

Deep Ecology and the Culture of Death

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ABSTRACT

Deep Ecology is a movement that places more value on the ecological system than on human beings. It goes far beyond animal advocacy in that it gives our species “no special consideration” in any conflict with other species. In its platform, Deep Ecology declares that “the flourishing of non-human life” requires a “substantial decrease” in human population, a goal that its followers plan to achieve by a revolution in politics, education, philosophy, and religion. The movement fosters neo-pagan rituals of earth-worship and a strange new morality, according to which the “Self-realized: individual may protect the ecosystem against other human beings in “Self-defense,” having come to see the ecosystem as simply an extension of his or her own flesh.

DEEP ECOLOGY, a movement launched by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1972, is the most radical branch of ecology. Naess coined the name *deep ecology*,¹ and his principles still prevail in the movement. Contrasting themselves to “shallow” ecologists concerned with the depleting of resources and pollution, deep ecologists aim at nothing less than a revolution in world-views for the sake of the environment, a fundamental change in religion, morality, and social institutions.²

The eight-point platform devised by Naess himself and his chief American exponent George Sessions in 1984 is supposed to contain the

¹ His major work, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* was not available in English until 1989.

² “Introduction,” *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. Eric Katz, Andrew Light and David Rothenberg (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. ix. Hereafter cited as *Beneath the Surface*.

chief principles of deep ecology, but in fact it does not. Eric Katz observes that Naess formulated this platform in a “deliberately ambiguous” way so as not to “alienate potential supporters.” Besides this, several principles that Naess had previously laid down in a 1972 formulation—such as Self-realization—are not even mentioned in the eight points, although they remain the movement’s “core doctrines.” They were left out to achieve “ideological consensus,” Katz says, but their absence from the platform “must not blind us to the fact that these are crucial features of the deep ecology position as it appears in almost all published discussions.”³ Thus, there is one version of deep ecology for the public at large and quite another for the initiates. Richard Sylvan criticizes deep ecology for its “murkiness” and “confusion,”⁴ but this obfuscation appears to be a strategy.

Even so, the movement has been defined. First and foremost, deep ecologists reject anthropocentrism, the world-view predominant in the West, according to which humans alone have an irreducible value because they are made in the image of God and have an immortal destiny. Deep ecologists reject such “species essentialism,”⁵ that is to say, they hold that humans are not basically different from the material world around them. For them, nature is first and foremost, while humans, far from having any dominion or even stewardship, are simply included in nature alongside everything else. This is called “ecocentrism”—the view that the ecological system as a whole has more value than the individual beings contained in it. As Marc Fellenz put it,

the ecocentrist can coherently argue that an endangered plant species...has a direct

³ Eric Katz, “Against the Inevitability of Anthropocentrism” in *Beneath the Surface*, pp. 18, 24-25.

⁴ William Grey, “A Critique of Deep Green Theory” in *Beneath the Surface*, p. 50.

⁵ Species essentialism is the “ontological separation of humanity from the rest of the natural world,” but deep ecologists believe that Darwin, by his evolutionary theory, has proven that animals “species” do not have essential natures that separate them from each other and from human beings. See Marc R. Fellenz, *The Moral Menagerie: Philosophy and Animal Rights* (Urbana and Chicago IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2007), p. 37.

claim to moral attention, and that the culling of an overabundant mammalian species in the same ecosystem may not only be morally justifiable, but obligatory to the extent that it would serve the integrity of the biotic community.⁶

That “overabundant mammalian species” might someday be us! He adds that deep ecologists go well beyond animal advocates in producing an impartial criterion by which conflicts between humans and animals can be resolved. This criterion, which offers “no special consideration to the interests and lives of rational, sentient, verbal *Homo sapiens*,” is a far “stronger critique of traditional humanism” than animal advocacy ever was.⁷

Deep ecologists tend to be pantheists. As Michael Zimmerman explains, they look to “neopagan religions for spiritual guidance in developing a nondomineering spiritual attitude toward nature.”⁸ In addition to giving the ecosystem “intrinsic value,” they regard it as a “divinity that is itself under siege,” and so they declare that we are “called” to both to “obey” its teachings and to “save it from ourselves.”⁹ In claiming to make common cause with Eastern religions, deep ecologists ignore the fact that those religions regard the material world as an illusion from which the human soul must strive to escape. Instead, deep ecologists see the material world as their be-all and end-all, while bitterly blaming the present environmental disaster on Christianity,¹⁰ precisely because this

⁶ Fellenz, *Moral Menagerie*, p. 163.

