

P. Aarne Vesilind's Commentary on "The Lease of Their Problems"

Commentary On
The Lease of Their Problems

When my kids were growing up, they experienced the usual pressures to conform to the standards of their society, including having the latest toys, clothes, electronics. They would ask for these necessities using arguments that often consisted solely of: "But, Dad, I *need* that!"

I tried my best to reason with them by pointing out a difference between *need* and want. What they wanted, of course, was the trappings of their culture. Their needs were already satisfied - a stable home, enough good food to eat, a warm place to sleep, and a cadre of good friends. But in their adolescent way of thinking, these were taken for granted. Because they had not known a different life, they thought that all lives had these advantages. What to the rest of the world would have been luxuries, to them became *needs*.

I remembered these arguments with my kids when I read this scenario, particularly, where the author quotes the Society of American Foresters (SAF) as taking the position that the Endangered Species Act is too restrictive, arguing that human economic needs [sic] should be considered as well as the biological needs of plant and animal species.

This argument is blatantly anthropocentric. It uses the word *need* in two different ways, just as my kids did. The need of nonhuman nature for forests is a need for survival, both as species and individuals. Humans' need, however, particularly in the United States, is one of luxury. Our country uses timber now to build palatial houses that have 10 times as many rooms as there are people to occupy them, and uses paper at a clip faster than when computers were not used for communication. We clear-cut forests because they belong to us, and we have been assured that we can do with them whatever we want.

The distinction among the senses of "need" is applicable in this scenario. One could argue that the Society of American Foresters, supported by and dominated by the timber industries, has a clear economic reason for dismantling the Endangered Species Act. SAF argues that the property owners (the large pulp and paper companies) would be economically deprived if we gave nonhuman nature a chance to survive. What we are witnessing, of course, is simple greed, not only on the part of the forestry industry, but also on the part of people who purchase lumber far and above their legitimate needs. *Want* is what is governing and justifying these decisions, not *need*.