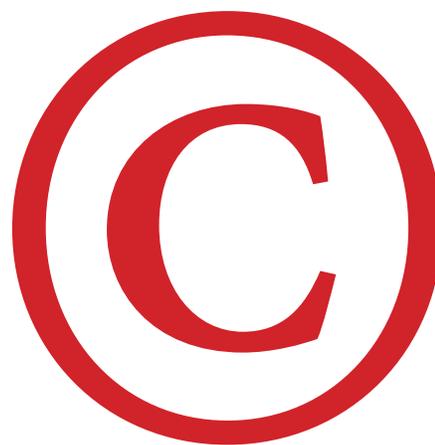


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*Always the Mountains*, by David Rothenberg. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002. 281 pages.

## Starting From Personal Experience

David Rothenberg's *Always the Mountains* explores the human relationship to nature

REVIEWED BY  
DAVID KELLER

A central theme of the Western tradition (that is, the cultural tradition with roots in ancient Greek society, extending through the Roman empire into Europe and beyond) is the uniqueness of humanity in contrast to nature. The Greeks saw the civilization they created as absolutely distinct from the chaos of nature outside the city wall.

Yet humans are inextricably linked with nature. We share the same double helix structure of DNA with all other organisms, from bacteria to bears.

Philosopher, musician, and world traveler David Rothenberg uses this complex and perplexing human/nature dynamic as the organizing theme of his excellent new collection of 18 essays and one poem, *Always the Mountains*.

Although Rothenberg is a professor of philosophy, his goal has never been to add lines to his résumé with the titles of dry articles published in academic journals. To the benefit of his readers, Rothenberg reaches a wider audience through fluid prose.

Most environmental philosophers attempt to discern the human place in nature by defining terms with analytic precision. Rothenberg rejects this approach. For him, concepts central to environmental philosophy — 'culture,' 'humanity,' 'technology,' 'nature,' 'wilderness' are interlinked and vary relative to one another, making it impossible to define them individually and statically. For example, we identify ourselves by our ability to transform nature using technology; nature is the context or class of things not manipulable by humans, so the human and the natural vary according to the state of technology.

Rothenberg asks the question: how does nature present itself in human experience? Subjective experience is the starting point for environmental philosophy. An admitted bibliophile, Rothenberg uses personal experience — hiking Mounts Monadnock and Katahdin, traversing Nepal, savoring a sunset from the Brooklyn Promenade, working on a book in Oslo, snowshoeing in the Catskills, riding a bus in Boulder, looking at the hills surrounding his home on the

Hudson River — as a springboard for meditations on the meaning of thinkers as diverse as Japanese Zen master Dogen, German philosopher Immanuel Kant, Italian Renaissance humanist Petrarch, Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi, American Romantic Henry David Thoreau, composer John Cage, even the cantankerous Edward Abbey.

Between college and graduate school, Rothenberg lived in Norway and studied with philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess, who is the founder of the life-centered environmental philosophy known as "deep ecology." Deep ecology asserts that through a psychological process of self-awakening, one comes to understand that humans are ecologically-interconnected with the rest of the biosphere.

Since subjective experience involves one's upbringing, "nature" is always seen through a cultural lens. Our nomadic forebears may not have even had the concept "nature," as they were always in nature. There was no non-nature, no wilderness, from which they separated themselves. Perhaps it was with the advent of agriculture and the sedentary lifestyle that these notions were invented.

Rothenberg dwells on the relativity of the meaning of nature, but he still believes that there is some objectively real thing out there called "nature." In this sense he disagrees with historian William Cronon's well-known contention that nature is nothing more than a cultural artifact.

Utah readers will especially enjoy Rothenberg's essay on Ed Abbey. Though Abbey belittled the academy, Rothenberg points out the deep philosophical undercurrents in Abbey's writing. Like Socrates, Abbey challenged each of us to follow our own paths, never his or anyone else's.

The human place in nature is difficult to locate with precision, as we are at once similar and dissimilar with our nonhuman counterparts. The task of comprehending the human/nature dynamic is as fun as it is daunting. If you love to ponder our subtly nuanced relationships with all that surrounds us, this book is for you. ♦

David R. Keller, Ph.D. is an assistant vice president and professor of Philosophy at Utah Valley State College.

# Enviro News From Around

## Tony Tony Tony!

In a speech comparing the danger of environmental degradation to the threat of terrorism, British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Feb. 24 outlined a sweeping plan to combat global warming. Blair called on his country, the European Union, and would-be E.U. members in Eastern Europe to cut carbon dioxide emissions 60% by 2050. That figure, which radically exceeds the one in the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, is the one scientists say could save the planet from the most dire consequences of the greenhouse effect. In his speech, Blair also criticized President Bush for backing out of Kyoto and failing to propose a meaningful alternative, and he promised to maintain pressure on the U.S. and other industrialized nations to cut emissions. Environmentalists praised the prime minister's vision, but also said it was long on rhetoric and short on concrete policy proposals.

London Guardian, Paul Brown, 25 Feb 2003

## Afghan Wetlands Gone Dry

Afghanistan's most significant wetland area is now almost as dry as a bone, according to the United Nations Environment Programme. Satellite imagery shows that 99% of the Sistan wetlands have dried out since 1998. Its main source of water, the Helmand River, has been flowing at far below normal levels. Alluding to their many years of war and violence, an Afghan official says research by UNEP "makes it clear how conflict causes environmental destruction," adding that "continued environmental depletion and scarcity of natural resources will cause further conflict" unless stronger systems of environmental management are put into place.

