

Observations on Deep Ecology and Hope

John Caddy

Part One: Some Problems with Deep Ecology

I am often frustrated by writers about Deep Ecology—too much ends, not enough means. Too much belaboring the problems, which after all are no longer news. Too much nit-picking and philosophical terms and fine distinctions, coupled with some large blind spots in their thinking.

- A) I dislike the smug tone of “Deep Ecology versus Shallow Ecology.” I understand it, but it seems divisive for no particular reason. Just more preaching to the choir.

- B) When deep ecology is critiqued by eco-feminists, the guys quickly circle the wagons, and dismiss as primary the eco-feminist critique that the problem is androcentrism (male-domination, patriarchy), and not anthropocentrism (human-domination). By doing this, they miss the central and powerful critique by eco-feminists, which is about quality of relationships. They point out that in a slave culture, everything is interconnected and interdependent, and that recognizing ecological interconnections is inadequate without addressing the quality of those relationships. Is there reciprocity? Balance? Equality? The eco-feminists are right on, here.

Some ecofeminists argue that self-realization and identification with all nature places too much emphasis on the whole, at the expense of the independent being. Ecofeminists contend that their concept of the self (as a dynamic process consisting of relations) is superior.

- C) The Deep Ecologists present Nature (Biosphere) as more fragile than it is. Most of these writers have degrees in philosophy, and have not, as Wendell Berry puts it, wintered and summered on a piece of land. Life is a force that pushes to fill every niche. Vernadsky, the true originator of the Gaia hypothesis in the 1920s, called this force Life Pressure. Living organisms are resurgent. It is our deepest nature. Going backpacking or camping is wonderful, but its encounters with wildness are so brief that the resurgent power of Life is not seen. Your average home gardener sees it; microbiologists see it. The Biosphere is stronger than we are usually led to believe.

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D) Three Associated Issues

- 1) Yes, we are destroying much. But there is a kind of “It’s just too late,” attempt at sophistication happening. “I don’t know what to do, therefore nothing can be done.” True, thousands of species are going extinct every month. This is horrible. But part of life pressure is speciation, which seems to be rising.
- 2) One sad holdover from the No Nukes movement is the vast overestimation of human power. There is still a widespread notion that humans have the ability (rather say capacity or disability) to destroy life on Earth. This is nonsense. Bacteria and other microbes are the substrate of life, and they easily change themselves to meet changed conditions. We are changing the biosphere, yes, but there is no way we can kill it off.
- 3) There is also the issue of human extermination at our own hands, a species suicide. Earth Firsters and many others tend to shrug and say, “Yeah, so? We had our run.” Misanthropy (dislike of humans) is a blind alley—it’s a cop-out. Giving up requires zero effort and zero thought.
- 4) Nature has long been regarded as indifferent to humanity. Farmers have never quite agreed. Some have railed against Nature for her indifference. How dare nature ignore Us? We are its Lords! But in recent decades, beginning with the “Don’t fool with Mother Nature” TV commercials, there is a growing sense that nature is personally angry with us and will destroy us if she can. She doesn’t thank us when we’re nice, but she will spank us when we’re bad. And they say we’re an adolescent species. The most egregious recent example of this is James Lovelock’s new book title, *The Revenge of Gaia*. Earth as angry Big Mama. He should be ashamed, for his original name for Earth’s homeostatic processes in the 1970s, Gaia, helped foster this set of delusions that have influenced so much New Age and pagan stuff and...

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Part Two: Belonging and the Ecological Self

All that said, Deep Ecology is powerfully correct in many ways, and the concepts have been personally most helpful to me. The central concepts of bio-centric equality (all lives have intrinsic value) and enlargement of self through inclusion are valid in the spheres of science and spirit both. When we deeply experience these concepts, we do transform.

The fundamentally important concept is what Naess terms Self-realization. I don't care for that name. I do like the concept of widening the self and widening the world-view. I do like Warwick Fox's translation of Self-realization into "transpersonal ecology." (His book about this is, of course, "Toward a Transpersonal Ecology.")

Please perform the following "thought experiment." You may want to make brief lists.

Explore the idea of BELONGING.

To what and/or to whom do you belong?

Other ways of asking this are:

What are your deepest, most powerful affiliations?

