

## My Second Crack at Deep Ecology

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My first crack at Deep Ecology came in the early 1990s, when I took a leave of absence from my computer career to study mainstream economics and its relationship to our ecological crisis. While scanning the stacks in the university library one day, I ran across *Deep Ecology - Living as if Nature Mattered*, by Bill Devall and George Sessions.

Although the book introduced me to Arne Naess, Gary Snyder, and the movement's other luminaries, most of the snippets it contained were forgettable and soon forgotten. The only thing that remained with me over the years was a quote from Warwick Fox: "... we can make no firm ontological divide in the field of existence: ... there is no bifurcation in reality between the human and the non-human realms."<sup>1</sup>

Deep Ecology slumbered in my brain while I completed my studies and then developed an alternative economic framework based on human needs and natural limits. This slumber was recently broken by criticism from a Deep Ecologist, who chided me for taking a "human-centered" approach to economics. I therefore decided to re-examine the movement to determine if I had indeed succumbed to the demon of anthropocentrism.

After scanning the Web I felt that my best bet for current, in-depth information was a set of essays titled *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century - Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*. George Sessions was the editor, but I figured he wouldn't repeat his earlier misstep, and I wanted to read the 13 essays by Arne Naess included in the collection.

The book turned out to be an excellent buy, greatly enhancing my understanding of Deep Ecology. Sessions even states in the Preface that his earlier work "had serious flaws"<sup>2</sup> - a rare and courageous admission. Let me therefore say: George, all is forgiven, although I had to wade through a lot of incense and New Age music at Vancouver's Banyen Books and Sound to find your tome

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Despite the use of superior source materials this time around, my view of Deep Ecology remains largely unchanged. I still admire its fierce commitment to nature, and I agree that humankind must undergo a paradigm shift to avoid ecological catastrophe. But I have serious doubts about some of the movement's key terms and tenets, and I question its strategy for achieving its goals. I will address these in turn.

My strongest doubt about Deep Ecology relates to its most central concept: "intrinsic value" (including its accepted synonyms - intrinsic worth, inherent worth, etc.)

First, value is commonly understood as a relationship between a subject and an object. One dictionary defines it as "attributed or relative worth, merit, or usefulness."<sup>3</sup> This means there must be someone or something that does the attributing or that defines the relation. In Deep

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Ecology, however, nature simply *has* intrinsic value, with not a subject in sight. This jars the logical mind.

Second, intrinsic value is defined in Deep Ecology as a qualitative concept. Naess states that, "It is not meaningful to speak of *degrees* of intrinsic or inherent value ..."4 For the rest of the world, however, value is quantitative - we assess and compare its various forms every day. This second divergence from common usage appears to confuse those within the movement itself, and certainly puzzles the relative newcomer.

Third, intrinsic value is conceptually superfluous. Deep Ecology uses the term as an ethical imperative that compels humankind to respect both human and non-human nature. This imperative, however, has a straightforward foundation: our compassion for, and appreciation of, our fellow life-forms. Naess states in his seminal 1973 essay that the equal right to live and blossom "... depends in part upon the deep pleasure and satisfaction we receive from close partnership with other forms of life."5 This is a statement about a relationship, not value.

Last, Deep Ecology's definition of "value" prevents many adherents from rationally addressing the world of economics, where the term has several important applications. The most serious problem in this regard relates to Karl Marx. When Marx says "value," many Deep Ecologists evidently think "labor," conclude "anthropocentrism," and summarily dismiss him.

For example, here is Michael E. Zimmerman in a recent issue of *The Trumpeter*, an academic publication dedicated to Deep Ecology:

According to John Locke and Karl Marx, value accrues to natural raw material only when humans mix with it their productive labour. Natural things, then, have no inherent or intrinsic value, but instead their value is determined primarily in terms of their use value, or of the price they fetch on the market.<sup>6</sup>

However, what Marx actually said was that commodities in fact have use-value under capitalism, and that capitalism in fact fails to ascribe exchange-value to nature. These are positive statements about a social reality. Zimmerman uses "value" in a completely different sense from Marx, and essentially states that nature should have value. Thus he radically shifts meanings, and switches from the positive to the normative. To its shame, Deep Ecology readily accepts these distortions.

"Intrinsic value" seems to have much in common with the notion of "natural capital". This term arose early in the modern environmental movement as a handy metaphor, informing people that nature, like capital, should be tapped for its revenue stream rather than being unnecessarily depleted.