⁷ Fellenz, *Moral Menagerie*, pp. 162.

⁸ Michael E. Zimmerman, “Possible Political Problems of Earth-Based Religiosity” in *Beneath the Surface*, p. 169.

⁹ Roger Gottlieb, “Spiritual Deep Ecology and World Religions” in *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Grounds*, ed. David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2001), p. 31. Hereafter cited as *Deep Ecology*.

¹⁰ Lyn White is usually cited as the one who first “identified Christianity as an important foundation of the destructive and exploitative relations with nature in the West.” See Cecil Jackson, “Gender, Nature and Trouble with Anti-Dualism” in *Sacred Custodians of the Earth?: Women, Spirituality and the Environment*, ed. Elaine Low and Soraya Tremayne (New York NY and Oxford UK: Berghahn Books, 2001), p. 25.

religion is theocentric, offers an otherworldly salvation, and gives humans the stewardship of the natural world. To replace the Christian worship of the transcendent God, the radical ecologists invent rituals to honor earth, to show their “interdependence with the natural world,” and to “express a kind of formalized, collective contrition for our ecological sins.”¹¹

DEEP ECOLOGY AND POPULATION CONTROL

In the platform co-authored by Arne Naess and George Sessions, we find the following, startling statement related to population control:

The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.¹²

Note the chilling phrase *a substantial decrease of the human population*. The term *substantial* means to a *large degree*. Does this imply half, or even two-thirds of the world’s population? Note the next statement as well, that non-human life today *requires* such an ample *decrease* in human numbers. The word *requires* implies that the speedy culling of our mammalian species is a matter beyond dispute.

These two sentences alone expose the dark heart of deep ecology. The goal of the movement is not just zero population growth, but a serious decline in the number of people on the planet. That this point was left in the public platform when other controversial principles were taken out for the sake of consensus reveals how non-controversial among certain classes is the desire to see the world’s population plummet.

How can such a substantial decrease be accomplished? Deep ecologists intend to bring it about, Eric Katz explains, by a profound change in “economics, technology and science, politics, education, philosophy, and religion.” All these facets of life “must be reoriented so that they can exist in harmony with the developing processes and life-

¹¹ “Introduction,” *Beneath the Surface*, p. x.

¹² This is principle #5. The entire 1984 platform of deep ecology, with its eight principles, is found in the “Introduction” to *Beneath the Surface*.

forms of the natural world.”¹³ What they hope for, then, is a wholesale revolution. If they ever come to power, they hope to alter the very foundations of society for the sake of the ecosystem. Humans are to be re-educated and circumscribed by laws so as to give intrinsic value, not to their children first—for perhaps, by then, such a preference will be condemned as the crime of anthropocentrism—but to rivers, watersheds, landscapes, and ecosystems.

According to Jonathan Maskit, an expert on deep ecology, Naess taught that the present environmental crisis is chiefly one of “population and economics.” It is, therefore, “a political problem.” Since the main principle of deep ecology (though it is missing from the platform) is that the ego-self is only a part of the world-Self, and since most people in the West do not believe this, deep ecologists have a big job ahead of them of persuading people to think like them and enacting laws to change their behavior.

And this is where politics becomes “the real heart of Naess’s deep ecology.”¹⁴ Maskit explains that Naess wanted both “personal change and political change” to occur at the same time, because persuading people to think in ecocentric terms does not necessarily change their behavior: “Policy changes are therefore needed to force even those who ‘know better’ to behave in a way commensurate with their beliefs.” Note the words *force* and *even those* in the last sentence. All people are to be *forced* to behave as if they believed they were merely part of nature, *even those* who already accept ecocentrism but whose behavior has not caught up with their conviction. Government “policies” are to serve as an “externalized will” in place of “the will that we don’t have,” and thus to “force us to act as we would if we were fully realized beings.” Again, note the use of the word *force* in this last sentence: Maskit says that policies can *force* everyone to conform, regardless of their interior views. What room will be left for free will? Virtually none. The belief that we are just part of nature, this scholar concludes, “can help motivate people to fight for policies they might not otherwise support. And those policies can

¹³ “Against the Inevitability,” *Beneath the Surface*, p. 21.

