robert Loftis, 'Three Problems for the Aesthetic Foundations of Environmental Ethics', *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 10, (2003): 41-50; Stan Godlovitch, 'Aesthetic Protectionism', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 6, (1989): 171-180; and Keekok Lee, 'Beauty for Ever?' *Environmental Values*, 4, (1995): 213-215.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see [source deleted for blind review].

<sup>10</sup> Stevens' comments were aired on the PBS New Hour, 2 November 2005. His speech can be viewed online at [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/environment/july-dec05/anwr\\_11-2.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/environment/july-dec05/anwr_11-2.html).

<sup>11</sup> Or so it seems; as we'll see, we will need to revisit the objectivity of aesthetic responses in section five, below.

<sup>12</sup> Holmes Rolston, 'Aesthetics in the Swamps', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 43, (2000): 584-597.

<sup>13</sup> Yuriko Saito, 'The Aesthetics of Unscenic Nature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, (1998): 101-111.

<sup>14</sup> The surprising (and somewhat disturbing) aesthetic power of industrial sites has been brought home in recent years by the work of the Canadian photographer Ed Burtynsky; his work can be viewed online at [www.edwardburtynsky.com](http://www.edwardburtynsky.com). That environmentally damaged environmental sites can have significant aesthetic value is also argued by Maria Jose Alcaraz

Leon in “Morally Wrong Beauty as a Source of Value”, *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 40-41, (2010-11).

<sup>15</sup> Lee, op cit.; on this issue, see also Godlovitch, op cit.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Bruce Armstrong, *Sable Island: Nova Scotia’s Mysterious Island of Sand* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1981), p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Current and historical information on the project is available at the Sable Offshore Energy Project website ([www.soep.com](http://www.soep.com)).

<sup>18</sup> ‘Canada and Nova Scotia Reach Historic Agreement to designate Sable Island as a National Park Reserve’. Canadian government press release, Halifax, Nova Scotia, October 17, 2011. Available online at [http://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/cp-nr/release\\_e.asp?id=1785&andor1=nr](http://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/cp-nr/release_e.asp?id=1785&andor1=nr).

<sup>19</sup> See Parks Canada’s ‘Sable Island FAQ’, online at [www.pc.gc.ca/eng/progs/np-pn/cnpn-cnpn/sable/faq.aspx](http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/progs/np-pn/cnpn-cnpn/sable/faq.aspx)

<sup>20</sup> Kathryn Blaze Carlson, ‘Tiny Sable Island Canada’s newest national park’, *National Post Online*, 18 October, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> The most famous example is G.E. Moore, but a more recent instance in environmental philosophy is Holmes Rolston: see, for example, his ‘Are Values in Nature Subjective or Objective?’, in *Philosophy Gone Wild* (Buffalo, Prometheus Books, 1989), pp. 91-117.

<sup>22</sup> [www.museum.gov.ns.ca/mnh/nature/sableisland/](http://www.museum.gov.ns.ca/mnh/nature/sableisland/)

<sup>23</sup> Allen Carlson, ‘Appreciation and the Natural Environment’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37, (1979): 267-276; see also his essays ‘Formal Qualities and the Natural Environment’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 13, (1979): 99-114 and ‘On the Possibility of Quantifying Scenic Beauty’, *Landscape Planning*, 4, (1977): 131-172.

<sup>24</sup> On these images, see Richard Friswell, ‘Wild Things’, *The Modern Estate*, (2008): 1-14. Some of Dutesco’s images, and the story behind them, can be viewed at his website:

<http://www.dutescoart.com/gallery/sablehorses/index.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis Dutton, ‘Artistic Crimes’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 19, (1965): 304-314.

<sup>26</sup> On the analogy between judgements of colour and aesthetic judgements, see Frank Sibley, ‘Objectivity and Aesthetics’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplement 42, (1968): 31-54.

<sup>27</sup> Hume 'Of the Standard of Taste', (1757), in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.) *David Hume: Moral Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), pp. 345-360.

<sup>28</sup> Hume, op cit., p. 355.

<sup>29</sup> Hume, op cit., p. 353.

<sup>30</sup> Hume seems to have thought so, but for a different take on why we admire true judges, see Jerrold Levinson, 'Hume's Standard of Taste: the Real Problem', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60, (2002): 227-238.

<sup>31</sup> As mentioned earlier, in addition to the objectivity of aesthetic responses, this conclusion requires a second assumption, which is that the appreciation of a photographic or cinematic representation of a natural area, such as Sable Island, is not equivalent to aesthetically appreciating that natural area itself. If this claim is false, then true judges could cultivate their taste using such representations, which would remove the proposed reason for preserving the actual area. For a detailed discussion and defence of the claim, see the references in note 23, above.