

## **Ecological Citizenship: The Democratic Promise of Restoration\***

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### INTRODUCTION

The writings of William H. Whyte do not loom large in the literature of my field: environmental ethics, the branch of ethics devoted to consideration of whether and how there are moral reasons for protecting non-human animals and the larger natural environment. Environmental ethics is a very new field of inquiry, only found in academic philosophy departments since the early 1970s. While there is no accepted reading list of indispensable literature in environmental ethics, certainly any attempt to create such a list would begin with Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and a more recent handful of senior scholars who had been writing on these topics early on, such as J. Baird Callicott, Val Plumwood, Peter Singer, Richard Sylvan, Tom Regan, and Holmes Rolston III (for a review of contemporary environmental ethics, see Light 2002, Palmer 2003, and Wenz 2001).

Environmental ethics aims to be an interdisciplinary endeavor. As such, the required reading list in this field should be more open than the traditional philosophical canon, inclusive of those environmental thinkers who either were not philosophers or whose philosophical status is a matter of some dispute. Such a claim is evidenced by the short list just recited: included there are figures like Leopold who, while trained as

a professional forester, arguably wrote one of the most important foundational works for environmental ethicists, the penultimate chapter of his autobiographical *A Sand County Almanac*, "The Land Ethic." But in thinking about the recent history of the development of this field of inquiry the gaps in who is considered to be indispensable for those new to the field seem more important than who would be included.

Much of my own work in environmental ethics has been devoted to the claim that the field is failing as a discipline that has much to say about the actual resolution of environmental problems. A considerable amount of literature on environmental ethics is focused on questions of the abstract value of nature as it is found in its most pristine form, namely wilderness. Most of the contemporary philosophers listed above (excluding animal welfare advocates like Singer and Regan) have primarily focused their work on providing arguments for wilderness preservation, or at least on questions of natural resource conservation found outside of densely populated areas (see Light 2001). Rarely, if ever, do environmental ethicists discuss how to form better relationships between society and nature in human-dominated settings--namely cities or other urban communities-- rather than simply considering the value of nature in the abstract. I won't go into the reasons here why this is true, but surely the blindness to urban issues is arguably in part a reflection of the larger anti-urban tendencies of the broader environmental community.

Thus, it is not surprising that the writings and ideas of William H. Whyte are conspicuously missing from the standard reading list of environmental ethics. If they were then this would be to suggest that environmental ethicists pay attention to an

entirely different set of questions than those that most of the senior scholars in the field are concerned with. The same applies to Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, and other non-philosophers who raise important ethical questions about the human habitat and the design of urban space.

I am convinced that Whyte should be on the reading list of every environmental philosopher regardless of the focus of their work. There are many reasons, but perhaps most important is that Whyte was concerned more with the “nature,” or rather the open spaces, that most of us will encounter in our daily lives – the strips of land here and there near our homes – than with the great wilderness areas that most people will never see. He didn’t have this focus out of mere predilection but because he knew that these smaller bits of land – “tremendous trifles” as he put it – were in the end more important to the everyday lives of people than the spaces further afield. If Whyte is correct, and if environmental ethics as a discipline is concerned with our possible moral responsibilities to the land around us, then paying attention to Whyte’s work could help redirect the geographical focus of environmental ethicists to a field of inquiry more relevant to the interests of most people.

Though not an ecologist, Whyte’s reasons for this focus are entirely consistent with a sound ecology of how people should live in relation to the broader natural environment. Whyte was a preeminent champion of the importance of density as the only sane future for land use policy in America. Whyte worked hard to try to show how density was better for us, and the land around us, and how it could be improved to make it more attractive as an alternative to the growing sprawl that he documented so

well and countered in The Last Landscape (Whyte 1968; 2002). None of this was to argue that wilderness preservation or conservation of species biodiversity or the like were not important environmental priorities, but rather to raise awareness of the fact that just as important is our relationship to each other as it is mediated by the nature closer to home.

