

Evaluation of the Doctoral Thesis of David Rozen

Clarifying Nature Protection: The Role of Attitudes Toward Nature in Shaping Its Forms

In his doctoral dissertation, David Rozen examines why contemporary nature protection remains conceptually confused and politically deadlocked. He argues that this deadlock stems less from factual disputes or competing conservation strategies than from underlying attitudes toward nature. These attitudes are largely underexamined fundamental orientations that shape how people perceive, value, and attempt to protect nature. Rather than offering policy prescriptions or normative theories, Rozen develops a Wittgensteinian clarificatory method to reveal these attitudinal frameworks, allowing debates over conservation to proceed in productive terms. Overall, I consider this thesis to be very well-researched, demonstrating the candidate's excellent capacities as a researcher in philosophy and the environmental humanities. The thesis is clearly structured, written, and organized in a comprehensive manner. It consists of three main parts, as well as an introduction, conclusion, and summary of five chapters. Part I diagnoses the present crisis of nature protection and maps the conceptual ambiguity of the term "nature." Part II is based on Wittgenstein's work and develops the concept of attitude as a methodology for analysis. Part III applies the Wittgensteinian methodology to the confused and stuck situation of nature protection.

In Part I, "Confusions Surrounding Nature Protection," Rozen begins by investigating the confusion and deadlock of nature protection in the Anthropocene. For over a century, the dominant model of nature protection has aimed to preserve pristine wilderness and protect biodiversity from human influence. However, in the Anthropocene, this approach has become increasingly implausible. Today, neo-protectionists still advocate for wilderness preservation and

protecting large areas from human activity. In contrast, new conservationists view ecosystems as providers of services and resources. Rozen convincingly shows that neither group can persuade the other because their disagreements are not merely technical. These disagreements stem from divergent evaluations of nature, or "attitudes," as Rozen calls them. These evaluations stem from pre-reflective orientations toward what "nature" is and why it must be protected. The result is a political deadlock that cannot progress despite the scientific urgency to act.

From the perspective of my research, I have two critical points to make. First, Rozen's focus on underlying values and convictions risks underestimating the role of social structures and institutions. While attitudes toward nature are important for understanding the current situation, institutional capacities and the distribution of resources are also important for understanding why nature protection is currently stuck and for clarifying how to overcome the deadlock. Even when attitudes align, implementation often fails due to a lack of institutional infrastructure, knowledge, or resource constraints. Therefore, achieving attitudinal clarity may not be sufficient to overcome the current situation. Second, a strong focus on attitudes may downplay the importance of justice considerations in overcoming political deadlock. Historical responsibility for environmental impacts, capacity to act, and the needs of future generations are justice considerations crucial to governing nature protection. Political conflicts are less about hidden attitudes than about competing claims of justice concerning burden sharing and entitlements.

In Part II, "Wittgensteinian Method of Analysis," Rozen draws on Wittgenstein's later philosophy to explore his concept of "attitude." According to Wittgenstein, attitudes are practical orientations toward the surrounding world, i.e., the ways in which we see and evaluate the world determine how we understand our environment and ourselves. Rozen develops a generalized conception of attitudes as clusters of embodied, culturally shaped reactions that guide perception, valuation, and action before practical reasoning begins. According to this conception, arguments, evidence, and policies are all based on attitudes. Disputes about how to protect nature often fail to persuade because the parties involved have different attitudes toward nature. This observation leads Rozen to propose analyzing attitudes as a clarificatory method to overcome the confusion and deadlock in nature protection. He claims that making underlying attitudes

explicit can dissolve conceptual confusion and expose the sources of disagreement that lead to deadlock.

I have two more objections to make. First, although Rozen claims that attitudes guide actions and reflect values, their normative content remains vague and lacks clear attribution of responsibility. I fear that analyzing attitudes will merely stay at a descriptive level and fail to offer guidance when ethical conflicts must be resolved (e.g., when nature protection conflicts with the right to a livelihood). Second, merely analyzing underlying attitudes makes it impossible to evaluate the appropriateness of connected values and, consequently, attitudes toward life. Through my own theorizing and engagement with mid-level ethical principles, I have come to believe that evaluating the appropriateness of attitudes must be tied to normative principles specified for the context at hand. Nevertheless, the methodology established fails to elucidate the principles for evaluation to be used to circumvent ambiguity.

In Part III, "Clarification of Nature Protection," Rozen applies his Wittgensteinian methodology to explain why the debate about nature protection is confused and stuck. He proposes a tentative solution: a new attitude toward nature that can overcome these challenges. By applying his method of attitude analysis, Rozen claims to uncover the core of the two most prominent approaches to conceptualizing nature protection discussed in Part I: nature as wilderness and nature as resources. The first approach to nature protection underwrites an attitude toward nature as pristine wilderness, motivating the creation of national parks and strict preserves. The second approach to nature protection values nature as a resource reservoir. This attitude implies valuing nature for the ecosystem services and economic benefits it provides. To overcome the dualisms of these two attitudes toward nature – human versus non-human and use versus non-use – Rozen hypothesizes a new attitude toward nature. This attitude views nature as a home where humans and non-humans coexist. Rozen justifies his hypothesis by drawing on four recent intellectual shifts in environmental ethics: the emergence of relational values, the focus on habitability, the expansion of the circle of coexistence between humans and non-humans, and the politicization of conservation.

I consider the last part of the thesis to be the least innovative because, although Rozen claims to apply a Wittgensteinian methodology to the challenge of confused and stuck debates on nature protection, the text mainly discusses new literature to refine the analysis of nature

protection in the first part. The Wittgensteinian methodology seems more implicit than explicitly applied. I wonder if the argument in Part III would have been possible without relying on Wittgenstein and an analysis of attitudes. Are attitudes really so important for overcoming confusion and deadlock? It would be much simpler to show where confusion and deadlock appear and then conduct an ethical analysis to determine which institutional structures to develop and the principles of justice according to which responsibilities should be assigned. Without appealing to attitudes, a governance scheme could be developed to show how to deal with confusion and overcome deadlock. Furthermore, claims developed under a tentative new attitude toward nature could be explained by relying on the four concepts used – relational values, habitability, the circle of coexistence, and politization – and the understanding of nature protection as convivial conservation.

Nevertheless, despite my criticism, I consider this doctoral thesis to be an excellent piece of philosophical work. David Rozen deserves to be assigned the grade of a doctor in philosophy, and he definitively merits this distinction. Focusing on attitudes is a valuable way to expose hidden premises in standard nature protection practices and theories. This approach clarifies the underlying concepts of nature and pre-reflective understandings that can even imply worldviews and self-perceptions of human beings. However, I believe that, in order to be applied to real-world politics, this analysis needs to be supplemented with ethical principles and considerations of normative justice.

Fribourg, 17. September 2025



Ivo Wallimann-Helmer

Professor in Environmental Humanities
Department of Geography
Director of the University of Fribourg Environmental Sciences and Humanities Institute