¹⁴ “Deep Ecology and Desire: On Naess and the Problem of Consumption” in *Beneath the Surface*, p. 225.

function, at least in part, to change behaviors in ways that we can support.”¹⁵ This is hardly democracy in action.

Humans are to be simultaneously coaxed and compelled, then, to do what nature *requires*—namely, bring about a *substantial decrease* in their own numbers. Even so, deep ecologists worry that a large population decrease might cause some self-congratulation and backsliding: “We can well imagine human population dropping, levels of consumption doing likewise, and so on, and this leading to an inability to continue seeing environmental problems as serious.”¹⁶ So, when will populations fall so low that deep ecologists will finally consider the environment safe from depredation and breathe a sigh of relief?

It seems that they will not be perfectly happy till our numbers reach the level of the Neolithic or upper-Paleolithic age, a time when the world was overrun with wild animals. Little wonder they are accused of “misanthropy.” Mark Fellenz remarks that deep ecologists remind him “of Nietzsche’s famous diagnosis of man as a disease on the earth’s skin.”¹⁷ Indeed, they not only condemn the use of animals for food and science, but even question the domestication of animals, without which very few people on earth could be fed.

Deep ecologist Paul Shepard idealizes the late Pleistocene, when small bands of humans roamed the earth as hunter-gatherers. The summons “Back to the Pleistocene!” was first heard in Gary Snyder’s *Turtle Island*,¹⁸ but while Snyder remains to this day a critic of modern agriculture, he has since accepted small-scale, indigenous farming. Marc Fellenz likewise glorifies the Paleolithic hunter ancient and modern by pointing to the “metamorphic ecstasis” that occurs in the sun-dance of the Oglala of North America as they “cut and impale themselves while dressed as various animals.” Such transformations into “animality,” he says, beautifully collapse the boundaries between culture and nature. It is commonplace among deep ecologists to “trace the primordial fall from a

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 225-26.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁷ *Moral Menagerie*, p. 162.

¹⁸ Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York NY: New Directions, 1974).

foraging paradise to agriculture,” or to blame the loss of biological diversity on the domestications of the Neolithic age.¹⁹ One may well ask, how many humans could survive on this planet if the only source of food were from hunting or from small-scale, indigenous farming? What would happen to urban populations?

Michael Zimmerman has argued persuasively that deep ecology resembles German National Socialism of the 1930s, which was also a “neo-pagan revival and a radical ‘green’ movement.” The Nazis, too, castigated Christianity as “nature-hating, life-despising, and other-worldly,” embraced a “perverted religion of nature,” and rejected the “progressive political ideologies” of socialism and liberalism for carrying on, albeit in secular form, the Christian view of a divine purpose unfolding itself in history. The Nazis made the same claim that humans were merely part of “the great web of life,” and their slogan “Blood and Soil” was a forerunner the deep ecologists’ bioregionalism. Zimmerman observes that even if they used modern technology, the Nazis were “premodern” in their “social and cultural orientation.”²⁰

Other scholars, too, mention the Nazis’ “green dimension,” their embrace of mystical neo-paganism, and their draconian laws to protect wildlife. Hitler, a vegetarian, believed in the intrinsic value of the natural world, castigated the destruction of nature wrought by industry, and wanted to protect the German wilderness.²¹

When to this eerie similarity to the Nazis we add the deep ecologists’ plan to bring about a *substantial decrease* in human population, it becomes clear that this radical movement is in the vanguard of the culture

¹⁹ Fellenz, *Moral Menagerie*, pp. 16-17.

²⁰ Michael E. Zimmerman, “Possible Political Problems of Earth-Based Religiosity” in *Beneath the Surface*, pp. 170-72; and Zimmerman, “Ken Wilber’s Critique of Ecological Spirituality” in *Deep Ecology*, p. 246. Two other important works dealing with this topic are Robert Pois, *National Socialism and the Religion of Nature* (London UK: Croom Helm, 1986), and Michael E. Zimmerman, “Ecofascism: A Threat to American Environmentalism?” in *The Ecological Community*, ed. Roger Gottlieb (New York NY: Routledge, 1996), pp. 229-54.