Of what are you a member?

Of what are you a part?

With whom or what do you feel rapport?

Who or what accepts you as yourself?

These questions suggest other less comfortable questions, such as:

Who and what will you defend?

Who/what are you willing to die for?

This can become sophomoric quickly, but these can be root questions about your being.

In the centuries most recent, Western culture has cherished and almost worshipped individualism. "Self-actualize!" the psychologists cried, "Realize the human potential!" "Consult your navel." It sounded pretty good at one time; now it sounds so self-involved as to be simply immature. Narcissus is always with us.

I think that we have lost much sense of community partly because of our self-worship. I think that as a culture we have become little more than

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mouths open wide with two hands at the edges shoving in everything they can get their fingers around. Western corporate culture consciously and deliberately does its best to create childish adults who have endless illusory wants with little sense of real needs. None of this is news. But this is the bizarre context of the questions above, this avaricious thing-centered brutality has come to dominate our days and our global ecocide. We have defined all lives not human as things rather than entities; DesCartes' enlightenment turned out to be dark.

But this is not the place to explore how we got into this mess. This is a place to think about how to get out of it. I believe that *belonging* has a lot to do with that.

Think about your affiliations for a moment. In our general cultural expectation, narrowing from the general to the particular, you belong to

your species>

(your race??!!)>

your nation>

your state>

your city/location>

your family>

your parents>

your children>

spouse>

choir>

your circle of friends>

your favorite teams and so on.

You belong!

One of the strongest instinctual drives of living creatures of all kinds is to join up, to affiliate, to cluster at every level. (See *Interliving* in *How Does Life Work @ Morning-Earth.org*)

We need to belong, we must belong as we must eat. Cut away from community, ostracized, we shrivel. Untouched babies die.

Much of social science language is pathetic jargon. But I honor the utility of the word "transpersonal."

[Trans-(beyond) + personal= beyond the self]

Transpersonal carries the implication of larger-than-self, and beyond the self.

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We belong to things larger, or wider, or more inclusive than the ego-self.

Spinoza said in the 17th century, “We are as large as our Loves.”

Another concept that may help here is psychological Identification. We “identify” with what we are part of, with what we belong to, and what we aspire to be. In literature, we “identify” with characters. We find we share traits with them or “think” like them. (Or wish we did.) Our ability to be compassionate, and especially our ability to empathize with other lives, human and not, is perhaps at the root of recognizing kinship.

Many naturalists and biologists have shared their memories, often from childhood, of transcendent moments in woods or prairie or on lakes when they knew they were part of everything alive. They report a sudden suffusion of belonging and the intuitive sense of interconnections with the Biosphere.

An experience such as this is not discussable; it is interior and nothing about it is verifiable from the outside.

Those who would narrow “Reality” to what they can stub their toes on have no patience or room in their small minds for intuitions, and wish they didn’t have to have these awkward experiences called emotions.

When we experience intense moments of belonging, we seem to become larger, as if we are suddenly aware of how very much we contain. Consider moments when you sang with others, and suddenly all the voices became one. Consider moments playing a team sport when briefly you jelled into one and everyone knew what to do, and what the others were going to do.

Deep Ecologists use lower case “self” for the unawakened consciousness and use capitalized “Self” for the enlarged ecologically aware self.

This Self-self usage is a bit in-group, but makes an important distinction. We must not become Self-righteous about being awake; belonging to the Biosphere is part of every person’s heritage. Environmentalists are too often smug, and too often use that feeling to separate themselves from the unenlightened masses.

Now revisit affiliations. Above, we began with the large concept of belonging to our species.

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The **Ecological Self** begins from the much more inclusive all life, the Biosphere, Nature, or living Earth, then perhaps narrows to continents or hemispheres, then bioregion, biome, then local ecosystems, eventually focusing in to family. Categories like nation and state become illusory and irrelevant. Categories that separate and presume to show degrees of relationship, as in cladistics and taxonomy, are irrelevant outside their disciplines.

In fact, the widened Self is unlikely to experience the Biosphere as hierarchical at all; it is a Whole

Deep Ecology strives to waken the transpersonal Self that embraces interconnection.

It is less a matter of creating new concepts inside people, than it is a matter of helping them become aware of sharings and dependencies already present.

