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For submission to: *Oikos*

Intrinsic Value and Its Commitments: A Response to the Conguillío Statement

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Funding information
Natural Science and Engineering Research Council, Canada

The Conguillío Statement asserts that ecosystems possess intrinsic value and presents this claim as part of the normative responsibilities of ecologists. Although such language is common in ecology, it is rarely accompanied by a sustained philosophical defense. This paper clarifies what would be required for the claim to succeed. If intrinsic value is understood in a modest, attitude-dependent sense—where ecosystems are valued for their own sake by individuals or communities—the claim is defensible but generates only limited, indirect reasons for protection. If, however, intrinsic value is understood in a stronger, objective sense capable of grounding binding, universalizable moral duties, the justificatory burden is substantially higher. I argue that ecosystems are unlikely to meet the conditions required for such strong claims. They lack the features—such as consciousness, interests, or unified welfare—that have traditionally grounded intrinsic value, and attempts to extend or pluralize these grounds fail to provide clear guidance in cases of conflict. As a result, appeals to intrinsic value either yield reasons too weak to support the responsibilities often attributed to them, or require a philosophical defense that has not been supplied. The intrinsic value claim should therefore be treated not as an established foundation for conservation, but as a substantive *and contested* philosophical position. Conservation goals can be defended without relying on it as a foundational moral premise.

KEYWORDS
intrinsic value, environmental ethics, moral justification, value pluralism, Hitchens' Razor

1 | INTRODUCTION

Ecologists and conservation biologists frequently appeal to the idea that ecosystems possess *intrinsic value*, often presenting this claim as a basis for moral responsibility. A recent example is the *Conguillío Statement*, authored by a group of 33 ecologists (Arnillas et al., 2024, 2026), which asserts that it is our (ecologists') general responsibility to:

> *"Consider the **intrinsic value** of natural ecosystems, acknowledging that these ecosystems and all living organisms require space and resources **to thrive**."* (Arnillas et al., 2024, p. 4; emphasis added)

Although the Conguillío Statement provides the immediate motivation for this paper, the appeal to intrinsic value is neither unique to that document nor incidental to its argument. Similar language appears throughout conservation biology and environmental policy, where intrinsic value is often invoked as a foundational justification for protection without accompanying philosophical defense (for some recent examples see Fearnside, 2021; Raymond et al., 2023; Washington et al., 2021). In this respect, the Conguillío Statement exemplifies a broader tendency to move from evaluative language to claims about responsibility without specifying how the former grounds the latter. The present argument therefore addresses a broader and recurring NORMATIVE CLAIM within ecology (terms displayed in SMALL CAPS are defined in Appendix A).

As often used, this claim lacks a clearly articulated rationale or supporting argument. Ecologists would do well to remember Hitchens' Razor (Wikipedia contributors, 2024): "*What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.*" For the claim to function as a foundation for binding moral responsibility, it requires defense; its normative authority cannot simply be assumed.[1]

These concerns are not new. A substantial philosophical literature in environmental ethics has examined and often expressed skepticism about appeals to intrinsic value, particularly with respect to ecological wholes (e.g., Weston et al., 1985; Morito, 2003; McShane, 2007; Svoboda, 2011). However, these debates have had limited uptake within ecological research and policy discourse. The aim of this paper is therefore not to introduce a new objection, but to clarify the structure and implications of this debate in a form directly relevant to ecological practice. Invoking intrinsic value as a basis for responsibility implicitly commits one to positions within these debates, whether or not this is acknowledged.

I argue that the claim that ecosystems possess intrinsic value can be defended only if the term is understood in a relatively modest sense—namely, that ecosystems are valued for their own sake by individuals or communities. If, however, intrinsic value is meant in the stronger sense often implied in conservation rhetoric—one capable of GROUNDING binding moral duties understood as OVERRIDING and UNIVERSALIZABLE—then the claim faces serious difficulties. Neither attempts to extend standard grounds of intrinsic value to ecosystems nor appeals to multiple independent sources of value successfully establishes such a conclusion. The intrinsic value claim should therefore be treated not as an established ethical foundation, but as a substantive philosophical position requiring explicit defense.

Clarifying this issue requires drawing on conceptual tools from moral philosophy. The analysis that follows is situated within the Western analytic tradition, not because it has universal authority, but because contemporary environmental policy and academic debate already rely on concepts such as moral duties, justification, and consistency. The argument is therefore conditional: if intrinsic value is intended to ground binding moral duties, then some defensible account must explain how such value is grounded and how conflicts are to be resolved (see Appendix B for a brief consideration of other traditions).

Many ecologists, myself included, have a strong intuition that ecosystems *ought* to matter in their own right. Such intuitions often motivate conservation practice. However, when they are translated into public or policy-facing claims—especially claims about intrinsic value and moral responsibility—they require careful articulation and defense. The purpose of this paper is not to dismiss these intuitions, but to examine whether the philosophical vocabulary used to express them can bear the NORMATIVE WEIGHT it is asked to carry.

I suggest that ecologists often attribute more normative weight to the intrinsic value claim than is necessary to support their broader aims. After clarifying competing conceptions of intrinsic value, I argue that ecosystems are

[1] For discussion of burden-of-proof norms in philosophy, see Flew (1950) and Rescher (1977).

unlikely to qualify as bearers of intrinsic value in the stronger, duty-grounding sense. Because the argument unfolds through several conceptual distinctions, I provide a roadmap in Box 1 to clarify its structure.

