

## Jason Nicholas • Dissertation Proposal (v.8)

*“We violated nature and, therefore, if nature is going to be set to rights we would begin by setting it to rights in our own domain.” – Sir Roy Strong*

Working title:

*Defining Stewardship: Human Accountability and the Care of Place*

Abstract:

The subject of land stewardship (and the broader topic of “environmental stewardship”) is a primary social and environmental issue. This dissertation examines the implications of the word and concept in the twenty-first century regarding individual and collective responsibility.

Scope:

This dissertation shall examine the history and current understanding of the word stewardship as it relates to land “under human care”. The primary consideration shall be *to what end is the human mandate for stewardship* (e.g. Do we have a choice to become stewards or are we all, of necessity, stewards at some level?)

The secondary considerations are:

- What are the responsibilities of humans in relation to the land?
- Who are the benefactors of stewardship?
- Are stewards appointed communally or self-selected from people concerned for a particular land or commodity?
- What are the legitimising factors of stewardship and who holds power?
- What historical baggage does this word carry (specifically in Scotland)?
- How has the Christian concept of “dominion” shaped our current understanding of stewardship?
- How does religious belief inform environmental care? (What does belief call for an individual to accomplish concerning stewardship or what licence might it apparently give for the misuse of a place?)
- How does this play itself out in a multicultural, multi-faith society?
- How is the concept of stewardship evolving in the twenty-first century?
- With whom are we stewards (e.g. with only fellow humans or are we, in some way, co-stewards with the environment itself [ref. Gaia Theory])?

The topic is vast and will need careful paring for the limitations of this dissertation; it will only tangentially examine the secondary considerations listed above (though each of them could probably become a book-length work). *I propose to mainly examine one’s personal obligation for stewardship and how that relates to a community.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Realising that the term “community” is fraught with its own semantic difficulties.

## Aims:

My primary aim is to produce a piece that will encourage my reader to consider his or her “responsibility to place”<sup>2</sup> I hope my reader will evaluate his or her “location”; in what domain does one exist and how does one positively contribute to or detract from this place?

There is an underlying question of individual power here; my assumption is that many people feel little responsibility to place because they are disconnected and disempowered. I would like to explore how, through the concept of stewardship, one might be brought back to both a connexion to place and implicit responsibility for its well-being (and, by extension, one’s own). How can one develop this either through a personal sense of stewardship or (alternately or concurrently) how can the “official” stewards encourage this in others?

## Objectives:

The concept of stewardship has direct bearing on the way people care for (or neglect) the place they are in; depending on who is given stewardship and how people consider their responsibilities as stewards, a place can either flourish for all living things that depend on it or fall into disrepair. To make a broad generalisation, as people become less connected to a sense of place, stewardship of a particular place becomes less important. Though this might be a question to prove or disprove via research; I think it generally safe to assume that most people have little *specific* impetus for stewardship. Though the term is bandied about at all levels concerning the environment, I sense that most of us have a poorly defined concept of stewardship at the median level (e.g. we may be good stewards of a household and have a fairly defined idea of the macro-environmental issues at hand; however, we may not fully grasp issues concerning our water table, forest, or wildlife). I would propose that, without an understanding of this median level of stewardship, people cannot fully address the micro- and macro-environmental issues (whether the people in question are considered stewards themselves or are holding to account those who have been appointed as such).

The Centre for Stewardship in Falkland, Fife is developing a model of stewardship (from the personal to large estate management) through its various training and awareness programs. I hope to supplement their work with a useful dissertation piece; we will work in collaboration on the research and I plan to be accountable to them through the process. When the research and writing is finished, the CfS has requested I present my findings in some manner of public forum and/or produce a version that is easily readable and accessible by their constituents. I also hope to rework the dissertation into a publishable article for a general audience (though, as the target audience of the dissertation is already broad, I hope to make it accessible from the outset). I hope to find, through research and writing of the dissertation, a sensible place to publish the material. (One option I am considering is using the material gathered for the foundations of an online forum or wiki where others

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<sup>2</sup> By this, I mean to encompass the land, community, home in which an individual lives. I’m hoping to connect these in a holistic way to show how the health of one influences the other.

could contribute their own thoughts and research on stewardship. The dissertation could then become the genesis of a larger collaborative work on the topic.)

### Research Questions:

- Is the concept of stewardship applicable for home, community, and the larger world or are there separate terms that would more appropriately describe each?
- How might this concept, as applied to land, translate to an individual's understanding of stewardship for all things (and, by extension, care of self)?
- How is the word "stewardship" understood by landholders, tenants, and city dwellers (in the Scottish context)?

### Justification:

I believe this is *the* central concept of environmental and social awareness. Without a clear understanding of our personal and civic responsibility to a given place, other considerations are somewhat moot. If I do not have a concept of how I can personally care for a place or hold others accountable a broad range of social and environmental ills may befall it. It is also particularly important to define terms of discourse for "the environmental debate". The word stewardship is used in various ways with often ambiguous (or even conflicting) meaning. I hope that, if not a definitive definition, this research might make a survey of how the term is used among a group of people who label themselves as "stewards".