As the course continues, we will explore the implications of deep ecology for the classroom, and you will be asked to design an experience or two in which participants learn something about ecology.

I think that no real change takes place without experiences that literally change one's mind. Such experiences are often in our culture dismissed or devalued shortly after they happen. We make our own families uncomfortable when we try to communicate to them our new insights. Sanity, in daily practical terms, simply means predictability.

Change happens mind by mind, heart to heart, and it's slow, at least at first.

But other things are Fast! Population Explosion! The 6th Great extinction!. How can we catch up?

There are snowball effects in many kinds of systems when saturation levels are reached, rather like sudden crystallization of a super-saturated solution. Global warming seems to be ready to snowball right now. Changes in consciousness, or new memes, do suddenly emerge from gestation and spread as wildfire, and that is a hopeful thing. Our societies do not predict these things.

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Three quotes:

Every social transformation ... has rested on a new metaphysical and ideological base; or rather, upon deeper stirrings and intuitions whose rationalized expression takes the form of a new picture of the cosmos and the nature of man. -- Lewis Mumford

... there is reason to hope that the ecology-based revivalist movements of the future will seek to achieve their ends in the true Gandhian tradition. It could be that Deep Ecology, with its ethical and metaphysical preoccupations, might well develop into such a movement. -- Edward Goldsmith

The main hope for changing humanity's present course may lie ... in the development of a world view drawn partly from ecological principles--in the so-called deep ecology movement. -- Paul Ehrlich

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Part Three: How Can We Find Hope?

Where do we find our hope in this world where our ecological footprint equals that of hundreds of Bangladeshis? We are Bigfoot, squashing so much. How do we counter our guilt and despair?

A lot of us sometimes describe ourselves as long-term pessimists, but short-term optimists. This seems to make others comfortable. Pessimism is certainly understandable in this world. Many professed optimists have thought deeply about little, and simply assume that we will “muddle through.” Nowadays, muddling through assumes a technological “fix” (fixation?) that we just haven’t figured out yet. Many people believe there is no limit to human power and understanding. More Dark Enlightenment.

Hopelessness is an escape strategy. It’s even fashionable.

Some of us, especially kids, express hopelessness just to fit in. But the loss of hope in our children is often real and very dangerous as they struggle to grow up in a culture that wants them to remain childish consumers.

The escape is simple: Hopeless = Helpless. Not only is there nothing to be done, there is nothing “I” can do. There is no point to action because there is no possible good result. “I’ll just plug in my iPod.” Tuning in to our gadgets is tuning out our empathy and compassion. Hopelessness is at heart laziness. But enough moralizing, which rarely accomplishes anything.

People intuitively want to be useful, but we don’t care to be told be good.

Daily Hope

I find my daily joy in the gifts that Earth offers me in abundance. She gives me beauty in the large and in the small, her squirrels scold me and make me laugh, she proffers mysteries I cherish, she shows me astonishing intricacy that leaves me in awe, she surprises me with joy. She teaches me, and this gift is often painful learning, but it is a joy delayed. She renews my innocent eye. Joy and hope live in the same breath.

I find long-term hope along several paths.

- (1) **Emergent Properties:** This is very simple and fundamentally important: we don’t know what’s going to happen. We don’t even know when it’s going to snow.

In systems theory we discover “emergent properties” (see Yearning to Be Round #2, Thinking in Wholes.)

All systems (we think) can create emergent properties. Human

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societies and cultures are living systems.

Emergent properties are aspects and functions of systems that emerge from system wholeness. New properties emerge and come into play, and the neat thing is that they cannot be predicted. Sweetness is an emergent property of certain combinations of carbon and hydrogen, and is not predictable from the properties of either element. Our tools for prediction are analytic & reductionist, and these do not work at a system level. In other words, trying to predict about wholes from known parts is impossible. Wholes really are greater than the sum of their parts. They include each relationship of parts within the system. And they birth new properties all the time. Rapidly spread cultural memes are one kind of emergent property.

Who knows what new perceptions and activism will emerge from within existing societies? My intuition is that a “critical mass” of eco-centric perceptions will trigger sudden changes in human perception. My hope is that a positive sea-change in attitudes and actions toward the biosphere will emerge.