Such concerns led Whyte to focus as much on the perception of open space as the physicality of it, or as he put it, two kinds of reality: “One is the physical open space; the other is open space as it is used and perceived by people. Of the two, the latter is the more important – it is, after all, the payoff of open-space actions” (Ibid., 165). For Whyte, the brook by the side of the road was just as important, if not more important, than the grand plans for regional parks. This focus speaks to a fundamental insight by Whyte that most philosophers working in environmental ethics have forgotten, or indeed never paid heed to at all: *that our relationship to nature is ultimately shaped locally*. It is therefore in our immediate backyards – streets, parks, stream banks, and remnants of woods, prairie, or desert – that we must demonstrate the importance of natural amenities to people if we are ever to hope to show them the importance of larger environmental questions. Eventually there should be a compatibility between the two; the local environment that comes to be cared for and loved by its neighbors becomes a reason for concern with larger scales of ecological phenomena. But in our quest to articulate the value of nature itself, absent its modification by humans, philosophers at least have forgotten that the natural spaces that we do in fact inhabit comprise the “last landscape” of most immediate importance.

Such intuitions have driven my work toward those environmental practices which tend to encourage a kind of stewardship, or more precisely, “ecological citizenship,” between people and the land around them. Much of this work has focused on restoration ecology as one practice that can help to reconnect people to the land. Regrettably, other environmental ethicists have decried restoration as “faking nature” (Elliot 1997) that either has no place in an ethical form of conservation or at best is secondary to larger schemes of preservation. But in restoration I have seen what Whyte saw in the tremendous trifles that he called our attention to so well.

In this light, the remainder of this chapter will first offer a brief explanation of what restoration ecology is, its importance, and the ethical dimensions of its practice. Next, the arguments for public participation in restoration will be reviewed. Then, one possible model for framing this participation – ecological citizenship – will be proposed. Finally, some relevant public policy implications will be identified. Though the original formulation of these ideas did not rely on a reading of Holly Whyte, I now see it as a consistent extension of important themes in his work. I do not think this influence is accidental, but rather proof of the continuing influence of Whyte on the community of scholars, activists and policy makers that have shaped the environmental context out of which this work has been produced.

## ETHICS AND RESTORATION ECOLOGY

Restoration ecology is the practice of restoring damaged ecosystems, mostly those which have been disturbed by humans. Such projects can range from small-scale urban park reclamations, such as the ongoing restorations in Central Park and Prospect Park in New York City, to huge wetland mitigation projects as in the Florida Everglades. Restoration ecology is becoming a major environmental priority, in terms of number of voluntary person-hours devoted to it and amount of dollars committed to it by public and private sponsors. For example, the cluster of restorations coordinated by the regional network, "Chicago Wilderness," in the forest preserves surrounding Chicago (to be discussed more below), attracted thousands of volunteers to help restore over 17,000 acres of native Oak Savannah (Stevens 1995; Gobster and Hull 2000). The final plan for the Chicago Wilderness program is to restore upwards of 100,000 acres. In the same region, the City of Chicago is committing an estimated \$30 million to restoring selected wetlands within the industrial brownfield region at Lake Calumet on the city's south side (see, chapter \_\_\_ by De Sousa).

In Florida, various government agencies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on returning the Kissimmee River to its earlier meandering path (Toth 1993). Work on the Kissimmee and other watersheds in Florida has revealed that even more extensive restoration is needed to fully address the threats caused by channelization to water reserves, endangered species, and the Everglades ecosystem. A plan submitted by the Clinton Administration and approved by Congress in 1999 appropriated \$7.8 billion dollars of funding over the next twenty years to restoring the Everglades,

making it one of the largest pieces of environmental legislation in U.S. history (Wald 1999).

Ecological restorations can be produced in a variety of ways. While the Chicago restorations have involved a high degree of public participation, others have not. Partly the differences in these various projects has been a result of their differing scale and complexity. Dechannelizing the Kissimee River is a task for the Army Corps of Engineers (which, after all, channelized it in the first place) and not a local community group. But many restorations that could conceivably involve community participation often enough do not, and some which already involve community participation do not utilize that participation as much as they could.

The alternative to community participation is to hire a private firm or use a government service to complete the restoration. One need only scan the back pages of a journal such as Ecological Restoration (formerly Restoration and Management Notes, one of the main journals in the field) to see the many landscape design firms and other businesses offering restoration services.

