



# Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800

*Keith Thomas*

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Throughout the ages man has struggled with his perceived place in the natural world. The idea of humans cultivating the Earth to suit specific needs is one of the greatest points of contention in this struggle. For how would have civilization progressed, if not by the clearance of the forests, the cultivation of the soil, and the conservation of wild landscape into human settlement? Yet what of the healing powers of unexploited nature, its long-term importance in the perpetuation of human civilization, and the inherent beauty of wild scenery? At no time were these questions addressed as pointedly and with such great consequence as in England between the sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries. "Between 1500 and 1800 there occurred a whole cluster of changes in the way in which men and women, at all social levels, perceived and classified the natural world around them," explains Keith Thomas. "New sensibilities arose toward animals, plants, and landscape. The relationship of man to other species was redefined; and his right to exploit those species for his own advantage was sharply challenged." Man and the Natural World aims not just to explain present interest in preserving the environment and protecting the rights of animals, but to reconstruct an earlier mental world. Thomas seeks to expose the assumptions beneath the perceptions, reasonings, and feelings of the inhabitants of early modern England toward the animals, birds, vegetation, and physical landscape among which they spent their lives, often in conditions of proximity which are now difficult for us to appreciate. It was a time when a conviction of man's ascendancy over the natural world gave way to a new concern for the environment and sense of kinship with other species. Here, for example, Thomas illustrates the changing attitudes toward the woodlands. John Morton observed in 1712, "In a country full of civilized inhabitants" timber could not be "suffered

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