

## Deep Ecology

Bron Taylor and Michael Zimmerman

*The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (London: Continuum, 2005).

Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (b. 1912) coined the term “Deep Ecology” in 1972 to express the ideas that nature has intrinsic value, namely, value apart from its usefulness to human beings, and that all life forms should be allowed to flourish and fulfill their evolutionary destinies. Naess invented the rubric to contrast such views with what he considered to be “shallow” environmentalism, namely, environmental concern rooted only in concern for humans. The term has since come to signify both its advocates’ deeply felt spiritual connections to the earth’s living systems and ethical obligations to protect them, as well as the global environmental movement that bears its name. Moreover, some deep ecologists posit close connections between certain streams in world religions and deep ecology.

Naess and most deep ecologists, however, trace their perspective to personal experiences of connection to and wholeness in wild nature, experiences which are the ground of their intuitive, affective perception of the sacredness and interconnection of all life. Those who have experienced such a transformation of consciousness (experiencing what is sometimes called one’s “ecological self” in these movements) view the self not as separate from and superior to all else, but rather as a small part of the entire cosmos. From such experience flows the conclusion that all life and even ecosystems themselves have inherent or intrinsic value – that is, value independently of whether they are useful to humans.

Although Naess coined the term, many deep ecologists credit the American ecologist Aldo Leopold with succinctly expressing such a deep ecological worldview in his now famous “Land Ethic” essay, which was published posthumously in *A Sand County Almanac* in 1948.

Leopold argued that humans ought to act only in ways designed to protect the long-term flourishing of all ecosystems and each of their constituent parts.

Many deep ecologists call their perspective alternatively “ecocentrism” or “biocentrism” (to convey, respectively, an ecosystem-centered or life-centered value system). As importantly, they believe humans have so degraded the biosphere that its life-sustaining systems are breaking down. They trace this tragic situation to anthropocentrism (human-centeredness), which values nature exclusively in terms of its usefulness to humans. Anthropocentrism, in turn, is viewed as grounded in Western religion and philosophy, which many deep ecologists believe must be rejected (or a deep ecological transformation of consciousness within them must occur) if humans are to learn to live sustainably on the earth.

Thus, deep ecologists generally believe that only by “resacralizing” our perceptions of the natural world can we put ecosystems above narrow human interests and thereby avert ecological catastrophe by learning to live harmoniously with the natural world. It is a common perception within the deep ecology movement that the religions of indigenous cultures, the world’s remnant and newly revitalized or invented pagan religions, and religions originating in Asia (especially Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism), provide superior grounds for ecological ethics, and greater ecological wisdom, than do Occidental religions. Theologians such as Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry, however, have shown that Western religions such as Christianity may be interpreted in ways largely compatible with the deep ecology movement.

Although Naess coined the umbrella term, which is now a catchphrase for most non-anthropocentric environmental ethics, a number of Americans were also criticizing anthropocentrism and laying the foundation for the movement’s ideas, at about the same time as Naess was coining the term. One crucial event early in deep ecology’s evolution was the 1974

“Rights of Non-Human Nature” conference held at a college in Claremont, California. Inspired by Christopher Stone’s influential 1972 law article (and subsequent book) *Should Trees Have Standing—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects* the conference drew many of those who would become the intellectual architects of deep ecology. These included George Sessions who, like Naess, drew on Spinoza’s pantheism, later co-authoring *Deep Ecology* with Bill Devall; Gary Snyder, whose remarkable, Pulitzer prize-winning *Turtle Island* proclaimed the value of place-based spiritualities, indigenous cultures, and animistic perceptions, ideas that would become central within deep ecology subcultures; and the late Paul Shepard (d. 1996), who in *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*, and subsequent works such as *Nature and Madness* and the posthumously published *Coming Back to the Pleistocene*, argued that foraging societies were ecologically superior to and emotionally healthier than agricultures. Shepard and Snyder especially provided a cosmogony that explained humanity’s fall from a pristine, nature paradise. Also extremely influential was Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, which viewed the desert as a sacred place uniquely able to evoke in people a proper, non-anthropocentric understanding of the value of nature. By the early 1970s the above figures put in place the intellectual foundations of deep ecology.

