Has the History of Philosophy Ruined the Environment?

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I review and appraise Eugene C. Hargrove's account of the adverse impacts of Western philosophy on attitudes to the environment. Although significant qualifications have to be entered, for there are grounds to hold that philosophical traditions which have encouraged taking nature seriously are not always given their due by Hargrove, and that environmental thought can draw upon deeper roots than he allows, his verdict that the history of philosophy has discouraged preservationist attitudes is substantially correct. Environmental philosophy thus has a significant (if not quite an unrivalled) role to play in the reconstruction of many of the traditional branches of philosophy, as well as in the protection of the natural world.

I had the good fortune while on holiday to read Eugene C. Hargrove's ingenious and original book *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*.[1] As a result, three papers have been written in response to different parts of Hargrove's text, including this one, which concerns his opening chapter.[2] The present essay has the aim of discussing in some detail Hargrove's stimulating account there of the history of Western philosophy and its bearing on the preservation of nature and of the environment. If Hargrove is right, or even if he is just partially right, much and possibly most Western philosophy serves to discourage preservationist attitudes, and for many centuries prevented them arising, and a proper environmental philosophy could, if introduced, profoundly change the character of much mainstream Western philosophy.

Environmental ethics is at least as prone as the other branches of applied

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[1] Eugene C. Hargrove, *Foundations of Environmental Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1989).

[2] The other papers (both unpublished) are "Attitudes to Wildlife in the History of Ideas" (forthcoming in *Environmental History Review*) and "Preservation, Art and Natural Beauty."

ethics, if not more so, to feed back ideas to the mainstream study of normative ethics and other branches of traditional philosophy, and to prompt revisions of them. (Thus, the study of value in the natural world has convinced many ethicists of the need to revise conventional human-centered accounts of the scope of obligation, and thus of ethics.) However, in the case of the chapter of Hargrove on which I concentrate, the link between environmental ethics and the philosophical tradition is mainly in the other direction—the implications of the philosophical tradition for modern environmental thought. As a matter of fact there are further links to be found in Hargrove's later chapters, some of which raise the whole question of the methodology of the history of ideas and of the use of history of ideas in arriving at conclusions for today, including conclusions in environmental ethics. But discussion of these links will have to be reserved for other papers.[3]

Now Hargrove's book addresses some of the same tracts of intellectual history as were considered by John Passmore in *Man's Responsibility for Nature,* but reaches some very different findings. As to the critique of Passmore offered in my own work, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern,* it is Hargrove's claims that my work addressed much the same historical material as Passmore, whereas he (Hargrove) has an extra tract of the history of ideas to set before the reader, which establishes the conclusion that Western traditions incorporate sufficient resources to support a preservationist ethic without resort to, e.g., Eastern traditions. This claim too is discussed elsewhere, and will not be further considered here.[4]

It should, however, be pointed out first that *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* actually presented to its readership some amount of significant historical material passed over by Passmore, both from the patristic and the early modern periods, some of which has a bearing on Hargrove's own historical account, as will be seen below. This said, I now focus on Hargrove's account of classical and early modern philosophy and their defective approaches to nature.

According to Hargrove's first chapter, philosophy is in some sense "responsible for the ideas and attitudes that inhibit environmental protection today." Religion "has played a much less fundamental role," except when shackled to philosophy (p. 15). The two periods in the history of philosophy which "have been most instrumental in shaping philosophical attitudes toward the environment" have been classical Greek philosophy and early modern European philosophy (p. 16) I consider Hargrove's surveys of these periods in turn.

According to Hargrove, the attempts of the pre-Socratic philosophers to discover the underlying material substance which persists through change fostered the belief, present already in Parmenides, that whatever changes does not

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[3] Ibid.