Box 1. Argument Roadmap: The Case Against Ecosystem Intrinsic Value

This paper asks whether appeals to ecosystem intrinsic value can ground the kind of binding moral responsibilities often invoked in conservation discourse. The argument proceeds conditionally: weaker conceptions of intrinsic value are defensible but normatively limited; stronger conceptions carry greater moral force but require a much more demanding defense. Because the reasoning can be challenging to follow in continuous prose, this box presents the core logic in a condensed premise–conclusion format to clarify the inferential structure.

I. The justificatory burden

1. The Conguillío Statement asserts that ecosystems possess intrinsic value [Section 1]
2. If this claim is meant to ground binding, universalizable, and attitude-independent moral duties, then it must rely on a strong, objective conception of intrinsic value [Sections 4 and 5]
3. Subjective and relational conceptions can explain why ecosystems are valued for their own sake, but they generate only attitude-dependent and mediated reasons for protection [Sections 4 and 5; Table 1]

C1 Therefore, the duty-grounding version of the intrinsic value claim depends on objective intrinsic value [Sections 4 and 5]

Implication: *The burden is not merely to show that ecosystems matter, but to show that they possess value capable of grounding direct moral duties*

II. The monist route

4. Monist extensionist theories ground objective intrinsic value in properties such as sentience, autonomy, interests, flourishing, or unified welfare [Section 6.1; Table 1]
5. These properties identify entities whose good can be advanced or harmed in their own right [Section 6.1]
6. Ecosystems lack sentience, autonomy, interests, and unified welfare in this morally relevant sense [Section 6.1]
7. Without such grounding properties, monist theories lack a basis for attributing objective intrinsic value to ecosystems [Section 6.1]

C2 Therefore, ecosystems do not satisfy the usual grounding conditions for objective intrinsic value within monist extensionist theories [Section 6.1]

Implication: *If intrinsic value requires a welfare-bearing subject, ecosystems do not meet the relevant criteria*

III. The pluralist route

8. Value pluralism may recognize multiple irreducible sources of objective intrinsic value, such as human welfare and ecosystem integrity [Section 6.2]
9. If these values are genuinely irreducible, no single underlying value fixes their relative priority [Section 6.2]
10. When such values conflict, they may generate competing moral claims [Section 6.2; see also the rainforest case in Section 2]
11. A defensible ethical framework must therefore explain how such conflicts are to be adjudicated [Section 6.2; see also Section 4]

Box 1 (continued). Argument Roadmap: the Case Against Ecosystem Intrinsic Value

12. Without such criteria, the attribution of multiple objective intrinsic values does not determine what ought to be done [Section 6.2]

C3 Therefore, even if ecosystems possess objective intrinsic value within a pluralist framework, that attribution alone does not yield determinate moral guidance in cases of conflict [Section 6.2]

Implication: *Pluralism may identify additional sources of value, but it still requires principles for weighing them*

IV. The upshot

13. Monism struggles to show that ecosystems possess the properties required for objective intrinsic value [Section 6.1]
14. Pluralism may attribute such value to ecosystems, but does not by itself explain how that value governs action in conflicts [Section 6.2]

C4 Therefore, the claim that ecosystems possess objective intrinsic value lacks adequate support unless its grounding conditions and action-guiding implications are explicitly defended [Section 7]

C5 Accordingly, ecosystem intrinsic value should be treated as a substantive philosophical position, not as a settled premise of conservation policy [Section 7]

Implication: *If intrinsic value is understood modestly, it supports limited and attitude-dependent reasons; if it is understood strongly, it requires a defense that has not yet been supplied*

To appreciate what is at stake, it is helpful to consider a case in which appeals to intrinsic value function not merely as rhetorical affirmations, but as grounds for concrete policy decisions. The following example isolates the structural difficulty that arises when claims of intrinsic value collide.

2 | A MOTIVATING CASE: CONFLICTING INTRINSIC VALUE CLAIMS

Ethical theories must be able to guide action in cases of conflict, not merely affirm values in the abstract

Imagine a large tropical rainforest designated as a strictly protected reserve. The justification is explicit: *the ecosystem possesses intrinsic value and ought to be preserved for its own sake.* On this view, altering the forest—through fragmentation, biodiversity loss, or economic development—constitutes not merely a practical loss but a moral wrong.

Within that forest lives an Indigenous community whose members have depended upon it for generations. Their subsistence practices, cultural identity, and social continuity are inseparable from their ongoing interaction with the forest. For them, the forest is not merely a resource; it is home, ancestor, and archive of collective memory.

In response to conservation pressure, management prohibits clearing, hunting, and extraction in order to preserve ecosystem integrity. These restrictions are justified by appeal to intrinsic value: if the ecosystem is valuable in itself, then its protection is not optional.

The resulting conflict is structurally familiar. On one side stands the claim that the ecosystem possesses intrinsic value and must be protected for its own sake. On the other stands the claim that the community's welfare, autonomy, and cultural survival possess intrinsic value and must be respected. Both claims are framed in non-instrumental terms

and appear to demand overriding force (see Section 5) and universalizability. Yet the framework does not specify how such competing claims are to be weighed or adjudicated.

