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Preface

When I first began teaching environmental ethics more than two decades ago, the field was widely seen by professional philosophers as a soft branch of philosophy, mostly taught by left-leaning tree-huggers who lacked the brain power to do any serious work in logic, philosophy of mind, or some other mainstream field of philosophy. Today things are very different. As the global environment has deteriorated and the threat of catastrophic climate change has grown, books, journals, conferences, and college courses in environmental ethics have proliferated, and a great deal of first-rate work has emerged. Now it is widely recognized that deep, rigorous, and creative thinking about the environment is one of the urgent challenges of our time.

Since the first Earth Day (April 22, 1970) more than fifty years ago, environmental awareness, activism, and concern have grown enormously. Yet by most measures of ecological health, our planet is far sicker than it was then. Globally, numerous environmental problems, including biodiversity loss, deforestation, topsoil erosion, ocean acidification, waste disposal, plastic pollution, resource depletion, overpopulation, overconsumption, chemical pollution, overfishing, water contamination, radioactive waste production, and outdoor air pollution, have all become significantly worse. Even more alarmingly, climate change caused mainly by burning fossil fuels has created a dire planetary emergency, threatening to swamp our coastal cities in rising seas; cause massive extinction cascades; create devastating droughts, floods, super-storms, and wildfires; bankrupt our economies; and make large portions of the world uninhabitable by humans.

My goal in this book has been to provide a clear, lively, and balanced introduction to the central issues and controversies in environmental ethics. It is written mainly for students and requires no previous knowledge of philosophy. At the same time, I hope that the book will be of interest to environmental scientists, environmental policy makers, and anyone curious to know what philosophers are saying today about the environment.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One (chapters 1–7) deals with theoretical issues in environmental philosophy. There we examine a variety

of ethical and environmental theories that provide concepts, principles, and perspectives that defenders believe should shape our thinking on ecological issues. In Part Two (chapters 8–14), we turn to applied environmental ethics, addressing current debates on topics such as responsibilities to future generations, population growth, overconsumption, food ethics, wilderness preservation, biodiversity loss, climate change, and ecological activism.

I received valuable help in writing this book from Bernard Prusak, Andrew Beck, Jennifer McBride, several anonymous reviewers, and Mia Bassham; my thanks to each. It was a pleasure to work with editors Jeff Dean and Elana Rosenthal at Hackett Publishing; they made this a better book in countless ways. I am grateful to Jim Sterba and Holmes Rolston, who stimulated my interest in environmental ethics when I was a graduate student and newly minted professor. Finally, I thank my students at King's College with whom I explored this subject over many years. If the future is Green, the victory will be theirs.