A corresponding movement soon followed and grew rapidly, greatly influencing grassroots environmentalism, especially in Europe, North America, and Australia. Shortly after forming in 1980, for example, leaders of the politically radical Earth First! movement (the explanation point is part of its name) learned about Deep Ecology, and immediately embraced it as their own, spiritual, philosophy. Meanwhile, the green lifestyle-focused movement known as Bioregionalism became another physical embodiment of a deep ecology worldview. Given their

natural affinities it was not long before Bioregionalism became the prevailing social philosophy among deep ecologists.

As a philosophy and as a movement, deep ecology spread in many ways. During the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, Bill Devall and George Sessions published their influential book, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*; Warwick Fox in *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* linked deep ecology with transpersonal psychology, thereby furthering the development of what is now called “ecopsychology”; David Rothenberg translated and edited Arne Naess’s important work, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*; and Michael E. Zimmerman interpreted Martin Heidegger as a forerunner of deep ecology, thus helping to spark a trend of calling upon contemporary European thinkers for insight into environmental issues. Many deep ecologists have complained, however, that the postmodern thinking imported from Europe has undermined the status of “nature,” defined by deep ecologists as a whole that includes but exists independently of humankind.

Radical environmentalist activists, including the American co-founder of Earth First!, Dave Foreman, and the Australian co-founder of the Rainforest Information Centre, John Seed, beginning in the early 1980s, conducted “road shows” to transform consciousness and promote environmental action. Such events usually involve speeches and music designed to evoke or reinforce peoples felt connections to nature, and inspires action. Often, they also include photographic presentations contrasting sacred, intact, ecosystems, which are contrasted with degraded and defiled lands.

Some activists have designed ritual processes to further deepen participant’s spiritual connections to nature and political commitment to defend it. Joanna Macy and a number of others, including John Seed, for example, developed a ritual process known as the Council of All

Beings, which endeavors to get activists to see the world from the perspective of non-human entities. Since the early 1980s, traveling widely around the world, Seed has labored especially hard spreading deep ecology through this and other newly invented ritual processes. The movement has also been disseminated through the writings of its architects (often reaching college students in environmental studies courses); through journalists reporting on deep ecology-inspired environmental protests and direct action resistance; and through the work of novelists, poets, musicians, and other artists, who promote in their work deep ecological perceptions. Recent expressions in ecotourism can be seen, for example, in the “Deep Ecology Elephant Project,” which includes tours in both Asia and Africa, and suggest that elephants and other wildlife have much to teach their human kin.

Deep Ecology has been criticized by people representing social ecology, socialist ecology, liberal democracy, and ecofeminism. Murray Bookchin, architect of the anarchistic green social philosophy known as Social Ecology, engaged in sometimes vituperative attacks on deep ecology and its activist vanguard, Earth First!, for being intellectually incoherent, ignorant of socio-economic factors in environmental problems, and given to mysticism and misanthropy. Bookchin harshly criticized Earth First! co-founder Dave Foreman for suggesting that starvation was a solution to human overpopulation and environmental deterioration. Later, however, Bookchin and Foreman engaged in a more constructive dialogue. Like social ecologists, meanwhile, socialist ecologists maintain that deep ecology overemphasizes cultural factors (worldviews, religion, philosophy) in diagnosing the roots of, and solutions to, environmental problems, thereby minimizing the roles played by the social, political, and economic factors inherent in global capitalism.

Liberal democrats such as the French scholar Luc Ferry (1995) maintain that deep ecology is incapable of providing guidance in moral decision-making. Insofar as deep ecology fails adequately to recognize that human life has more value than other life forms, he argues, it promotes ‘ecofascism,’ namely the sacrifice of individual humans for the benefit of the ecological whole, what Leopold termed “the land.” (Ecofascism in its most extreme form links the racial purity of a people to the well-being of the nation’s land; calls for the removal or killing of non-native peoples; and may also justify profound individual and collective sacrifice of its own people for the health of the natural environment.) Many environmental philosophers have defended Leopold’s land ethic, and by extension, deep ecology, against such charges, most notably one of the pioneers of contemporary environmental philosophy, Baird Callicott.