If ecosystem intrinsic value is understood as a strong claim—such that damaging the ecosystem constitutes a wrong to it—then strict preservation may follow. But if the community's members possess intrinsic value in virtue of their interests, agency, or capacity for flourishing, then restricting their practices may also constitute a moral wrong. The disagreement concerns *what is owed directly to distinct bearers of value*.

The purpose of this case is not to deny the possibility of coexistence, nor to claim that conservation and subsistence are always in conflict. It is to isolate a structural question: *what follows when two claims of intrinsic value issue incompatible prescriptions*?

The appeal to intrinsic value alone does not answer this question. It does not determine whether ecosystem integrity should override human subsistence, whether human interests should take precedence, or which features of the situation are morally decisive. ***To function as a basis for moral responsibility, intrinsic value must do more than assert that something matters; it must help determine how competing values are to guide action.***

The rainforest case is therefore diagnostic. It shows that once intrinsic value is invoked in policy contexts, it must be capable of adjudicating conflict. In the sections that follow, I examine whether the attribution of intrinsic value to ecosystems can meet this demand.

3 | INSTRUMENTAL VERSUS INTRINSIC VALUE

> *The strength of intrinsic value arguments turns on philosophical reasoning about which kinds of entities can bear value in themselves*

Arguments for conserving ecosystems typically appeal either to their INSTRUMENTAL VALUE or to their supposed INTRINSIC VALUE.

Instrumental value arguments appeal to the usefulness of ecosystems for human well-being (e.g., The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Program, 2003). While such arguments can justify conservation in many cases, they cannot secure all the outcomes ecologists seek. Some ecosystems may be judged less useful than the activities that would transform them.[2]

Instrumental value need not be confined to human interests; organisms and ecological processes may be instrumentally valuable to one another. Yet instrumental value must be instrumental *for something*. The argument that follows assumes a common view in moral philosophy: that things are instrumentally valuable only because they contribute to something *valued for its own sake* (Parfit, 1984; Zimmerman and Bradley, 2025).

Intrinsic value, by contrast, does not depend on usefulness to something else. Within contemporary ethical theory, it is widely accepted that at least SENTIENT beings plausibly possess intrinsic value. Extending intrinsic value to such beings is relatively straightforward within frameworks that ground MORAL STANDING in interests, WELFARE, or the capacity for experience.

The crucial question is whether this extension can coherently reach beyond sentient individuals to ecological wholes such as ecosystems. Extending intrinsic value in this way is philosophically demanding, because the properties typically invoked to ground moral standing—interests, welfare, or unified subjects of experience—are not obviously present at the ecosystem level.

[2] Damming a river for hydroelectric generation or flood control might be an example. It's not inconceivable that humans might find greater utility in these uses than in the pre-dam river ecosystem.

The contrast is therefore methodological as well as conceptual. The strength of instrumental value arguments turns on empirical evidence about comparative usefulness; the strength of intrinsic value arguments turns on philosophical reasoning about which kinds of entities can bear value in themselves. If ecosystems are to possess intrinsic value, they must satisfy the latter standard. Whether they do so is the issue taken up in Section 6.

4 | FROM INTRINSIC VALUE TO MORAL DUTIES

To claim intrinsic value is to begin a moral argument, not to finish one

It is important to distinguish intrinsic value from moral standing or MORAL CONSIDERABILITY. An entity may be valued for its own sake without being the kind of thing that can be wronged.

One familiar model is the treatment of artworks, artifacts, or natural landmarks as valuable "for their own sake." Such entities may be preserved not because they are useful, nor because they possess interests or welfare, but because they are objects of non-instrumental valuing. A similar approach could be applied to ecosystems. On this view, ecosystems may be valued for their own sake without being bearers of moral standing.

However, this analogy has limits. In the case of artworks, the reasons for preservation are mediated through valuers—individuals or communities who recognize their significance. Destroying a painting may wrong those who value it, but it does not wrong the painting. The resulting duties are indirect and context-dependent.

By contrast, appeals to intrinsic value in conservation discourse typically aim at a stronger conclusion. They are invoked not merely to explain why ecosystems are valued, but to ground responsibilities that constrain action even in the face of competing interests. In this stronger sense, such claims purport to BIND moral agents independently of their particular preferences or commitments, rather than applying only to those who already share certain evaluative attitudes. This suggests a form of moral standing: that ecosystems are the kinds of entities toward which direct duties are owed.[3]

If intrinsic value is understood in this weaker, artifact-like sense, it can support reasons for conservation, but these remain indirect and dependent on human valuing. They do not establish that ecosystems can be wronged, nor that their protection carries the kind of force typically associated with moral requirements. To secure that stronger conclusion, a more demanding account is required.

This point can be clarified by distinguishing among three related but non-identical claims. To say that something has intrinsic value is to say that it is valuable for its own sake. To say that it has moral standing is to say that it is the kind of entity toward which direct duties can be owed. And to say that such duties exist is to claim that actions can wrong that entity in its own right, rather than merely wronging others who value it. These claims are often run together in conservation discourse, but they come apart. An entity may be valued for its own sake without thereby being the sort of thing that can be wronged. The stronger conclusion—that ecosystems can be wronged directly, and thus that their protection is morally required in a way that constrains competing considerations—depends not merely on their being valued, but on their qualifying as bearers of moral standing.