One important question is which method to use to conduct a restoration project where options are available: volunteers or professional contractors? This depends in part on what we hope to achieve in any particular restoration. Most restorations are justified in terms of increasing the ecosystemic health of a landscape or restoring a particular ecosystem service or function. In such a case most will argue that the ends should justify the means: we should use the most efficient scientific means to achieve a

desired end, namely a professional firm or a government agency specializing in such work.

But such an approach assumes that the only relevant criteria for what counts as a good restoration are scientific, technological, design, and economic factors. There is also an important moral dimension to a good restoration, namely the degree of public participation involved in such projects (Light and Higgs 1996; Light 2000a). This view argues that there are unique values that are at stake in any restoration that can be achieved only through some degree of public participation in a project, e.g., the potential of restorations to help nurture a sense of stewardship or care between humans and the nature around them. Such social or moral values to the community augment the other values of restoring the ecological condition of a site, *per se*.

To achieve these moral values, a good restoration should maximize the degree of hands-on public participation appropriate for a project, taking into consideration its scale and complexity. Volunteers should ideally be engaged in all aspects of a project, including planning, clearing, planting, maintenance and so on. This does not mean that expertise should be abandoned in restorations; it just means that whenever possible, restorations are better when experts help to guide voluntary restorationists. Based on such arguments I have claimed that the practice of restoration ecology is as much about restoring the human relationship with nature as it is about restoring natural processes themselves. Not to attempt to achieve both of these ends in restorations is to lose the potential moral benefits of restoration.

What kind of participation is best for a restoration? I suggest that a democratic model of participation, which I term “ecological citizenship,” is the best model for achieving the full potential of restoration in moral and political terms. Our choices of how we shape practices and policies involving restoration is a critical test for how deep a commitment to encouraging democratic values we have in publicly accessible environmental practices. But before explaining this point, let us consider the simpler participatory benefits of restoration.

## RESTORATION AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

There have been several arguments put forward for the importance of democratic participation in environmental decision making. According to Sagoff (1988), access to environmental amenities should be understood in the U.S. at least as a right of citizenship rather than only as a good to be consumed. Public participation in the formation of environmental policy was given perhaps its strongest empirical defense in Gundersen’s study (1995) demonstrating the positive environmental consequences of democratic decision making. Contrary to many expectations, Gundersen argued that opening environmental decisions to the public does not necessarily weaken those decisions and in many ways may make them stronger. More recently, other philosophers and political theorists have made specific proposals for democratic environmental reforms, e.g., environmental constitutional rights,

environmental trusteeship, and methods for expanding environmental justice (see the essays in Light and de-Shalit 2003).

All of these scholars – let us call them “democratic environmental theorists” – rely on a set of common premises. First, that environmental ethicists and political theorists must accept the democratic context of environmental decision making in which we in the developed world (and largely in international institutions) find ourselves. There is no room among these scholars to consider Malthusian arguments that would force some form of “green totalitarianism” on people. Second, these theorists all assume that it would be better to go further and actively endorse and expand the democratic context of environmental decision making because in the end it will provide the basis not only for better forms of environmental protection but also better human communities as well, helping to bring people together in stronger social networks.

Following from the first premise, it is proposed that only a democratic environmentalism can actually achieve long term sustainability. Such a position conflicts with most approaches in environmental ethics by considering the traditional ways that humans value nature (e.g., aesthetic value, resource value, or the value of protecting the environment for future generations) in contrast with the view that nature only has moral status if it has some form of non-instrumental or intrinsic value. Something is said to have intrinsic value when it is valuable in and of itself without reference to its value for other ends. To attribute such intrinsic value to nature resembles classical ethical arguments for why humans are the kinds of beings to which

we owe moral obligations. For example, Immanuel Kant (1785) famously argued that humans possess a specific form of intrinsic value such that we should never reduce them solely to the value they have to us to help to achieve our own ends. We should try to respect every person as an end unto themselves and so should grant them at least some minimal level of moral standing.

Most environmental ethicists postulate a similar value for nature, namely, to esteem non-human species and ecosystems regardless of their instrumental or economic value solely to humans. Such a view resists appeals only to human interests as a basis for valuing some bit of nature in part because such arguments cannot guarantee that nature will be protected against competing claims for a human interest in exploiting or developing nature.