- (2) **We must rise in our own Esteem.** We underestimate ourselves. This is a function of our culture of fear and helplessness, which is essentially political manipulation. The culture of fear erodes our own intuitive knowledge; knowing that government responds poorly, we generalize from that to mistrusting each other’s response to crisis. We all know, deep down, that humans “step up” and do what is needful during crises. (Not every person, but the vast majority respond to emergencies with strength and power.) Let’s focus on being attentive in-person to persons responding with strength to what happens in their lives.

We are not helpless. We are routinely conned into feeling adrift and helpless. Mass media’s continual strobe of horrific images is a recent phenomena that damages our spirits. Bad news sells. Market rules. No image is connected or contextualized; every video-bite is awful. We are shown to be weak and confused, at the mercy of politicians, soldiers, and the planet. Chicken Little dominates the weather report. Every snowfall has become a storm. We are universal victims.

Avoid media shrapnel. We confuse raw de-contextualized images with knowledge. We struggle in the midst of what is perfectly named an “information explosion.” Media images are shrapnel. In large doses, they fester in wounded spirits.

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- (3) **Information is not knowledge.** It does not become knowledge until it is coherently linked to other information already linked.

Neither is knowledge wisdom; only when knowledge has been connected through time to human experience and valuing has it a chance of becoming wisdom.

- (4) **We must re-estimate the Wild.** Nature is Resurgent. (See Part 1-C, above) We underestimate the Biosphere.

Do not confuse wildness with wilderness. Wildness is within all lives. The wild is everywhere; it cannot be extinguished. The wild centers every seed. Wilderness is myth and gone, the wild is everywhere. Wilderness is distant, wildness local. Wildness is nothing less than the urge of life to be: the shove of grass blade through the blacktop, the peregrine in the tower, weeds pioneering a landfill, the stubborn patch of brush where kids make forts.

Much deep ecology writing seems quite ignorant of the resurgent power of nature. Life is a force. It expands to fill all possible niches and habitats. Some theorists whose hearts are in the right place are rather ignorant about Nature as more than a vacation experience. So I take some pronouncements of doomed ecosystems with a grain of salt. Life is resilient and has compensating processes triggered by devastation.

- (5) **Engage our urge toward Wholeness** This urge is an immensely positive force: We yearn to be round. We yearn to braid all the disparate strands of our selves into one strong cable and we yearn to perceive this cable reaching out in all directions, into the earth, into the seas of water and of sky. As we discussed above, we need to know we belong. The transpersonal or ecological self or self-made-round can be encouraged to happen, I think, along several lines of possibility:
- a. by wakeful attention to other lives as entities of intrinsic worth and a right to exist.
 - b. by making art in celebration of Nature and celebration of intuited relationships therein, and by Journaling our encounters with other lives.

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- c. by creating and entering communities, by sharing, by mutual support. As Arne Naess points out, “You must find others who feel the same and form circles of friends who give one another confidence and support in living in a way that the majority find ridiculous, naive, stupid and simplistic. But in order to do that, one must already have enough self-confidence to follow one’s intuition.”
- d. by combating biophobias in urbanized people, especially kids:
 - i. composting & growing in school: gardens, restorations of “dead” lots, etc. *Note: see the School Garden Project of the Chicago Schools and the Chicago Botanic Gardens.*
 - ii. caring for and observing micro-wildernesses
 - iii. observing symbioses—deeply perceiving interdependences.
 - iv. making stories/dramas from these experiences.
- e. By regular Re-Earthing (by consciously engaging in trans-personal experiences).
 - 1. Many people benefit from communal Re-Earthing Rituals such as the Council of All Beings.
 - a. Delores LaChappelle, Joanna Macy, John Seed, and more recently, Ruth Rosenheck have developed ceremonial/ritual activities specifically to accomplish re-Earthing in workshop settings
 - 2. Storytelling, mythmaking, dance are strong paths here.
 - 3. Direct sensory observation of other lives (not mediated), is a good empathic path
 - 4. Performing child-like season rituals such as puddle-stamping and mud-play.
 - 5. As you eat and drink, follow the sequence of lives that provide for you, and thank them. (see Bioregionalism)
 - 6. Touching and petting other animals is a powerful path.
 - 7. Speak to other lives, aloud.