[4] See "Attitudes to Wildlife in the History of Ideas."

really exist. Though Parmenides' belief in the one unchanging entity was eventually rejected, his general conception of matter (or, alternatively, it may help to say, of reality) as "eternal, unchanging, permanent, indivisible, indestructible and immovable" was widely adopted (pp. 19–20). Certainly Plato accepted that these are qualities of whatever is genuinely real, i.e., the forms, compared to which the world of the senses comprises nothing but shadows. Plato was able, with the help of these theories, to rescue knowledge and epistemology from Parmenidean scepticism, but at the cost of denying reality to the world of experience except insofar as physical objects participate in the forms.

By contrast Aristotle "brought down the forms into the natural world," and through his understanding of natural objects as "combinations of matter and form" managed to explain change, while at the same time arguing that neither form nor matter changes fundamentally (p. 21). Thus, Parmenides's denial of absolute change was not fundamentally challenged. So far, at least, I am carried along by Hargrove's account, but for minor qualifications about his choices of phrasing. Were the forms thus "brought down into the natural world" at all like Plato's transcendent forms? And did Aristotle really believe in an unchanging primary matter.[5] If Aristotle believed rather in various sorts of changing matter, then other grounds would have to be given for his belief in the unchanging character of reality. But let this point be treated as a small one, and be deferred.

Hargrove now proceeds to argue that the approach of Greek philosophers to natural phenomena "(1) prevented the development of an ecological perspective, (2) discouraged the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, and (3) promoted a conception of reality that made the idea of natural preservation conceptually difficult, if not impossible" (p. 21). To consider first the case for the prevention of the development of an ecological perspective, ecological relationships are concerned with objects which are impermanent, perishable, and in a constant state of change, whereas among the Greeks, objects of knowledge were held to be permanent, eternal, and unchanging. Further, the Greek understanding of knowledge diverted people from reliance on observation, and encouraged reliance on reason, which was expected to unearth by deduction the simple, rational structure of the world. By contrast ecological knowledge involves a complexity of structure unlikely to be fathomed by deduction, and requiring extensive and painstaking observation and experimentation.

According to Hargrove, the only major Greek philosopher "who came close to approaching nature from an ecological perspective" was Aristotle, who recognized the need for observation in biology and in what we call geology. Yet Aristotle had no interest in the protection of nature, and passed up opportunities

[5] A contrary view is argued for by W. Charlton, *Aristotle's Physics I and II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 78 and 129–45. I am grateful to Michael Durrant for this reference.

to express himself on the subject.[6] In case Hargrove is here accused of assuming the possibility for Aristotle of thoughts which could not have occurred to him, he at once points out that Aristotle's teleology excluded such thoughts. Aristotle, that is, believed that natural entities embodied in-built purposes. Ultimately, says Aristotle in the *Politics,* nature has made all animals for the sake of man. But, more significantly, the in-built purposes of natural entities are themselves unchanging, and enough entities will always serve their purposes to keep the entire teleological structure of nature in place without any call for human concern about it. Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus, by contrast, both attained an understanding of many ecological relationships and rejected Aristotle's doctrine that "animals, plants and the earth existed solely for the sake of man" (p. 26). But his work went unnoticed, and had no influence.

Hargrove's second point concerns the discouragement generated by Greek philosophy for the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world—and by now his grounds can be anticipated. Thus, despite the widespread Greek appreciation of natural beauty, and the evident literary skill and personal appreciation of nature shown by Plato in particular, Greek metaphysics discouraged all its adherents from the appreciation of the world of experience, and predisposed them rather to appreciation of whatever reality underlies it.[7] The Platonic approach, indeed, directly led to a preference in the seventeenth century for entities which displayed some resemblance to perfect geometrical shapes, and a distaste for such irregular and disorderly piles of rocks as the Alps: producing, for example, Thomas Burnet's views on mountains in 1671 (p. 28). But in any case for Platonists "the beauty of the natural world cannot . . . be preserved or protected, in part because it is not truly beautiful but primarily because it does not really exist" (p. 28). According to Hargrove, this attitude is continuous with and helped to engender the medieval view that "aesthetic appreciation of nature should be discouraged because love of nature will detract from love of God" (p. 29).