One problem, however, is that such views may degenerate into the complacent assumption that compliance with a moral principle will follow if the principle can be shown to be theoretically justified. If traditional environmental ethicists can provide the rationale for the intrinsic value of nature, then it is assumed that people will eventually act accordingly and come to respect nature in a moral sense. But there are precious few good reasons to accept such a view. Just because a moral reason can be offered, and even defended as true, does not guarantee that it will be followed. The more important question is: What sorts of reasons would morally motivate someone to change their behavior for the betterment of nature? This question requires going beyond abstract discussions of the value of nature to consider instead, for example, which practices might encourage an embrace of the importance of the long term

sustainability of the environment. Another way of putting the same point would be to ask what practices make people better stewards of the environment?

Encouraging a direct participatory relationship between local human communities and the “nature” around them is one way to elicit such a sense of stewardship. Communities which have a participatory relationship with the land around them are less likely to allow it to be harmed in contrast with “top-down” regulations or mandates from a higher authority which may be ignored or opposed locally (see Curtin 1999 for some examples). Noting that three-quarters of the American people live in metropolitan areas, urban ecologist Steward T. A. Pickett (2003, 67) puts it this way: “If the public bases its understanding of ecological processes on its local environment, then extracting ecological knowledge from urban systems has the best chance of enhancing ecological understanding worldwide.”

Restorations performed by volunteers arguably tend to foster these kinds of relationships. For instance, a study of 306 volunteers in the Chicago restoration projects reported that the respondents were most satisfied with a sense of meaningful action (“making life better for coming generations,” or “feeling that they were doing the right thing”), and fascination with nature (“learn how nature works”) (Miles, et. al. 2000, 222). Listed third behind those values was participation, e.g., helping people feel they were “part of a community” or “accomplishing something in a group.” This study also found that length of experience in restoration activities was not a significant factor in whether people gained such perspectives: While the length of involvement of the 306 respondents ranged from two months to 27 years, “the benefits an individual derived

from restoration were the same whether the individual was a relatively recent recruit or an 'old hand'" (Ibid., p. 223).

This and other studies (see those in Gobster and Hull 2000) indicate that participation in restorations has the potential for promoting strengthened attitudes toward long term sustainability through appeal to human interests and thus may produce better connections between people and nature in places closer to home. But in the context of the views of the democratic environmental theorists, there is more work that could be done here. Restorations clearly have the potential for producing good environmental stewards who feel a close personal connection to the land that they have come to care for. But what about a more ambitious notion of participation than that implied by "stewardship"? Does participation in restoration provide a foundation for something like "ecological citizenship" as well? This may seem like an odd question because the distinction between stewardship and citizenship may be unclear. The point I wish to make though is actually more simple. Stewardship describes a kind of relationship between people and the land around them. But the Chicago restorationists also indicated that they were involved in a form of participation with each other as much as they were involved in meaningful participation with nature. If one of the goals of a democratic environmental theory is to not only work within the confines of our democratic institutions but also use environmental protection or restoration as a justification for strengthening those institutions, then one question would be whether we can expand the notion of participation in restoration and other environmental practices to consider it as part of the duties we might have to each other as members of

a community? In short, can we understand such participation as a kind of civic obligation as well?

## ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP

I have previously characterized the goal of encouraging public participation in restorations as representing a new and more expansive “culture of nature” (Light 2000b). Beyond producing a bond of interest between local communities and the nature around them, restorations also stimulate the development of moral norms more supportive of environmental sustainability in general. But if restoration helps to produce such a culture of nature, what kind of culture will that be? Twentieth-century fascists arguably had a strong cultural attachment to nature which justified some of their most extreme and anti-democratic practices. A preferable culture context for our relationship with nature would be a democratic culture, meaning that the practices which would serve as a foundation for that culture should also be democratic. Ideally, participants in such a culture should see themselves as ecological citizens working simultaneously to restore nature and to restore the participatory and strong democratic elements of their local communities.