The claim that ecosystems possess intrinsic value can therefore be interpreted in at least two ways. One is what Morrow (2024) calls *weak intrinsic value*: ecosystems may be valued for their own sake, but this does not generate moral standing or direct duties. The wrongness of destroying such an ecosystem arises from the value people attribute to it, not from harm done to the ecosystem itself.

By contrast, a *strong* conception of intrinsic value does generate moral standing and direct duties (Morrow, 2024).

[3] For a careful distinction between intrinsic value and moral considerability in the context of ecosystems, see Cahen (1988).

If something has objective intrinsic value, then harming it constitutes a moral wrong independently of its effects on others. This stronger sense appears to underlie many appeals in conservation discourse.

Moral judgments of this kind differ from practical or preference-based judgments in that they are typically thought to take precedence over competing non-moral considerations, and to apply consistently across relevantly similar cases. In this respect, they are often treated as both OVERRIDING and UNIVERSALIZABLE.[4] These features are analytically distinct, but they tend to travel together in ordinary moral reasoning.

The appeal to intrinsic value in conservation derives much of its force from the suggestion that it grounds moral judgments in this stronger sense. If ecosystems possess intrinsic value that is overriding and universalizable, then their protection is not merely desirable but, at least in some cases, required—even when it conflicts with significant human interests. The rainforest case illustrates the implication: if ecosystem integrity carries such force, then restrictions on subsistence practices follow as moral constraints rather than trade-offs.

This brings us to a central issue. "Intrinsic value" is used in importantly different ways, and these differences determine the kind of MORAL FORCE a claim can exert (see **??**). Some conceptions treat value as dependent on evaluative attitudes; others treat it as a feature of the world itself. This distinction matters because not all forms of value are equally capable of grounding obligations that apply independently of particular evaluative commitments.

On views where value depends on the attitudes of individuals or communities, the reasons generated are correspondingly contingent: they apply to those who hold the relevant attitudes, and their force may vary as those attitudes change. Such views can support genuine action, but they do not, by themselves, explain why a given obligation should bind agents who do not share those evaluative commitments. By contrast, if intrinsic value is understood as objective—as a feature of the world that does not depend on being valued—then it provides a candidate basis for duties that are both universalizable and attitude-independent. Only a conception of this stronger kind can underwrite the claim that ecosystem protection is required, rather than merely recommended or contingent.

The argument that follows proceeds conditionally from this distinction. If appeals to intrinsic value in ecological discourse are intended to ground obligations that hold irrespective of individual or cultural perspectives, then they must rely on a conception of value capable of supporting such claims. Whether any such account can be successfully extended to ecosystems is the question taken up in the next section.

5 | COMPETING CONCEPTIONS OF INTRINSIC VALUE

What intrinsic value demands depends on how it is conceived

To say that something has intrinsic value is to say that it is valuable for its own sake. While this formulation is widely accepted, there is deep disagreement about what grounds such value and how it operates in moral reasoning. The central question is whether intrinsic value depends on evaluative attitudes, or whether it is independent of them.

Three broad positions can be distinguished.

On the *subjective* view, intrinsic value arises from evaluative attitudes. Something has intrinsic value because it is valued non-instrumentally by a valuer. Such valuing may be reasoned and reflective, but it remains attitude-dependent: absent the relevant attitudes, the value would not exist (O'Neill, 1992; Sandler, 2008).

Relational views hold that intrinsic value arises through the interaction between valuers and features of the world. The properties of an ecosystem—its complexity, rarity, or integrity—can make certain responses more appropriate than others, but value still depends on valuers, even if not reducible to arbitrary preference.

[4] See Hare (1952), Scanlon (1998), and Williams (1985).

On the *objective* view, intrinsic value is a property of the world that does not depend on human attitudes. If an ecosystem possesses objective intrinsic value, its value exists independently of whether it is recognized or endorsed.

The disagreement among these positions concerns the grounding of NORMATIVITY. Subjective and relational views treat value as attitude-dependent; the objective view treats it as attitude-independent. The issue is therefore not how widely a value judgment is shared, but what makes it true.

As O'Neill (1992) notes, "intrinsic value" is sometimes used to mean non-instrumental value and sometimes to mean non-relational value. These senses come apart: something may be valued for its own sake while still depending on evaluative attitudes. The present argument focuses on the stronger, attitude-independent conception—objective intrinsic value—because only that conception plausibly generates duties that apply irrespective of whether the value is recognized.

The distinctions summarized in Table 1 reflect these different grounding claims and their moral implications. On subjective and relational views, duties are indirect and mediated through valuers: destroying an ecosystem may wrong those who value it, but not the ecosystem itself. By contrast, if ecosystems possessed objective intrinsic value, they would be direct objects of moral concern, and destroying them would constitute a wrong to the ecosystem itself.

These differences are not merely classificatory. They determine the kind of reasons intrinsic value claims can generate. Where value depends on evaluative attitudes, the reasons it supports are correspondingly limited in scope, contingent on those attitudes, and not necessarily shared across agents. Where value is understood as objective, by contrast, it purports to generate reasons that apply more broadly, remain stable across changing perspectives, and treat failure to recognize them as a mistake rather than a difference in preference.

This distinction matters because the Conguillío Statement does not specify which conception is intended. If ecosystems possess subjective or relational intrinsic value, the justificatory burden is modest but the resulting duties are limited and mediated. If ecosystems possess objective intrinsic value, a far more demanding philosophical defense is required. The following sections address that stronger claim.