About Plato I think Hargrove makes his point. But there is nothing in this section about Aristotle or Theophrastus, nor, come to that, about the Stoics or the Epicureans. My impression is that there was nothing in Aristotle's philosophy to discourage an appreciation of natural beauty, but his aesthetic of harmonious form can have done little to encourage it, and I am unaware of any evidence for his actually experiencing such appreciation (except in the matter of the stars, and, perhaps, of personal beauty, as mentioned below). Theophrastus may be a different matter, but it should be mentioned that the Stoics and the Epicureans, who were in both cases both materialists and advocates of simple pleasures, do manifest an appreciation of natural beauty (witness, for example, the views ascribed to both schools in Cicero's *De Senectute* and the description of the

[6] Aristotle, *Meteorology,* 352b25-30; cited by Hargrove, *Foundations,* p. 25.
[7] Plato, *Phaedrus,* 227a–230e; cited by Hargrove, *Foundations,* p. 27.

golden age by the Epicurean Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura*). Thus, Hargrove's conclusion here is an overgeneralization. (I defer comment on his remarks about medieval attitudes until after considering his third point.)

Hargrove's third point is that Greek philosophy "promoted a conception of reality that made the idea of natural preservation conceptually difficult, if not impossible." In part, his grounds are as before: Plato's awareness of the deforestation of Attica and of the increased runoff of rainfall there is expressed with an indifference partly to be explained by the belief that the natural world was "an illusion, and did not exist as experienced in any fundamental sense" (p. 30). Hargrove adds here the speculative explanation that the Greeks in general were suffering from existential *angst* about the possibility that the material world might not continue to exist, and thus wanted proof that it was permanent and unchanging. But he goes on to face the objection that Plato's indifference to environmental change does not square with this theory; he replies that this indifference is "simple proof that he, unlike the pre-Socratics, already had a philosophical theory . . . that permitted him to accept and ignore environmental change as inconsequential." Far from being simple proof, this reply is surely an epicycle, which does not really help out the initial theory, for the initial theory was supposed to explain, among other things, Plato's indifference to environmental change, but, as the objection shows, that theory predicts something other than indifference. Besides, such *angst* does not show up, as the theory would predict, in the Greek historians, dramatists, lyric poets, or orators.

Hargrove now explains that Aristotle's metaphysics had no such implications as Plato's. In the *Meteorology,* Aristotle evinces a belief in land gradually becoming uninhabitable desert in some places, while other land at the same time becomes habitable. He then suggests that Aristotle's belief that the entire system existed for the sake of humanity accounts, in the circumstances, for his absence of environmental alarm. He adds that in the *Nicomachaean Ethics* Aristotle "rules out any moral concern for future generations on the grounds that including posterity into ethical deliberation would make the decision process too complicated" (p. 32). If it is held that Aristotle might have evinced environmental concern but for this particular stance, then his lack of such concern would not be wholly due even to his geology, let alone his metaphysics, but partly due to his ethics; but the passage cited[8] is not, in fact, about moral concern at all, but about the limits to what may be looked for when *eudaemonia* is ascribed, which is rather different. Hargrove goes on to suggest that for Aristotle a human being can move other things without being moved, and is thus independent of his or her environment (p. 32). Nevertheless, in view of Aristotle's view that *eudaemonia* requires possession of some degree of worldly wealth, and other contingent

[8] Aristotle, *Nicomachaean Ethics,* 1097b9-15; cited by Hargrove, *Foundations,* n. 30, p. 46.

benefits such as possession of honoured ancestors or children and personal beauty too, I am unable to take this suggestion seriously.[9] Still, Hargrove's conclusion that Aristotle was unable to have concern about the environment because he accepted the general Greek belief in the indestructibility of ultimate reality may well be right. Even if Aristotle did not believe in unchanging primary matter, his belief in a stable teleological world system of entities reliably discharging their in-built purposes probably suffices to vindicate the point.

