

Title: The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy, Law, and the Environment
Author: Mark Sagoff
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Review by Mark Colyvan (University of Sydney)

This is a substantially revised second edition of Mark Sagoff's influential 1988 book. Sagoff attempts to show how to perform a delicate balancing act between thinking of the environment as intrinsically valuable (valuable in itself, irrespective of human interests) and as instrumentally valuable (valuable in order to achieve particular goals). The first kind of value Sagoff frequently describes using religious language (e.g. "nature as sacred" (p.1)). The second he characterizes in narrow economic terms (e.g. "an object of economic exploitation" (p.2)). It is clear that these two kinds of value can come apart. For example, a piece of nature might be thought to be intrinsically valuable without having any value for humans. Sagoff argues that society should aim to balance these two ways of valuing nature, without reducing one to the other. He suggests that it is possible to have both: good economic performance and "still respect the sacredness of nature" (p.3).

The book covers a great deal of interesting territory: social policy, environmental law, ecology, and environmental ethics. The conclusion is a controversial call to arms, pleading with environmentalists to reject the "scientism" of preserving biodiversity, investing in ecosystems services and the like. (Sagoff pointedly uses the pejorative term "scientism" to refer to this approach (p.23).) Instead, he would have environmentalists return to their historical roots in overtly spiritual, ethical and aesthetic ideals. It is hard to take seriously the more sensational reading of this conclusion. It is nothing short of an intellectual crime to turn from science to spirituality for answers or advice on anything, let alone for a justification for preserving nature. But there is a more modest and plausible reading of Sagoff's conclusion: narrow economic construals of the value of the environment (often called "market values") are inadequate as a basis for defending conservation efforts. This is undoubtedly right and for pretty much the reasons Sagoff gives. In my view, however, this more modest conclusion does not require an appeal to intrinsic values, spiritual values, religious motivations, nor a rejection of the scientific approach to defending environmentalism. In short, this is a provocative but good book.