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(5) Recognize Who We Are. Children come out of our schools with no clue that their bodies are made of Earth, or that we are the product of very long evolution, or that our bodies are recycled, 100% post-consumer content. Consider these three questions as fundamental curricula-developing inquiries:

Who are we? Where did we come From? What should we do?

Following are a few quotes to clarify waters I may have muddied:

1) Care flows naturally if the “self” is widened and deepened so that protection of free Nature is felt and conceived as protection of ourselves ... Just as we need not morals to make us breathe ... so if your “self” in the wide sense embraces another being, you need no moral exhortation to show care ... You care for yourself without feeling any moral pressure to do it—providing you have not succumbed to a neurosis of some kind, developing self-destructive tendencies, or hating yourself.

Arne Naess

2) What I suggest is the supremacy of environmental realism over environmental ethics as a means of invigorating the environmental movement in the years to come.

If reality is like it is experienced by the ecological self, our behavior naturally and beautifully follows norms of strict environmental ethics ...

[But] when people feel they unselfishly give up, even sacrifice their interest in order to show love for Nature, this is in the long run a treacherous basis for conservation.

Through **identification**, they may come to see their own interest served by conservation, through genuine self-love, love of a deepened and widened self.

—*Arne Naess*

3) What deep ecology directs us toward is neither an environmental ethics nor a minor reform of existing practices. It directs us to develop our own sense of self until it becomes Self, that is, until we realize through deepening ecological sensibilities that each of us forms a union with the natural world, and that protection of the natural world is protection of ourselves. --*Alan Drengson*

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4) It all depends on you and me. If we see the world as a living organism of which we are a part—not the owner, nor the tenant; not even a passenger—we could have a long time ahead of us and our species might survive for its “allotted span.” It is up to us to act personally in a way that is constructive. The present frenzy of agriculture and forestry is a global ecocide as foolish as it would be to act on the notion that our brains are supreme and the cells of other organs expendable. Would we drill wells through our skins to take the blood for its nutrients?

--James Lovelock, scientist

5) This shift [to an emphasis on our “capacity to identify with the larger collective of all beings” is essential to our survival ...precisely because it can serve in lieu of morality and because moralizing is ineffective.

Sermons seldom hinder us from pursuing our self-interest, so we need to be a little more enlightened about what our self-interest is.

It would not occur to me, for example, to exhort you to refrain from cutting off your leg. That wouldn't occur to me or to you, because your leg is part of you.

Well, so are the trees in the Amazon Basin; they are our external lungs. We are just beginning to wake up to that. We are gradually discovering that we are our world.

--Joanna Macy

6) How do we develop a wider self? ... Our Self is that with which we identify. The question then reads: How do we widen identification?

Self-realization cannot develop far without sharing joys and sorrows with others, or more fundamentally, without the development of the narrow ego of the small child into the comprehensive structure of a Self that comprises all human beings. The deep ecology movement takes this a step further and asks for a development such that there is a deep identification of individuals with all life.

... the Self in question is a symbol of identification with an absolutely maximum range of beings.

The ecosophical outlook is developed through an identification so deep that one's own self is no longer adequately delimited by the personal ego or the organism. One experiences oneself to be a genuine part of all life...

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We are not outside the rest of nature and therefore cannot do with it as we please without changing ourselves ... we are a part of the ecosphere just as intimately as we are a part of our own society ... Paleontology reveals that the development of life on earth is an integrated process, despite the steadily increasing diversity and complexity. "Life is fundamentally one."

My concern here is the human capability of identification, the human joy in the identification with the salmon on its way to its spawning grounds, and the sorrow felt upon the thoughtless reduction of the access to such important places. ... When solidarity and loyalty are solidly anchored in identification, they are not experienced as moral demands; they come of themselves." —*Arne Naess*

"Whenever I injure any kind of life I must be quite certain that it is necessary. I must never go beyond the unavoidable, not even in apparently insignificant things. The farmer who has mowed down a thousand flowers in his meadow in order to feed his cows must be careful on his way home not to strike the head off a single flower by the side of the road in idle amusement, for he thereby infringes the law of life without being under the pressure of necessity." --Albert Schweitzer

Avoid causing unnecessary pain. There will be plenty of pain in the world as it is. --Gary Snyder