This account of the Greeks, however, is defective in that Greek and Roman Christians accepted both the reality of the created world and its destructibility and impermanence. Some, certainly, absorbed the doctrines of Platonism, and to the extent that they did were in much the same position as their pagan counterparts. But not all Christians at any time have been Platonists, despite Hargrove's account of early Christian philosophy (p. 34). There again, some *may* have assumed that the everlasting arms of the creator were a sufficient guarantee of the supply of our daily bread, a religious version of the view ascribed by Hargrove to Aristotle.

The fact is, though, that many medieval Christians set about improving the landscape, partly for the sake of human benefit, and partly to enhance its beauty for the sake of God's glory. The Cistercians are just the most conspicuous example. (There is ample evidence in Glacken of both the theory and the practice.[10]) While this is not, in itself, environmental concern, that attitude can be discerned in the rules and measures adopted in the medieval period to limit deforestation and preserve forests.[11] Meanwhile, a love of God's creation also embodying ecological concern was shown in the twelfth century by Hildegard of Bingen.[12] In any case, Hargrove's generalization about the medieval belief that love of nature should be discouraged is a further instance of overgeneralization, for Glacken cites numerous cases of medieval writers celebrating nature's beauty, and expressing a concern to perfect it. These attitudes would have been impossible, on Hargrove's account of history, if it had not been for the influence of some quite different metaphysic from those of Plato and of Aristotle. That further metaphysic is to be found in the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of creation, as has been argued by such writers as Glacken, Hooykaas,[13] and Jaki.[14]

Hargrove, however, seems entirely right in representing the Christian philoso-

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[9] See Aristotle, *Nicomachaean Ethics*, 1099a31-1099b9.

[10] Thus, Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 176–351.

[11] Ibid., pp. 318–51

[12] On Hildegard of Bingen, see Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986).

[13] R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1972).

[14] S. Jaki, *Science and Creation* (Edinburgh and London: Scottish Academic Press, 1975).

pher Descartes as the father both of modern philosophical problems and of the characteristic anti-environmental bias of modern philosophy. Descartes's distrust of sensation and reliance on reason to gain knowledge aligns him with Plato, and against Aristotle, whose dominance in the later Middle Ages was then being challenged. His method of doubt required him to accept only what was self-evident or deducible from it, and while he perhaps managed by this method to establish his own existence, the rest of his enterprise depended on his two proofs of God's existence, and in turn "on God's goodness as a guarantee of our common-sense belief in the existence of other people and the world" (p. 35). The rejection of these proofs left intact just the method of doubt, plus the proof of personal existence, and that "only from the point of view of the person doing the thinking," and "as a mental entity" at that, "not as a material being" (p. 35).

Descartes thus bequeathed to subsequent philosophers several problems. One concerned the basis of knowledge of the external world. Descartes's own philosophy made this problem even more intractable, since for him matter was so impermanent that God had to maintain it from moment to moment, and because the two kinds of created substance, matter and mind, had no properties in common, and should, therefore, have been incapable of interacting. Moreover, the properties ascribable to matter were divided into primary qualities, which were all measurable, and secondary properties, including colors, tastes and smells, which were in several respects subjective and did not correspond to configurations of physical objects.

Hargrove has little difficulty in showing that this philosophy was at least as discouraging of preservationist concern as Platonism. Indeed the problematic account of matter which it offered generated an even more unpromising reaction during the following 250 years, for in response to the *aporiae* of Descartes, Berkeley rejected physical matter as an unnecessary hypothesis, Hume maintained that all we can know is that sensations or impressions exist (but it should be remarked that Hume also held that we cannot doubt the existence of body and that mathematical truths can also be known[15]), and Kant's efforts to rectify the damage were usually interpreted in the nineteenth century as requiring reference to the external world to be dropped, producing a century of idealism, contrary to Kant's wishes. Only at the end of the nineteenth century was "this lunacy . . . effectively put to rest when G. E. Moore courageously led a rebellion against the philosophies of Kant and Hegel at Cambridge University, which brought about the end of idealism as mainstream philosophy and permitted the rehabilitation of the external world" (p. 37).

