Section 1 of this article does a good job of summarizing many of the points that we have explored so far in this seminar. For one, he notes that there is no special problem for environmentalists when it comes to the conservation of instrumentally valuable properties in nature. By instrumentally valuable, I mean properties in nature that provide some benefit to humans. Sober, for the purposes of this article, is not particularly concerned about the arguments that environmentalists might raise about the conservation of those instrumentally valuable items.

I would perhaps add that it would be hasty to conclude that there are no important philosophical issues surrounding the conservation of instrumentally valuable items or processes in nature. For instance, there can be disagreements about whether some entity or process in fact provides a particular benefit. For example, you might wonder whether rainforests are indeed a source of new medicines, or, whether remote and inaccessible arctic refuges really do provide recreational benefits. In addition, there can be questions about how to weigh conflicting instrumental values. For instance, how heavily should aesthetic value be weighed against economic gain? But Sober, in this article, is setting aside those kinds of issues. As he puts it,

The problem for environmentalism stems from the idea that species and ecosystems ought to be preserved for reasons additional to their known value as resources for human use. The feeling is that even when we cannot say what nutritional, medicinal, or recreational benefit the preservation provides, there is still a value in preservation. It is the search for a rationale for this feeling that constitutes the main conceptual problem for environmentalism.” (172-3).

He goes on, in Section 1, to discuss sentientism as one example of a moral theory that justifies the protection of some species regardless of their instrumental value. However, he notes that this does not extend to many of the entities (e.g. many organisms, inorganic entities like mountains and rivers, and ecological wholes like species and ecosystems) that environmentalists care about.

Section 2 of the chapter discusses the “ignorance argument,” as he calls it, I would like students to read this short section and consider whether it goes beyond anything that was covered in our discussion of the precautionary principle. I am not suggesting this as a question. Rather, just something for you to think about and perhaps raise in discussion.

Questions

1. Section 3 of the chapter discusses the slippery slope argument. Sober notes that some environmentalists might be reluctant, for political reasons, to concede the point that the value of a species might be contingent on its rarity (see top of page 179). The worry is that this might be used as a convenient excuse to postpone conservation efforts. In a few sentences, paraphrase Sober’s response to this objection. Then, in a short paragraph, discuss whether you take this to be a convincing response.
2. Section 4 deals with the concept of naturalness. In your own words, briefly summarize Sober’s objection to the way that this concept is employed by Environmentalists. Then, in a second paragraph, try to develop an objection to Sober, defending (some) conception of naturalness. Basically, I would like to students to try and give naturalness a run for its money, responding specifically to Sober’s worries. See how it goes.

3. In Section 5, Sober tackles some interesting questions about the putative needs and desires of ecological wholes (species and ecosystems). He argues that the Aristotelian notion of a natural tendency is basically unintelligible. Moreover, he claims that a Darwinian concept of goal-directedness is “profoundly individualistic,” and so cannot be extended to such holistic entities as entire species or ecosystems. I would like students to write a short (1 paragraph) reflection on this line of argument. You might comment on his dismissal of Aristotelian thinking, for example. Or perhaps suggest another way of thinking about the goals of biological systems, one which is neither Darwinian nor Aristotelian. Or, perhaps you want to explore the possibility that Darwinian goal-directedness might extend to higher-level entities, and what that might mean for environmentalism.