As a popular expression, "natural capital" has been highly effective - it has probably raised environmental awareness in millions of people. But environmentalists have gone beyond this limited usage and now employ the term as an analytical concept. As such it is patently unsound. Capital is in the social realm, while nature is not. Different realms require different concepts. Conflating the two spheres has theoretically crippled both ecological economics and the environmental movement as a whole.

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I speculate that something similar happened in Deep Ecology's infancy. "Intrinsic value" was found by the movement's pioneers to express the beauty and sensuous proximity of the natural world. The term had the power to jolt people into a greater awareness of their ecological neighbors. But then, possibly through inertia or the curse of early success, a useful popular expression was transformed into a theoretical linchpin, and the intellectual rot crept in.

My second major doubt about Deep Ecology is its undisciplined use of the term "anthropocentrism," which has two divergent meanings. If humankind is seen as alienated from nature, then an anthropocentric approach to wildlife management or economic policy is disastrous for the natural world. Conversely, if humankind is seen as integrated with nature, anthropocentrism is respectful of the natural world. It all depends on which "anthro" you have in mind when you say "anthropocentrism".

Ecotheologian Thomas Berry describes the alienated side of humankind as follows: "To the industrial entrepreneur, human possession and use is [sic] what activates the true value of any natural object."<sup>7</sup> This characterization of humankind as an exploitive capitalist for whom all value is instrumental to profits appears to be the basis for Deep Ecology's sharply negative interpretation of "anthropocentrism."

Berry also depicts humankind's integrated side:

The survival of hundreds of thousands of species is presently threatened. But since the human survives only within this larger complex of ecosystems, any damage done to other species, or to the other ecosystems, or to the planet itself, eventually affects the human not only in terms of physical well-being but also in every other phase of human intellectual understanding, aesthetic expression, and spiritual self-development.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, a genuine focus on human interests in such an interwoven world carries with it a deep concern for nature. This concern remains instrumental, but the end is human well-being instead of profits, which makes an immense difference. At the extreme - if humankind is seen as completely integrated with nature - the practical distinction between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism disappears entirely. Numerous statements in the Sessions book in fact reflect this perspective.

Because Deep Ecology has not proposed a term for a focus on integrated humankind, I suggest that "human-centric" be adopted for this purpose. "Anthropocentric" should continue to be used, but only in those cases where the focus is on alienated humankind.

If these terms had been in place, I could have asked my critic, who charged me with building a "human-centered" economics, which of the two alternatives he meant. If he had answered "anthropocentric," I could have asked him to substantiate his charge, possibly leading to a productive exchange. As it was, I faced a vague and virtually unanswerable accusation. This is no way to win friends and build a social movement.

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George Sessions outlines Deep Ecology's strategy in the opening lines of his Preface: "[Deep Ecology's] main concern has been to bring about a major paradigm shift - a shift in perception, values, and lifestyles - as a basis for redirecting the ecologically destructive path of modern industrial growth societies."<sup>9</sup> An alternative formulation is that Deep Ecology wants to avert ecological disaster by replacing the anthropocentric philosophy of Western civilization with an ecocentric version, using intuitive concepts expressed in popular language.

Just as the debate about global warming is over for rational people, there is no doubt that Deep Ecology's goal is correct. It is obvious to anyone with even minimal ecological awareness that humankind's environmental impact on the planet must drastically decline. The only question is whether Deep Ecology's emphasis on a popular philosophical transformation is the most effective way to achieve this end.

To some degree, the approach probably has been successful. As with "natural capital," I suspect that "intrinsic value" and "ecocentrism" have instigated a profound ethical reorientation in a significant number of people. Let's assume this is true, count it on the plus side, and examine the negatives.

A relatively minor strategic problem is Deep Ecology's popular orientation, which makes it a slippery beast intellectually. Deep Ecology slides easily from the logic of philosophy to the intuitions of ecosophy, like Arne Naess skiing at Tvergastein. Whenever I think I have Deep Ecology figured out conceptually, up pops Arne to tell me that its key concepts are intuitive and unprovable. And just when I feel myself merging with Deep Ecology's spiritual flow, there's Arne again, telling me that the real purpose of the movement is to think deeply and clearly. In the end, you just have to believe, but that's not my style, and it's probably not the style of many other thinkers either.

