

The fallacy of the

'People vs. Trees' tactic

By M. PHILIP STERN

The issue of "environmentalism" should be addressed from a wider perspective than that usually adopted. It is not merely an ecological, but in a way not usually understood, a significant moral issue.

The recent public hearing on the siting of group homes in Corson's Brook Woods reveals the need for such discussion. Many people have seen the moral issue too narrowly, and in too simple terms. They have tended to settle for unfortunate, polarizing phrases, such as "People versus Trees."

The phrase is unfortunate because it pits two sets of dedicated, highly moral people against each other. It is also probably inaccurate — as many have pointed out both people *and* trees could probably receive justice.

As I see it, however, the major problem is that the phrase implies the terribly low value (in most people's minds) of trees and of "environmentalism" in gen-

eral, and that this reveals something about the way modern human beings think about themselves in relation to "nature." Though most people are not aware of it, from a moral point of view, it is this way of thinking that is terribly significant.

Let us establish first the moral perspective that is clear to everyone. There has been community opposition to group homes wherever the state has tried to place them. Morally, this is shameful, and advocates for the handicapped are thus understandably suspicious, even angry at the opposition of environmentalists.

Furthermore, the present plans to deinstitutionalize remaining residents of places such as the Staten Island Developmental Center are also the result of moral indignation. The poignant memories of horror stories have made absolutely clear the urgent need to protect those who cannot protect themselves; to respect their dignity and worth as human beings, and to try to provide them

with an environment in which they can grow and develop.

What has been involved for advocates of the handicapped has been a long process of consciousness-raising — similar to that of minorities in the 60s, and more recently, of the women's movement. As in those movements, ignorance, fear, and prejudice had to be overcome, and these dedicated advocates have achieved much public understanding through their deeply moral perseverance.

Sadly, even though most of the same issues are involved, the slogan mentioned earlier suggests that a similar moral understanding of environmentalism still needs to be won. Our natural resources, too, cannot protect themselves (as the name of our local organization, the "Protectors," suggests), and they too need an environment in which they can grow and develop.

To be sure, there are differences between people and trees, and if there really were no other alternatives, the needs of people

would come first. But unfortunately, searching for alternatives never becomes a high priority, because treating trees and wildlife with respect is very low in the scale of value in most people's minds — except when it hits their pocketbooks, when they suddenly see the damaging effects of upsetting some specific ecosystem. And most sad of all, the moral issue, in its broadest perspective, is never really understood, even though it has been with us for centuries.

Modern man, in his pride and arrogance, has lost his perspective of who he is in relation to the universe, to all things around him. In "Desiderata," that wonderful series of 17th century statements found outside a Baltimore Church, one sentence consoles many by saying, "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here." Today, the focus has to be reversed: We have to remind ourselves that the trees have a right to be here.

Great writers have always

pointed out the importance of respecting all forms of otherness in the world. Shakespeare wrote that there is *nothing* that exists "but to the earth some special good doth give." The word "special" is significant. Handicapped people are sometimes called "special." So are the things in nature.

Unfortunately, only occasionally do some of us experience the otherness of nature, and show respect and humility before it — perhaps only after some violent natural disaster, or on the rare occasion that we really look at the stars on a clear night, or on that once-in-a-lifetime trip when we look down the Grand Canyon.

But our true moral health depends on having a proper view of ourselves in relation to the universe. For there is a hidden carry-over to unconscious habits of thought. Disrespecting otherness in nature, we will disrespect and exploit people too.

Observing the wonder of a living, harmonious ecosystem, what

Wordsworth called, "Nature's holy pain," we should indeed lament with him "What man has made of man." Perhaps if we could hear more often in nature, as Wordsworth did, "The still sad music of humanity . . . of ample power / To chasten and subdue," We would come to respect each other more.

I respectfully suggest that a larger, broader, more truly moral perspective be adopted in addressing environmental issues, and that equal attention be paid to *all* the moral imperatives involved.

If enough *value* had been accorded the "environmental" consideration, the state would never have chosen Corson's Brook Woods in the first place, and would certainly now, instead of expending so much energy to justify and hold onto a prematurely arrived at decision, find a less sensitive alternate site, and accept the city's request to make this one part of our Greenbelt.

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