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[15] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2d ed., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), bk. 1, pt. 4, sec. 2 and bk. 1, pt. 3, sec. 1; see also D. G. C. MacNabb, *David Hume, His Theory of Knowledge and Morality* (New York: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951), pp. 40–47.

The influence of Descartes, according to Hargrove, also bedevilled scientific method. The rationalist influence of such philosophers "made modern science curiously antiobservational"; indeed, in the seventeenth century science was not based on observation. "Observation did not make its appearance in modern science until empiricism, more than a century later [namely, than Descartes and Galileo], had made it more fashionable and Hume's analysis of causation had revealed the need for experimentation with controls" (p. 38). Hargrove continues in this vein for some paragraphs, characterizing early modern science as possessed of a geometrical, reductionist, and antiobservational method which prevented natural history sciences from being accepted as sciences at all.

But these claims are mostly catastrophic rubbish. Certainly Descartes's method, and that of Galileo too, were geometrical and antiobservational, and in some respects early modern science was reductionist. It is also credible that the downgrading of secondary qualities could well have retarded progress in natural history. But the rest of these remarks about the history of scientific method are wholly misguided. Hargrove writes as if unaware of seventeenth-century British empiricism, and as if Bacon, Hooke, Boyle, and Newton had never lived. Following the ideas of Francis Bacon, British natural philosophers attempted in one form or another a systematic study of nature through observation, experimentation, and controls. This was, of course, scarcely to the credit of Descartes, but Descartes's method was consciously rejected by generations of practicing English scientists, and by the philosopher who saw himself as their underlaborer, none other than John Locke, whose views on property are discussed by Hargrove in another chapter. It would also be misleading to suggest that the scientific method of Descartes was futile, and to leave the impression that there was no cross-fertilization between scientific work in Britain and on the Continent during this century. But the crucial point is that Hargrove's account of the methodology of early modern science is a glaring instance of overgeneralization. Furthermore, his chronology and his view that sciences such as biology were unacceptable as sciences among the natural philosophers of the early modern period are downright wrong.

Thus Hargrove writes as if biologists such as John Ray, Nehemiah Grew, and Robert Derham had never lived or worked, and had never been recognized as members of the Royal Society, and as if that society had not included among its first members John Evelyn, whose works *Sylva* and *Fumifugium*[16] actually express recognizable ecological concern, long before the stage at which, according to Hargrove, the establishment of uniformitarianism in geology late in the eighteenth century completed the intellectual basis which made such concern a

[16] For Evelyn, see Glacken, *Traces*, pp. 485–94, and Robin Attfield, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell and New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 42. For Ray and Derham, see Glacken, *Traces*, pp. 415–26.

possibility. This, indeed, is one of those places where Hargrove should have taken notice of material unremarked by Passmore but brought into these debates by Glacken and, subsequently, by myself in *The Ethics of Environmental Concern*.

After spending several paragraphs explaining a process which is largely a product of his own imagination, his text recovers sanity and insight with a discussion about a further impact of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. His point is that, granted this distinction, the conclusion of Hume that there is a great gulf between an *is* and an *ought* is an unsurprising development; indeed, he cites a passage of Hume's *Treatise* in which vice and virtue are compared with sounds, colors, heat and cold, as perceptions in the mind, and nothing more (p. 41). This kind of approach in due course led to positivism and to the disparagement of values, and of the humanities in general, by many scientists, a development well illustrated by Hargrove through passages from Charles Darwin's autobiography. The same general trend might also account for a further development remarked by Hargrove (to the extent that there was such a development), namely, the disappearance from the subject matter of aesthetics, after the time of Burke and Kant, of natural beauty. (But is he really right about this? There was surely an interest in natural beauty and its relation to human consciousness at least on the parts of Hegel and of Schelling. And does Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* not count as aesthetics?)