Although some ecofeminists indicate sympathy with deep ecology’s basic goal, namely, protecting natural phenomena from human destruction, others have sharply criticized deep ecology. Male, white, and middle class deep ecologists, Ariel Salleh maintains, ignore how patriarchal beliefs, attitudes, practices, and institutions help to generate environmental problems. Val Plumwood and Jim Cheney criticize deep ecology’s idea of expanding the self so as to include and thus to have a basis for protecting non-human phenomena. This “ecological self” allegedly constitutes a totalizing view that obliterates legitimate distinctions between self and other. Moreover, Plumwood argues, deep ecology unwisely follows the rationalist tradition in basing moral decisions on “impartial identification,” a practice that does not allow for the highly particular attachments that often motivate environmentalists and indigenous people alike to care for local places.

Warwick Fox has replied that impartial and wider identification does not cancel out particular or personal attachments, but instead, puts them in the context of more encompassing

concerns that are otherwise ignored, as when for example concern for one's family blinds one to concerns about concerns of the community. Fox adds that deep ecology criticizes the ideology—anthropocentrism—that has always been used to by social agents to legitimate oppression of groups regarded as sub- or non-human. While modern liberation movements have sought to include more and more people into the class of full humans, such movements have typically not criticized anthropocentrism as such. Even a fully egalitarian society, in other words, could continue to use anthropocentrism to justify exploiting the non-human realm.

In response to the claim that deep ecology is, or threatens to be, a totalizing worldview that excludes alternatives and that—ironically—threatens cultural diversity, Arne Naess responds that, to the contrary, deep ecology is constituted by multiple perspectives or “ecosophies” (ecological-philosophies) and is compatible with a wide range of religious perspectives and philosophical orientations.

Another critic, best-selling author Ken Wilber, argues that by portraying humankind as merely one strand in the web of life, deep ecology adheres to a one-dimensional, or “flatland” metaphysics (1995). Paradoxically, by asserting that material nature constitutes the whole of which humans are but a part, deep ecologists agree in important respects with modern naturalism, according to which humankind is a clever animal capable of and justified in dominating other life-forms in the struggle for survival and power. A “deeper” ecology would follow from discerning that the cosmos is hierarchically ordered in terms of complexity, but that respect and compassion are due all phenomena because they are manifestations of the divine.

In the last analysis, for Naess, it is personal experiences of a spiritual connection with nature and related perceptions of nature's inherent worth or sacredness, which provide the ground for deep ecological commitments. In his view, such experiences are diverse and this

approach *respects* diversity, indeed, many ultimate premises are consistent with the eight-point, Deep Ecology Platform, which Naess developed with George Sessions.

Although controversial and contested, both internally and among its proponents and its critics, Deep Ecology is an increasingly influential green spirituality and ethics that universally recognized in environmentalist enclaves, and increasingly outside of such subcultures, as signifying a radical movement that challenges the conventional, usually anthropocentric ways humans deal with the natural world. Its influence in environmental philosophy has been profound, for even those articulating alternative environmental ethics are compelled to respond to its insistence that nature has intrinsic and even sacred value, and its anti-anthropocentric challenge.

Its greatest influence, however, may be through the diverse forms of environmental activism that it inspires, action that increasingly shapes world environmental politics. Not only is deep ecology the prevailing spirituality of bioregionalism and radical environmentalism, it undergirds the International Forum on Globalization and the Ruckus Society, two organizations playing key roles in the anti-globalization protests that erupted in 1999. Both of these groups are generously funded by the San Francisco-based Foundation for Deep Ecology, and other foundations, which share deep ecological perceptions.

Such developments reflect a growing impulse toward institutionalization, which is designed to promote deep ecology and intensify environmental action. There are now Institutes for Deep Ecology in London, England and Occidental, California, a Sierra Nevada Deep Ecology Institute in Nevada City, California, and dozens of other organizations in the United States, Oceania, and Europe, which provide ritual-infused experiences in deep ecology and training for environmental activists. It is not, however, the movement's institutions, but instead the

participants' love for the living Earth, along with their widespread apocalypticism (their conviction that that the world as we know it is imperiled or doomed), that give the movement its urgent passion to promote earthen spirituality, sustainable living, and environmental activism.

### **Further Reading**

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