²¹ Roger Gottlieb, “Spiritual Deep Ecology” in *Deep Ecology*, pp. 25-26; Jackson, “Gender, Nature” in *Sacred Custodians*, p. 26.

of death. As John Cobb observes, deep ecologists “for the most part do not attend to the question of individual animal suffering. Their concern for the health of the biosystem leads them to accept animal suffering as the natural course of things.... Their concern is directed chiefly to the wild and to how human beings rightly fit into the order of the wild.”²² Marc Fellenz adds that for deep ecologists “the enormous mortality which removes the majority of the newborn every year from nearly every species” is simply one of the “value-neutral inevitabilities in the natural world.” Suffering is of no importance from their impartial ecosystem-favoring viewpoint.²³

DEEP ECOLOGY AND THE END OF MORALITY

Arne Naess has repeatedly said that he is “not interested in ethics” but rather in offering a “new way of seeing the world.”²⁴ This new way is called “Self-realization,” and it is the “fundamental norm” of deep ecology, the “point” around which all his ideas “coalesce.” Even so, it has been left out of the eight-point platform. Self-realization means that a person identifies totally with the non-human world. Once this identification is attained, Naess declares, it “eliminates the need for a system of moral obligation.”²⁵

Although we usually think of ourselves as experiencing the world, deep ecologists argue that the world is experiencing itself. They claim that all things, including trees and rocks, experience each other in a web of relations. Naess sees “organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations,”²⁶ and claims that “intuition” is what makes us realize a world that sees us “before we see it,” a world that is “alive,” “self-aware,” and full of strange “presences” like smiling trees, crying

²² John B. Cobb Jr., “Protestant Theology and Deep Ecology” in *Deep Ecology*, p. 226. He adds that, “Interest in the ‘humane’ treatment of domesticated animals seems to many deep ecologists to be sentimental.”

²³ Fellenz, *Moral Menagerie*, p. 164.

²⁴ Deane Curtin, “A State of Mind Like Water: Ecosophy T and the Buddhist Traditions,” *Beneath the Surface*, p. 264.

²⁵ Katz, “Against the Inevitability,” *Beneath the Surface*, pp. 26-27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

rocks and “birds conferring on the future of the planet.”²⁷

But what is the political purpose of Self-realization? Deep ecologists explain that when we achieve the larger “Self”—with a capital “S”—one that incorporates the ecosystem, we begin to “defend the planet in Self-defense, we preserve natural processes and entities as an expression of our shared interests with the rest of creation.”²⁸ Once we realize that protecting the ecosystem is *Self-defense*, there is no need for a system of morality. Our basic obligation now is to protect the natural world spontaneously, as if we were shielding our flesh from a lethal attack. We can act spontaneously out of a sense of urgency, because Self-defense carries within it its own moral justification. There is no need for weighing and considering before acting, or for reflection and contrition afterwards. As a Self-realized ecologist, Bill Devall calls it his “right” to defend a nature that “has become *part of my body*.”²⁹

When traditional morality has been subsumed into deep ecology’s Self-realization and Self-defense of nature, the culture of death will surely rule the earth. What criminal law will be able to punish infanticide if the action was taken in so-called Self-defense of the ecosystem? Here we see how anarchic deep ecology may come to be in practice. For should the doctrine of Self-defense be widely propagated, violent conflicts would erupt everywhere on behalf of the ecosystem. Fanatics would claim that trees or streams were part of their own bodies. Human life would be of little value to these zealots who even now believe that nature *requires* a *substantial decrease* in the size of our population and who see no need for a system of morality like the Ten Commandments.

According to deep ecology, once Self-realization is achieved, the Self will *do* what the Self *is*. Ethics will follow from ontology. The Self will no longer act because of “what it believes, values, understands, or weighs in the balance of moral and other considerations.” In fact, “it will *no*

²⁷ David Rothenberg, “No World but in Things: The Poetry of Naess’s Concrete Contents” in *Beneath the Surface*, pp. 152-57.

²⁸ Katz, “Against the Inevitability,” *Beneath the Surface*, p. 26.

²⁹ Mathew Humphrey, “Ontological Determinism and Deep Ecology: Evading the Moral Questions?” in *Beneath the Surface*, pp. 91, 96. Humphrey offers an excellent critique of deep ecology.

longer be possible for us to injure nature wantonly, as this would mean injuring an integral part of ourselves.”³⁰ Note that it will be *impossible* for us to harm nature. How could that be without universal lobotomy or a totalitarian regime?