But what is ecological citizenship? At first blush, it involves some set of moral and political rights and responsibilities among humans, as well as between humans and nature. Though I do not have the space here to fully flesh out the appropriate contrasts, on this view, roughly, one’s duties to nature ought not be isolated from one’s duties to

the larger human community. The goal of ecological citizenship would then minimally be to allow as many members of a community as possible to pursue their own private interests, while also tempering these pursuits with attention to the environment around them. A strengthened relationship with nature promoted in this way would then entail the development of specific moral, and possibly legal, responsibilities or expectations that all of us be held responsible for the nature around our community and respect the environmental connections between communities.

Notions of citizenship in general however have a long history of philosophical and political debate and disagreement. Which understanding of citizenship would be best for infusing it with a set of environmental responsibilities as well? While space prohibits a full explanation of the view, one useful understanding of citizenship for the present discussion is along what is known as “classical republican” lines (not the political party) which identify a range of obligations that people have to each other for the sake of the larger community in which they live (see, for example, Pettit 1997). Thus, a duty of citizenship on this view is not satisfied merely by something like voting, and it is not exhausted by describing citizenship only as a legal category which one is either born into or to which one becomes naturalized. It is instead something which we might call an “ethical citizenship,” or a concept of “citizenship as vocation,” where being a good citizen is conceived as a virtue met by active participation at some level of public affairs. As the political theorist Richard Dagger puts it, what sets apart the “good citizen” on this view is that they do not “regard politics as a nuisance to be avoided or a spectacle to be witnessed” (Dagger 2000, 28).

The good citizen is someone who actively participates in public affairs – someone who generates “social capital” by their active engagement with fellow citizens on issues of importance. Dagger and others are quick to admit that such an expanded sense of citizenship has been in steady decline throughout the history of the Western democracies. Citizenship is something that most of us today see as only a guarantor of certain rights but not as demanding responsibilities of us, other than leaving each other alone. Yet the language of citizenship still resonates widely in our culture as a way of talking about the moral responsibilities that people should have toward each other in a community. Defining what it means to be a “good citizen” is something that influential pundits outside the academy care about. Thus, using the language of citizenship to describe our relationship to each other and to the natural world could be a way of making discussion of such relationships more important to the broader public.

To add an environmental dimension to this expanded idea of citizenship would be to claim that the larger community to which the ethical citizen has obligations is inclusive of the local natural environment as well as other people. This does not mean that all legal citizens of a community would be required to become environmental advocates or ecological citizens in this way, but rather that embracing the ecological dimensions of citizenship would be one way of fulfilling one’s larger obligations of this thicker conceptions of citizenship. In the same way, some people in our communities already join local parent-teacher associations as a way of fulfilling what they understand to be their personal and civic duties. Along these lines, contemporary republican theorists such as Dagger have already written much that helps us to

conceive of this kind of citizenship as inclusive of environmental concerns. Using the example of urban sprawl, Dagger (2003) argues that ethical citizens would have a good reason to fight sprawl because it both threatens the environmental and civic fabric of a city. A sprawled city, as Whyte certainly appreciated, will only exacerbate the demise of civic associations which connect people to each other in networks of moral and political obligation.

If Dagger and others are right about this then an expanded notion of citizenship is incomplete without an ecological dimension. And if the point of ethical citizenship is to encourage people to take on responsibilities for each other in communities then these responsibilities can be expanded to include environmental dimensions as well. If we look at things this way then the volunteer restorationists in Chicago were acting as good ecological citizens in their participation in this set of projects. If those restoration projects were conducted only by contractors and did not involve public participation, an opportunity to foster such ecological citizenship would have been lost. When people participate in a volunteer restoration, they are doing something good for their community both by helping to deliver an ecosystem service and also by helping to pull together the civic fabric of their home.

Another good example is New York City's Bronx River Alliance, a project of the City of New York Parks and Recreation Department and the non-profit City Parks Foundation. The Alliance is organized by a few city employees who coordinate sixty volunteer community groups, schools and businesses in restoration projects along the 23 miles of the Bronx River. The focus is not only on the environmental priorities of the

area, but also the opportunities afforded by it to create concrete links between the communities along the river by giving them a common project on which to focus their civic priorities. Literature from the alliance says that the purpose of the project is to “Restore the Bronx River to a Healthy Community, Ecological, Economic and Recreational Resource.” The Alliance, like the Chicago restorations, is thus both civic and environmental, and the geographic scale of the environmental resource, crossing several political lines, helps to create a common interest between them. Again, the project makes the environment the civic glue between various communities.