Hargrove's overall position in this chapter is that philosophy, a major influence upon Western science and culture in general, "has consistently failed to provide a foundation for environmental thought throughout the course of Western civilization" because of Greek metaphysics and because of the scepticism of early modern philosophy (p. 44). Both periods inhibited the development of an understanding of natural beauty, and modern philosophy has undermined the foundations of ethics and value theory in general; while philosophy of science "has consistently undercut the legitimacy of the environmental or natural history sciences." This position is the core of Hargrove's case against Passmore, who writes as if "philosophy did not and does not inhibit environmental thought," and holds instead that "environmental thought just happens to be incompatible with Western thought, traditions, and civilization" (p. 44). But all this makes environmental ethics and philosophy "philosophy's opportunity to rectify its greatest error, the rejection of the natural world as it is experienced concretely in real life" (p. 45).

This overall conclusion can now be assessed. First, not all of it stands up. Not all Greek metaphysics was incompatible with taking the natural world seriously; exceptions, alongside Theophrastus, whom Hargrove mentions as such, and in some respects Aristotle, include Stoics, Epicureans, and those Christians who steered clear of Platonism (such as Tertullian, and again the Antiochene school). Not all early modern philosophy discouraged either observation, empiricism, or

natural history, which all have received greater philosophical support than Hargrove realizes. Not all pre-modern philosophy discouraged the appreciation of natural beauty. Not all philosophies of science have discouraged geology and biology. Finally, since there have been philosophical naturalists who uphold the derivation of values from facts—despite the best efforts of Hargrove's hero G. E. Moore—it can be added that modern philosophy has not entirely undermined the foundations of ethics.

Yet a good deal of Hargrove's conclusions still stand. Greek metaphysics has largely had the impact which he says it has had. Early modern rationalism has been widely influential, and has led to the disparagement of observation and of the natural world. The appreciation of natural beauty has been impeded both by Platonism, neo-Platonism and the downgrading of secondary qualities. The objectivity of ethics and of values in general has been considerably undermined by the influence of philosophers such as Hume and, be it said, G. E. Moore. Geology and biology have been marginalized from time to time, if not consistently.

Thus, to write as if philosophy did not and does not inhibit environmental thought (as Passmore does) displays an inadequate critique of the history of philosophy. On the other hand, environmental thought is not wholly incompatible with Western thought, traditions, and civilization, either contingently or essentially; environmental thought can draw upon and develop a variety of metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and axiological roots which go much deeper than Burke or Kant or uniformitarianism, let alone eighteenth and nineteenth-century explorers and artists. And incidentally the historical sources disregarded by Hargrove, the church fathers and the seventeenth-century empirical natural philosophers, are links in what might be regarded as a tradition which did take the natural world seriously, as I argue in *God and the Secular*.[17] It is rather that most of the history of philosophy has been hostile to environmental thought, that (as Hargrove says) by the time that idealism came to be widely rejected it was too late for philosophers to play a formative role in such thought (p. 37), and that there is a great deal of reconstruction to be done, both in philosophy and, of another sort, in a world which until recently had to face its environmental problems with much more hindrance than help from the central discipline of Western civilization, philosophy.

All this may not confer on environmental ethics and philosophy quite the central role claimed by Hargrove. Many other branches of philosophy can contribute to the reconstruction of philosophy, while in my own experience environmental ethicists need a good deal of help from conventional ethicists and

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[17] Robin Attfield, *God and the Secular: A Philosophical Assessment of Secular Reasoning from Bacon to Kant* (Cardiff: University College Cardiff Press, 1978). (This work is out-of-print; copies can be supplied by the author.)

from social and political philosophers too, not to mention other disciplines, before they can be of major help in the rescue and restoration of the natural world from environmental deterioration. Yet Hargrove is not altogether wrong when, in his introduction, he claims that environmental ethics is unlike the other areas of applied ethics. While the other branches are likely to remain distinct subject areas, environmental ethics, as he says, bears on most of the traditional fields within philosophy: aesthetics, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of science, and social and political philosophy; and, once these traditional fields adjust so as to take account of the problems with which environmental ethics deals, environmental ethics may disappear itself (p. 2). The prospects that the traditional fields will suitably adjust, however, may be slender; but Hargrove could be right to the extent that, until they do, environmental ethics and environmental philosophy will remain thorns in their side.