### Review of the Literature

My initial search for literature (on full-text electronic libraries) yields a huge array of resources; there are thousands of "weighty" books and articles on the topic. The literature review could potentially encompass all of written history as the topic has been relevant since the dawn of agriculture and the beginning of commerce and writing. However, as I have but 15,000 words to work with, I will need to focus narrowly for a manageable amount of research. As I will work with a particular organisation during their keynote event, it is likely that my research will reflect my considerations of interview material gathered there.

### Methodology

I presume my methodology will be qualitative-based on semi-structured interviews and literature review. I am exploring the history of a concept and its current understanding among a group of people concerned with it (though, of course, part of my implicit argument is that everyone should be concerned with stewardship; I will attempt to explore the concept with those who define themselves as stewards as well as those who might assume they have no connexion with the term).

I aim to examine the way participants of the Centre for Stewardship's Big Tent Festival consider the word stewardship. (Again, exploring the spectrum from "personal stewardship" to a larger, more community based idea; how does the word bring people together in an "iconic" way for events such as the festival and in support of organisations like the Centre for Stewardship?)

I will perform a series of interviews at the Festival itself (both arranged and impromptu). I would imagine interviewees will fall into three categories:

1. Those who self-assess as “stewards” or who have been given that title and see themselves as actively participating in a form of stewardship.
2. Those who fill the role of steward but do not necessarily define themselves as such.
3. Those who, in a particular circumstance, neither define themselves as a steward nor see the role of steward as their responsibility (e.g. in relation to a piece of land or commodity).

I presume it will be fairly straightforward to find people in category one and two at the Festival. However, it may be challenging to find interviewees for category three as they would not necessarily attend such an event. As a control group of sorts, I hope to interview local residents around Falkland to garner their perspectives on stewardship, the festival, the work or the Cfs, etc.

For all three categories, I hope to explore the power dynamic implicit in the role of steward or the giving over of that role. For example, in category three, I would consider what power over self and environment one might have relinquished if the role of stewardship is denied; what are the implications of this beyond the piece of land or commodity involved?

Where practicable, all interviews will be audio recorded with informed consent; I am not expecting the need to protect the identity of any interviewees but will do so if confidentiality is an issue. Following the interviews, I will transcribe and code the data in a Grounded Theory matrix in order to analyse the data.

Secondly, in addition to interviews, I will pull data from books and documents pertaining to the topic. I've visited the Mitchell Library in Glasgow and spoken to librarians there concerning what books and archive material might be available. The search there may be particularly time consuming as many of the archives I would want to reference are only catalogued through an archaic hand-written system. However, according to the librarians, there is considerable material archived on land holding and the history of land usage in Scotland; so a search there will hopefully be worthwhile.

As I cull through materials, I will mimic the interview categories to discern what these three groups have historically said or done regarding stewardship.

#### Provisional Work Schedule:

I will need to discuss in more detail the schedule with the Centre for Stewardship but, very roughly, I am reading relevant literature now (as of 1 July) and will, of course, continue reading for the duration. I hope to begin interviews in the latter half of July and finish by mid-August to allow time for review and transcription. As noted above, the bulk of my interviews will take place 26-27 July. I will, ideally, have a draft of the dissertation by mid to late August so I can see what needs to be added or revised.

## Resources:

I'm speaking with folk at the Centre for Stewardship in Fife concerning their need to refine a definition of stewardship and promote a model for the future. I have e-mailed and met with Ninian Stewart and Mike Small at the CFS and have an ongoing dialogue on what their needs are for research and what will be practical for me to undertake. They are very articulate and I think will be a great boon to my academic work (they will hold me accountable and make me a "steward of my words"). I also hope to pull commentary from the Centre For Human Ecology community as I would imagine many of them will have something to say on the topic.

However, though I have to consider my time limits and scope of my research, I want to take care not to preach to the converted. I do want to explore how this concept is understood popularly; I'll need to refer to what is happening in "the everyday world".

## References:

My reading is ongoing; I have scanned full-text web libraries and found what looks to be a goodly amount of material pertaining to the subject. I've read *The Dominion of Man* (Black, John Edinburgh University Press 1970) as a starting point for my research. Of course, most books on the environment touch on the subject so I expect to draw from a wide range of sources.

I am greatly influenced by the writings of Wendell Berry on this topic and expect to refer to him extensively (as well as the other "New Agrarian" authors). I hope to make some study of the stewardship of intimate spaces (I'm going to have to come up with a solid definition of "intimate spaces" but am generally meaning the small-scale natural surroundings one experiences daily); for this I will reference authors such as Henry David Thoreau and Derrick Jensen.

## Bibliography:

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