A more fundamental strategic issue is that Deep Ecology shares a false assumption with other environmentalists: that a correct worldview is a sufficient basis for correct policies. A correct worldview, however, only allows us to recognize that the current patterns of production and consumption are pathological. It does not provide us with the analytical tools to determine which new patterns will create a sustainable future. For that, an economic logic is required. Deep Ecology's failure to acknowledge this leaves a gaping hole in its strategic vision. This failure is puzzling because Naess frequently alludes to the potential role of economic thought.

In "The Deep Ecological Movement," for example, Naess says:

The slogan of 'non-interference' does not imply that humans should not modify some ecosystems, as do other species. Humans have modified the earth over their entire history and will probably continue to do so. At issue is the *nature and extent* of such interference.<sup>10</sup>

This statement points directly to the need for an economic logic, which is the *only* way to determine the nature and justifiable extent of human interference in ecosystems. My reference here is not to mainstream economics, but to a new framework that defines human value, human cost, and natural limits, and then establishes optimal economic behavior for humankind.

Later in the same essay, Naess says: "The question arises: to what extent does an increase in production and consumption foster ultimate human values? To what extent does it satisfy vital

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needs, locally or globally?"<sup>11</sup> Again, the correct questions are all here, but they are crying out for an economics to help answer them.

In "The Third World, Wilderness, and Deep Ecology," Naess states,

Unflinching opposition to the cutting down of *any* trees, or to the establishment of *any* new human settlements in any wilderness *what so ever* is a preposterous idea presumably held by no one. The real issue here for the Third World is: How much wilderness and wildlife habitat is it acceptable to continue to modify and destroy, and for what purposes?<sup>12</sup>

Note that here again we are faced with quantitative questions. As I have pointed out, "intrinsic value" in Deep Ecology is a qualitative concept, and therefore cannot help us derive quantitative answers.

While Naess clearly recognizes the need for an economic logic, he appears to be virtually alone in this. The movement in general is silent on economics, although it does issue the occasional dismissive comment, like this one by Gary Snyder: "Economics must be seen as a small sub-branch of Ecology ...".<sup>13</sup> This advice, if followed, would eliminate from consideration the uniquely human aspects of production and consumption - a profoundly misguided stance that sharply contradicts the views of Naess and others.

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Despite my misgivings about Deep Ecology, I believe it can play a useful role in humankind's difficult transition to a sustainable future for all species. Let me therefore close by summarizing my suggestions for strengthening this role.

1. Retain the notion of "intrinsic value." Although conceptually untenable, it has popular appeal and intuitive impact.
2. Change the term from "intrinsic value" to "intrinsic worth" or "inherent worth." "Value" must be reserved for economic thought to avoid confusion.
3. Retain "ecocentric," based on the same considerations as "intrinsic value."
4. Replace the poorly-defined "anthropocentric" with three well-defined terms:
  - a. "Human-centered": focused on human interests, without reference to humankind's relationship with nature.
  - b. "Human-centric": focused on the interests of humankind seen as integrated with nature.
  - c. "Anthropocentric": focused on the interests of humankind seen as alienated from nature.
5. Address economic thought head-on. Pick up the thread from Arne Naess and develop the required concepts and analytical methods. My own work in this area can be found on my website: [needsandlimits.org](http://needsandlimits.org).

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6. Re-examine Marx. It is true that he was committed to endless material growth, and Deep Ecology correctly rejects this side of his thought. But this growth obsession was part of his worldview, which is distinct from his penetrating analysis of capitalism. And capitalism - as Deep Ecologists rarely acknowledge - is at the core of the civilization we must now transcend.

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## **Notes**

1 Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology - Living as if nature mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 66.

2 George Sessions, *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century - Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1995), xiv.

3 *The Random House College Dictionary, Revised Edition* (Random House: 1984)

4 Arne Naess, *Equality, Sameness, and Rights* (Sessions, 223). Emphasis in original.

5 Arne Naess, *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movements - a summary* (Sessions, 152).

6 Michael E. Zimmerman, "Humanity's Relation to Gaia: Part of the Whole, or Member of the Community?" *The Trumpeter*, Vol. 20, no 1 (2004)

7 Thomas Berry, *The Viable Human* (Sessions, 12)

8 Berry (Sessions, 11)

9 Sessions, ix

10 Arne Naess, *The Deep Ecological Movement* (Sessions, 69). Emphasis in original.

11 Naess (Sessions, 72)

12 Arne Naess, *The Third World, Wilderness, and Deep Ecology*, (Sessions, 401). Emphasis in original.

13 Gary Snyder, *Four Changes* (Sessions, 146)