6 | ASSESSING ECOSYSTEMS OBJECTIVE INTRINSIC VALUE CLAIMS

> *To ground objective intrinsic value for ecosystems is to explain both why they matter and what that requires of us*

Skepticism about intrinsic value in environmental ethics is well established (see, Weston et al., 1985; Morito, 2003; McShane, 2007; Svoboda, 2011, to name a few). These critiques converge on two challenges: identifying plausible grounds for intrinsic value beyond sentient individuals, and explaining how such value can guide action in cases of conflict.

These challenges structure the analysis that follows. Before turning to these strategies, Table 2 briefly sets aside several familiar but unsuccessful grounding claims, which do not establish intrinsic value and cannot bear the required justificatory weight (see Newman et al., 2017, Chapter 9).

The remaining discussion focuses on two more serious strategies. Monism attempts to extend standard grounds of intrinsic value to ecosystems, while pluralism allows ecosystems to possess value on distinct grounds. Each faces a different difficulty: ecosystems do not satisfy the grounding conditions required by monist accounts, while pluralist approaches struggle to explain how competing values are to guide action.

Conceptions of Intrinsic Value	Moral Force	Plausibility for ecosystems
Subjective. Intrinsic value is projected by conscious valuers onto a world that lacks inherent value	Attitude-dependent reasons; indirect moral consideration	*Highly plausible*: ecosystems can be non-instrumentally valued by human agents, and such valuing is empirically ubiquitous
Relational. Intrinsic value arises from the interaction between human psychology and specific features of the natural world		*Plausible*: Depends on the stability and scope of the valuing relationships that sustain it
Idiosyncratic. Intrinsic value arises from relationships that are unique to individuals	Attitude-dependent reasons; indirect moral consideration	*Plausible at the individual level*, but too variable to support broadly shared claims about ecosystem intrinsic value
Culturally shared norms. Members of specific societies may identify different classes of entities as intrinsically valuable	Attitude-dependent reasons; direct moral consideration from those within the culture, indirect consideration from those outside	*Plausible within particular cultures*, but not generalizable across societies
Hard-wired. Humans are hard-wired to make certain judgments about intrinsic value, leading to a convergence across different cultures regarding which natural entities they recognize as intrinsically valuable	Attitude-dependent but widely shared reasons; direct moral consideration	*Implausible*: persistent and widespread disagreement about ecosystem intrinsic value is inconsistent with a hard-wired basis
Objective. Intrinsic value is a property of the external world that human valuers come to recognize; it is not assigned by humans	Attitude-independent reasons; direct moral consideration	*Contested*: many philosophers deny that value can exist without valuers; even if it can, it seems unlikely that ecosystems possess the kind of properties that could ground such value

TABLE 1 Conceptions of intrinsic value and a rough assessment of their relative moral force. Moral force is the power to compel right actions by moral agents. *Direct consideration* refers to treating the ecosystem as if it were a direct object of moral concern; in stronger accounts, this corresponds to attributing moral standing. *Indirect consideration* indicates that moral agents do not give direct moral consideration to the ecosystem but instead focus their consideration towards other humans who themselves value the ecosystem for what it is.

Claim	Why the argument fails
Ecosystems are intrinsically valuable because they are *natural*	This reflects a common intuition in conservation: that natural systems are valuable simply in virtue of being natural. However, it commits the *naturalistic fallacy*. The fact that something is natural is purely descriptive; it does not, by itself, establish that it is morally good or valuable. No set of descriptive facts entails a normative conclusion (the "is–ought" gap, Hume, 1739), and it remains an open question whether any natural property is identical with moral goodness (Moore, 1903).
Ecosystems are intrinsically valuable because they are *made up* of individual plants and animals which are intrinsically valuable	This argument assumes that value "scales up" from organisms to ecosystems. However, it commits the *fallacy of composition*. The fact that parts possess a property (e.g., intrinsic value) does not entail that the whole possesses that same property. Intrinsic value does not automatically aggregate upward from components to systems; additional argument is required to show that the system itself is a bearer of value.
Ecosystems are intrinsically valuable because they *give rise* to individual plants and animals which are (or might be) intrinsically valuable	This reflects the idea that ecosystems matter because they produce or sustain valuable organisms. However, it commits an *origin fallacy*. Producing something that has intrinsic value does not entail that the producer itself has intrinsic value; at most, it establishes instrumental value. Causal generation does not transmit moral status.
Ecosystems are intrinsically valuable because they are *rare*	Rarity often motivates conservation concern, especially for endangered or unique systems. However, rarity does not by itself establish intrinsic value. It describes how uncommon something is, not whether it is valuable in its own right. At most, rarity may strengthen reasons for protection given other values, but it does not generate intrinsic value on its own (Gunn, 1980, p. 34).

TABLE 2 Some commonly encountered arguments for attributing intrinsic value to ecological wholes. These arguments face serious logical difficulties and do not, by themselves, establish intrinsic value (see Newman et al., 2017, Chapter 9 for further discussion).

6.1 | Monism: Single-Source Accounts of Intrinsic Value

Ecosystems are not the subjects of welfare, and so not the kinds of entities that can meaningfully be said to thrive

Monist theories ground intrinsic value in properties of individual subjects, such as sentience, interests, autonomy, or the capacity for flourishing (Table 3). What these accounts share is a common structure: intrinsic value attaches to entities whose welfare can be benefited or harmed.