We must recognize however that the Bronx River Alliance did not emerge merely out of civic goodwill but was formed by the City Parks Department attempting to follow other successful models such as the Central Park Conservancy, which has dramatically improved the ecological viability of Central Park while expanding citizen involvement in the maintenance of the park. The Alliance was encouraged by the Parks Department leadership partly in response to funding shortages which would have made it impossible to allocate sufficient public resources to restore the Bronx River without the work of the volunteers. But if we were to see public participation in such projects as an opportunity to restore first, some bit of nature, second, the human relationship to that bit of nature, and third, the cohesiveness of the community itself, then creating the Alliance wouldn't be seen as a last resort under the conditions of budget shortfalls but instead the first choice for maximizing the various natural, moral, and social values embodied in this particular site. If we took the idea of encouraging ecological citizenship seriously then we would want to create opportunities for people

to engage in voluntary alliances of restoration (or other community environmental projects) even when we had public funding to instead pay parks workers or a landscape design firm to do the job for us.

The democratic participation of citizens in restoration projects at bottom is about building a democratic culture of nature, or more simply a stronger human community that not only takes into account, but is actively inclusive of, concerns over the health, maintenance and sustainability of larger natural systems. Such concerns will be important for the goal of encouraging the evolution of a more responsible citizenry overall given the role such healthy environments play in making human communities themselves sustainable.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This discussion leads to two general recommendations for restoration based on the citizenship model.

First, the expanded notion of ethical and ecological citizenship involves a robust notion of participation as democratic participation. Mere participation in an environmental project by allowing community input on an environmental decision is not enough but should be accompanied on this model by the creation of opportunities for people to actively engage in these projects on the ground. Such a framework is more likely to create a relationship between people and nature beyond mere stewardship, inclusive of seeing care for nature as a way of being a good citizen in their

communities. Other hands-on environmental practices, such as community gardening, may also yield social values of citizenship equivalent to those of restoration (Light 2000c).

Second, along the lines of the citizenship model, the rights and obligations of people in an environmental community should be institutionalized. When something is designated as a right or responsibility under any understanding of citizenship then it is eventually given legal status. If participation in democratic decision making is a right attached to citizenship then we must have laws that insure that citizens will be able to exercise their right to vote.

In the same way, if we took the idea of ecological citizenship seriously then laws should be encouraged that mandate local participation in publicly-funded restoration projects whenever possible. Because restorations become opportunities for forming bonds of citizenship they therefore take on the mantle of a state interest. The Bronx River example suggests the value of institutionalizing alliances between citizens and government. Another approach would be to mandate that democratically organized local citizen groups have a “right of first refusal” to participate in government funded restoration programs. Thus, a restoration project RFP might stipulate that priority for license of the project will be given to voluntary organizations, subject to expert guidance. This would resemble contracting provisions relating to local, minority, or women-owned contracting firms in government funded housing projects. These regulations not only create local jobs but are intended to build local interest in such projects.

If government does not promote such partnerships as the Bronx River Alliance, environmentalists should encourage such participation themselves. In the case of the Chicago Wilderness this has involved the leadership of the Nature Conservancy which has purchased land for restoration as well as coordinated volunteer restorationists on public lands, and the Field Museum which has donated office space for the coordination of these projects.

Larger restorations such as the multi-billion dollar project by the Army Corps of Engineers to restore the Florida Everglades may be too unwieldy for significant voluntary efforts, at least in terms of hands-on public participation. But smaller scale restorations, such as the Chicago projects and Bronx River restorations are ideal for this purpose. While some environmental organizations favor larger, "wilderness" oriented projects of preservation or restoration over such smaller scale urban projects (Light 2001), we must, again following Whyte, narrow our geographic focus to consider the benefits of less flamboyant, smaller-scale initiatives in cities. More importantly, we must take from Whyte's earlier observations that the push toward more democratic participation in such projects will better serve the long-term interests of sustainability, conceived not as a narrow environmental goal, but as a more complete project that better connects local citizens with their local surroundings.

\*This paper is a revised version of "Restoring Ecological Citizenship," in Democracy and the Claims of Nature, eds. B. Minter and B. P. Taylor (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 153-172.

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