We contemplate the full meaning of Naess’s Self-realization when we read Val Plumwood’s shocking celebration of *traitors* to the human race. Evidently she has already achieved Self-realization, because Plumwood has no qualms about praising those who assume “traitorous identities” by identifying with non-humans against the human race:

Traitorous kinds of human identity involve a revised conception of the self and its relation to the nonhuman other, opposition to oppressive practices, and the relinquishment and critique of cultural allegiances to the dominance of the human species and its bonding against nonhumans, in the same way that male feminism requires abandonment and critique of male bonding as the kind of male solidarity which defines itself in opposition to the feminine or to women and of the ideology of male supremacy.³¹

Plumwood honors these traitors to the human race because they “do not flinch from contact with the pain of oppressed others.” She transforms the divine commandment, Love thy neighbor as thyself, into the deep-ecological commandment: Hate thy neighbor as thyself for the sake of the nonhuman world.

ANTI-CHRISTIAN ECOLOGY AND THE CULTURE OF DEATH

Ever since Lyn White first attacked Christianity as the guilty party in the West’s domination of nature,³² the attacks have not ceased. Deep ecologists have kept insisting that Christianity fostered “environmentally destructive behavior” by desacralizing the earth. In their quest for an alternative belief, they have gone after “esoteric religious traditions and remnant foraging societies.” An early example is Gary Snyder, who

³⁰ Ibid., p. 98.

³¹ Val Plumwood, “Deep Ecology, Deep Pockets, and Deep Problems: A Feminist Ecosocialist Analysis” in *Beneath the Surface*, p. 69.

³² “Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* (10 March 1967): 155.

declares that he prefers to traditional Christianity the beliefs of “Gnostics, hip Marxists, Teilhard de Chardin Catholics, Druids, Taoists, Biologists, Witches, Yogins, Bhikkus, Quakers, Sufis, Tibetans, Zens, Shamans, Bushmen, American Indians, Polynesians, Anarchists, [and] Alchemists.” Likewise, Bill Devall has called for the creation of new rituals, “earth bonding processes—which worked so well for primal peoples.” He praises Native Americans, New Agers, and ecopsychology subcultures for bringing about “earth-beneficent consciousness change.” Rituals have been designed “to evoke and deepen feelings of connection to a sacred Earth.”³³

Just as deep ecologists prostrate themselves before the divinity of the natural world, so ecofeminists revive the cult of the earth-goddess. In her witty critique of ecofeminism, Cecile Jackson reveals that goddess-worshiping cultures were far from being as peaceful and nurturing as these feminists imagine. In reality, they were consistently engaged in human sacrifice. One of her examples is from ancient Egypt, where the cult of the earth-goddess demanded that hundreds of Egyptian women be buried alive. Amazingly, Jackson reveals that this monstrous human sacrifice has its modern defender in Joseph Campbell, who argues (in *Masks of God*) very much in the style of a deep ecologist. Ignoring the great suffering revealed in the postures of the Egyptian women’s corpses, Campbell argues that

these sacrifices were not properly, in fact, sacrifices at all; that is to say they were not particular beings.... They were parts only of a larger whole; and it was only by virtue of their absolute submission to that in its unalterable categorical imperative that they were anything at all.³⁴

Note that Campbell says they were *not particular beings*. This is exactly how the culture of death today presents the unborn baby who is literally torn apart in the womb. Eventually, if earth-adoring deep ecologists come to power, adults as well as infants may be unable to prove they are *particular beings*, rather than merely part of an overabundant mammalian

³³ Bron Taylor, “Deep Ecology” in *Beneath the Surface*, p. 271. See also n9.

³⁴ “Gender, Nature” in *Sacred Custodians*, pp. 32-33, and n59.

herd needing to be culled for the sake of a specific ecosystem. As Marc Fellenz puts it, “by subordinating both human and animal to the ecocentric criterion,” deep ecology allows “for the possibility that nonhuman interests ought to prevail for the sake of a given ecosystem’s integrity.”³⁵ Yes, not *might prevail*, but *ought to prevail*. So-called Self-defense will then be the only morality.

Deep ecologists like Bill Devall, George Sessions and Paul Shepard believe that ecocentrism requires not just reverence for the wilderness, but an “unleashing of the animality in ourselves.” Accordingly, if these radicals should seize power, we can expect, as Fellenz says, that the “consummate embodiments of humanity” will finally emerge from “outside the process of civilization altogether.”³⁶ As in Revelation 13: “I saw a beast rising out of the sea....”

³⁵ Fellenz, *Moral Menagerie*, p. 167.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 204.