Extending such value to non-human animals is relatively straightforward under many accounts (see e.g., Gruen and Monsó, 2024). The difficulty arises with ecological wholes (see e.g., Jaworska and Tannenbaum, 2023a; Brennan and Lo, 2024). Ecosystems lack consciousness, agency, and unified welfare. They are not subjects of experience, nor do they possess interests in the relevant sense (e.g., Sagoff, 1984, 2008).

Although ecosystems can function well or poorly, this is a matter of FUNCTIONAL GOODS, not welfare. Describing an ecosystem as "healthy" or "degraded" characterizes how it operates—its stability, resilience, or persistence—but does not imply that anything is benefited or harmed in its own right. For that, there must be a subject for whom things can go better or worse.

One response is to extend the notion of welfare to ecosystems—for example, by treating integrity as a kind of system-level good. But this move faces a dilemma. If understood in functional terms, it merely redescribes system performance. If understood in a genuinely welfare-like sense, it requires an account of how a system without a unified subject could nonetheless have a good of its own. Without such an account, appeals to ecosystem "flourishing" risk either restating functional performance or assuming what they are meant to establish.

A similar difficulty arises for broader appeals to ecosystem "interests" (e.g., Stone, 1985; Serres, 1995; Latour, 1993, 2004). Detached from welfare, it is unclear how such interests generate action-guiding reasons of the relevant kind. Absent an account of how they ground duties toward ecosystems independently of their effects on other morally considerable beings, the appeal risks shifting terminology without securing the desired conclusion.

If intrinsic value is grounded in welfare-bearing properties, ecosystems do not qualify. If it is not, proponents must explain what grounds such value and how it generates obligations. In the absence of such an account, the extension from individual subjects to ecological wholes remains incomplete.

The Conguillío Statement's appeal to ecosystem *thriving* is therefore revealing. To say that an entity thrives suggests that things are going well *for it*. If this stronger reading is intended, ecosystems are implicitly treated as welfare-bearing subjects. If a merely functional sense is intended, the term does not support claims about intrinsic value. Either way, the appeal does not remain neutral.

TABLE 3 Commonly proposed grounds for attributing intrinsic value to individual human beings. Each proposal identifies a property thought to make an entity a bearer of welfare to whom harms and benefits can accrue. For systematic philosophical discussion of these candidate grounds of moral status, see DeGrazia (2012) and Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2023b).

Proposed Ground	Brief Description	Why Thought to Ground Intrinsic Value
Rational autonomy	Capacity for self-governance, practical reasoning, and moral agency.	Autonomous agents can choose ends and shape their own lives, giving them a status that commands respect rather than mere use.
Sentience	Capacity to experience pleasure and pain; having experiential states that can be positively or negatively valenced.	The capacity for suffering or enjoyment makes it morally significant how the entity is treated.
Possession of interests	Having a welfare that can be benefited or harmed; being the kind of entity for whom things can go better or worse.	If an entity has interests, then its good provides reasons for action independent of others' purposes.
Subject-of-a-life	Being an individual with beliefs, desires, memory, and a sense of the future, whose life has experiential unity.	A psychologically unified life generates moral claims because harms and benefits accrue to a continuing subject.
Capacity for flourishing	Ability to realize species-typical potentials or achieve forms of well-being characteristic of one's nature.	Flourishing provides an objective standard of better or worse states for the individual itself.
Unified welfare	Possession of a single, integrated welfare subject whose good can be promoted or damaged as a whole.	Moral evaluation presupposes a determinate bearer of welfare to whom harms and benefits accrue.

6.2 | Pluralism: Multi-Source Accounts of Intrinsic Value

Pluralism can multiply sources of intrinsic value, but it must also explain how those values are to be weighed when they conflict

Value pluralism allows for multiple irreducible sources of intrinsic value, such as welfare, autonomy, or ecosystem integrity. This is not in itself problematic. The difficulty arises when these values are grounded in fundamentally different properties and come into conflict.

If human beings possess intrinsic value in virtue of welfare or interests, and ecosystems in virtue of integrity or stability, then conflicts between them require principled adjudication. Without such a principle, pluralism identifies multiple values but does not explain how they govern action.

The rainforest case (Section 2) illustrates this problem. The appeal to intrinsic value alone does not determine which claim prevails. A further account of adjudication is required. If human interests always prevail, "ecosystem intrinsic value" has little independent significance. If ecosystem-level duties sometimes override human interests, proponents must specify which interests yield and why. Affirming multiple sources of intrinsic value is not sufficient; their relative weight must be explained.

This concern does not reject pluralism; it identifies a structural requirement. Where multiple irreducible values are affirmed, a defensible account of their relative weight is needed. Absent such an account, the appeal to intrinsic value remains normatively underdetermined (Berlin, 1969; Raz, 1986; Chang, 1997). The point is not that pluralism is mistaken, nor that practical reasoning cannot sometimes resolve conflict, but that attributing intrinsic value alone does not supply the resources for adjudication. Intrinsic value may identify what matters, but without further principles to guide comparison or prioritization, it does not determine what ought to be done.

7 | CONCLUSIONS AND HUMBLE ADVICE

Intrinsic value is most defensible when treated as a topic of argument rather than an assumed premise of policy

The difficulty identified in this paper is not simply philosophical disagreement, but conceptual ambiguity. In ecological discourse, "intrinsic value" is used in more than one sense, often without distinction. In some contexts, it refers to a modest, attitude-dependent claim that ecosystems are valued for their own sake. In others, it appears to function as a stronger, objective claim capable of grounding binding moral duties.

When the weaker conception is in play, the justificatory burden is modest, but the resulting duties are limited and mediated. When the stronger conception is invoked, a substantial philosophical defense is required. The problem arises when the rhetorical authority of the stronger conception is assumed while its grounding conditions remain unspecified. In such cases, "intrinsic value" risks functioning as a moral placeholder rather than a defensible premise.

At the same time, the Conguillío Statement does not rely on intrinsic value in isolation. Its appeal to care, responsibility, and a plurality of values suggests that ethical guidance is drawn from a broader normative framework. This is a sensible approach, but it also indicates that intrinsic value alone cannot bear the full normative weight placed upon it.

The issue, then, is not whether ecosystems deserve protection, nor whether ecologists are justified in caring about them for more than instrumental reasons. The question is whether the language of intrinsic value, as currently used, can support the obligations it is asked to justify.

Careful conservation advocacy requires arguments that can withstand scrutiny within shared norms of public justification (Norton, 1984, 2005; Sagoff, 2008). Conceptual clarity strengthens rather than weakens environmental commitment. If intrinsic value is to play a central role in ecological ethics, ecologists must specify which conception they intend—and accept the corresponding philosophical commitments.

Until its grounding is made explicit and its implications defended, intrinsic value should function as a topic of argument, not as a premise of policy.

8 | SPECULATIONS

> *"There is no such thing as philosophy-free science; there is only science whose philosophical baggage is taken on board without examination." —Daniel C. Dennett, Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*

Ecologists should engage more seriously with philosophy. The concepts that structure ecological research and conservation practice—biodiversity, ecosystem health, integrity, and intrinsic value—are not merely descriptive. They are evaluative, and they shape judgments about what matters and what ought to be done.

Many of these concepts are not only contested, but *essentially contested*: persistent disagreement reflects differences in underlying normative commitments, not merely gaps in data (*sensu* Gallie, 1955). As a result, additional empirical evidence or improved measurement may leave the central issues untouched.

To invoke a concept such as intrinsic value is therefore to take a position within an ongoing philosophical debate about the nature of value, moral standing, and ethical obligation. When such concepts are used without engagement with these debates, they risk obscuring rather than clarifying the basis for ecological claims—particularly when those claims are used to justify action.

The point is not that ecologists must become philosophers. It is that greater philosophical literacy would improve the clarity and coherence of ecological reasoning. At minimum, it would help distinguish where disagreements are empirical and where they are genuinely normative. More ambitiously, it would encourage a shift toward more explicit and defensible normative frameworks.

If ecological science is to inform decisions about what *ought* to be done, the concepts through which those decisions are framed must be used with an awareness of their philosophical commitments—and of the limits of what they can support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply appreciative of the assistance of two anonymous referees for their very valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper. I work on the shared traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples. I recognize, honor, and respect these Nations as the traditional stewards, since time immemorial, of the lands and water on which Wilfrid Laurier University is now present. This acknowledgment represents my responsibility and commitment to learn about and confront colonial legacies and to earnestly engage in the unfinished work of reconciliation. This work was supported by a Discovery Grant from the Canadian Natural Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC). I thank Pedro Peres-Neto and Georgia Mason for comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am deeply grateful to my friend and mentor, Gary Varner, for showing me the value and joy of philosophical thinking in ecology.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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A | KEY PHILOSOPHICAL TERMS

This appendix provides brief clarifications of several philosophical concepts used in the main text. Definitions are indicative of how the terms are used in this paper rather than attempts to resolve ongoing debates.

COHERENCE The requirement that one's moral commitments fit together in a consistent and mutually supporting way. On a coherentist view, a belief is justified when it forms part of a coherent system of beliefs.

FUNCTIONAL GOODS States in which a system operates effectively according to its organizing processes (e.g., resilience or stability in ecosystems). These differ from *welfare goods*, which concern what benefits or harms a subject.

GROUNDING (of moral duties) What explains why a moral obligation exists. To say that intrinsic value *grounds* a duty is to say that the fact that something has that value explains why we are required to treat it in certain ways.

INSTRUMENTAL VALUE The value something has as a means to an end. An entity has instrumental value insofar as it contributes to something else that is valued.

INTRINSIC VALUE Value that something has *for its own sake*, rather than as a means to some further end. A key distinction is between *weak* intrinsic value (which may depend on evaluative attitudes) and *strong* intrinsic value (which is taken to ground direct moral duties independently of such attitudes).

MORAL STANDING (MORAL CONSIDERABILITY) Being the kind of entity toward which moral agents can have *direct* duties. To have moral standing is to be a potential object of moral concern in its own right.

NORMATIVE WEIGHT The strength of the reasons generated by a value claim, particularly in cases of conflict. It concerns how strongly a consideration counts relative to others.

NORMATIVITY The domain of reasons, obligations, and evaluative standards—what counts as justified, required, or wrong. Questions about the *grounding of normativity* concern what explains the existence and authority of such reasons.

OVERRIDINGNESS The idea that moral judgments take precedence over other kinds of considerations, such as prudence, etiquette, or personal preference.

SENTIENCE The capacity for conscious experience, particularly the ability to feel pleasure or pain or to undergo states with a subjective, experiential character. Many ethical theories treat sentience as sufficient for moral standing because it grounds interests that can be harmed or benefited.

UNIVERSALIZABILITY The requirement that similar cases be judged according to the same principle. A moral judgment commits the agent to applying that judgment consistently across relevantly similar situations.

WELFARE What is good or bad *for* an entity—what makes its condition better or worse from its own perspective. A *welfare-bearing subject* is an entity for whom things can genuinely go better or worse.

These concepts are used throughout the paper to distinguish different ways in which intrinsic value claims may be understood and to clarify the kinds of moral commitments they entail.

B | METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING AND ALTERNATIVE TRADITIONS

The discussion has been situated within the Western analytic tradition of moral philosophy. This framing is methodological rather than dismissive. Contemporary ecological science and environmental policy already presuppose norms of consistency, justification, and public reasoning that are characteristic of analytic moral philosophy. When ecologists invoke concepts such as intrinsic value, moral responsibility, or justice in academic and policy contexts, they are implicitly entering that shared justificatory space. The present argument, therefore, evaluates the intrinsic value claim within the framework that currently structures much of ecological discourse.

This does not deny that alternative philosophical traditions offer rich and meaningful accounts of the human–nature relationship. Indigenous philosophies, ecofeminism, deep ecology, and Earth jurisprudence, among others, articulate conceptions of value that extend beyond individual sentient beings and often treat ecosystems or natural entities as bearers of intrinsic worth. These traditions often ground moral commitments in relational, spiritual, communal, or holistic frameworks that differ in structure from those of analytic approaches.

Because the purpose of this appendix is descriptive rather than critical, these views are presented in summary form. Critics have argued that positions attributing intrinsic value universally to all natural entities confront a structural difficulty: without a principled mechanism for resolving conflicts among competing values, their action-guiding implications may remain unclear (Routley, 1973; Routley and Routley, 1980). This concern appears in a more limited but concrete form in the rainforest example in Section 2, where competing claims of intrinsic value issue incompatible prescriptions. Absent an adjudicative principle, the appeal to intrinsic value alone does not determine what policy requires. The same structural question becomes central in the analysis that follows, particularly in Section 6.2.

Adopting any such framework in a public scientific or policy argument, therefore, requires more than citing its existence. It involves clarifying the standards of justification it employs and explaining how conflicts are to be resolved in practice. In the absence of such clarification, appeals to intrinsic value risk functioning as rhetorically powerful claims without clear guidance for action.

Table 4 provides a schematic overview of several influential approaches and illustrates how a philosopher working within the analytic tradition might question their justificatory structure—not to dismiss them, but to identify the points at which further argument would be required if they are invoked as grounds for binding moral duties.

The purpose of this appendix is, therefore, limited. I am not attempting to refute alternative moral traditions, nor to claim that analytic philosophy exhausts moral reflection. Rather, it highlights a structural point: if the Conguillío

Statement's appeal to intrinsic value is intended to ground binding responsibilities for ecologists in academic and policy contexts, then that claim must be defensible within the shared norms of public moral justification that already govern those contexts. The next section turns from this survey to a more focused examination of how claims about ecosystem intrinsic value might be defended within monist and pluralist frameworks.

School of Thought	Conception Intrinsic Value	Potential Western Analytic Critique
Indigenous Philosophies e.g. Winter (2021); Whyte (2018, 2020)	Nature and living beings are often viewed as kin, carrying a sacred or ancestral value that exists independently of human ascription.	Might argue that moral claims grounded in cultural or spiritual traditions lack universalizability. Such commitments could be seen as subjective or localized rather than systematically justified through a shared rational framework.
Ecofeminism e.g., Plumwood (1986)	Emphasizes the intrinsic worth of nature as intertwined with the liberation of marginalized groups, underscoring care-based, empathetic relationships rather than purely dispassionate logic.	Could contend that care-focused ethics do not provide a fully consistent or overriding framework. Critics may call for more explicit logical criteria to justify when or why empathy should take precedence over other concerns.
Deep Ecology e.g., Naess (2005)	Proposes an "ecocentric" or "biocentric" worldview in which all life forms and ecosystems possess intrinsic value, often invoking spiritual unity and holistic insights.	Might claim that a metaphysical or spiritually grounded approach lacks clear mechanisms for distinguishing legitimate moral responsibilities from subjective or mystical beliefs. Could view the argument as too vague for systematic ethical reasoning.
Earth Jurisprudence e.g., Burdon (2012)	Assigns inherent rights and moral/legal standing to natural entities (e.g., rivers, forests), positing that Earth itself is a rights-bearing subject.	May argue that granting legal personhood or moral standing to non-sentient entities overlooks the need for a rational basis for moral considerability. Critics could see this as conflating legal tools with genuine ethical justification.

TABLE 4 Selected non-Western or alternative environmental philosophy schools of thought and how they conceive of intrinsic value. The right-hand column illustrates how a Western analytical philosopher might challenge these conceptions, typically invoking overridingness, universalizability, clear moral foundations, or rational justifications as the basis for critique. For more on the concepts of universalizability and overridingness, see section 4.