BBC News, Alex Kirby, 07 Feb 2003

## Lofty Language on Fuel Cells

President Bush has tried out several neat-o gadgets powered by hydrogen fuel cells (a video camera and cell phone, among others) and reinforced the lofty language of his State of the Union speech, saying that he would ask Congress to spend \$1.2 billion on "a new national commitment to take fuel-cell cars from the laboratory to the showroom." Enviro and Democratic presidential candidates say the administration's plan is a crock: Fuel-cell cars won't be clean unless the hydrogen they run on is generated by renewable energy, rather than from fossil fuels; the timeframe of the administration's plan is also too liberal. In the meantime, inefficient, polluting cars and SUVs will continue to fill the roadways. Finally, critics note that the government already has its hands on \$400 million of the \$1.2 billion trumpeted by Bush, so his proposal is far less grand than it appears.

Washington Post, Dana Milbank, 07 Feb 2003. San Francisco Chronicle, Associated Press, H. Josef Hebert, 06 Feb 2003

## Go Mitt!

Massachusetts is sticking to its guns on clean air, Gov. Mitt Romney (R) announced last month. The state refused to extend a deadline for heavily polluting power plants to reduce their emissions, meaning they'll have to clean up their acts by 2004. In 2001, then-acting Gov. Jane Swift (R) imposed the deadline on the state's so-called Filthy Five power plants, ordering them to reduce emissions of nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide by 50%. Since then, the owner of one plant, Salem Harbor, has pressured the state to delay the requirement; the state Department of Environmental Protection seemed ready to concede. But in a surprise development that is cheering environmental and health advocates, Romney stuck to the earlier deadline. He blamed Salem Harbor for 53 premature deaths, 570 emergency room visits,

and 14,400 asthma attacks each year.

Boston Globe, Peter Howe, 06 Feb 2003. ; Forbes.com, Reuters, 06 Feb 2003

## Military Might What?

After failing last year to wrest from Congress a wholesale exemption from many environmental laws, the Pentagon is trying to rally public support for its campaign this year. The Defense Department says that laws such as the Endangered Species Act have interfered with training and other programs in the past. It's a hassle to have to worry about the well-being of critters and ecosystems, the argument goes. At an environmental forum at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C., John Keane, a top Army official, said it was hard to proceed with adequate training exercises on military bases because the "Army hosts 170 federally endangered species on 94 installations." Greenies contend that enviro laws aren't preventing the military from meeting its goals; they would prefer that the Pentagon seek exemptions on a case-by-case basis, not through a blanket exception. Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.) seems to agree: "Using the threat of 9/11 and Al Qaeda to get unprecedented environmental immunity is despicable."

New York Times, Katharine Q. Seelye, 06 Feb 2003

## Let's Pause to Ponder Run-off

Stormwater runoff flowing into restored Seattle-area creeks and rivers appears to be killing salmon, according to a groundbreaking study by the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service; 88% of coho salmon studied last fall died within hours of swimming into a stream that was being inundated by runoff. Rainwater pours off streets, roofs, and parking lots into the waterways, carrying with it oil, grease, pesticides, and loads of other pollutants. The study suggests that federal efforts to protect salmon and return higher numbers of them to rivers and creeks in the Puget Sound region will face even more challenges than initially anticipated.

Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Lisa Stiffler and Robert McClure, 06 Feb 2003

## Buy Macs! They Last Longer!

It's likely that the computer you're using right now will one day end up in China contributing to a mounting toxic nightmare. Towns along China's southeastern coast have become dumping grounds for obsolete computers and other electronic equipment sent from the U.S., Europe, and Japan for "recycling." Entire communities, children included, make meager livings by picking apart the technological waste, separating out metals, glass, and plastics in unsafe and unregulated conditions, at no small cost to their health and the local environment. Rivers and soil in these communities have soaked up lead, mercury, and numerous carcinogenic toxics, and the local people are suffering from high levels of infant mortality, birth defects, tuberculosis, blood diseases, and respiratory problems. More than 40 million computers became obsolete in the U.S. in 2001, and the numbers keep rising. Up to 80% of the computers that U.S. consumers give to recyclers get shipped to Asia for dismantling.

Washington Post, Peter S. Goodman, 24 Feb 03

## Spaniards Know How to Rally

Hundreds of thousands of Spanish citizens hit the streets of Madrid on Sunday to protest the national government's poor handling of the Prestige oil tanker spill, which has been labeled the worst environmental disaster in the country's history. Hundreds of chartered buses brought in protesters from Galicia, the region whose environment and economy have

# the World

BY GRISTMAGAZINE.COM

been devastated by the November spill off the country's northwestern coast. Protesters, many with black tears painted on their faces and mock oil stains on their clothes, demanded the resignation of government officials whom they accused of failing to coordinate effective cleanup efforts and misleading the public about the severity of the disaster. Meanwhile, Greenpeace is calling on the European Union to prosecute Spain for its mishandling of the oil spill, saying the Spanish government violated E.U. laws by letting the tanker sink and release its cargo into the sea.

London Guardian, Associated Press, 23 Feb 03; Planet Ark, Reuters, 24 Feb 03

## Solutions to Bird Crash Problem

Up to 50 million migratory birds die every year from slamming into communications towers for cell phones, pagers, and radios, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Now, environmentalists are suing the Federal Communications Commission to force it to protect those birds. The lawsuit concerns towers that are at least 200 feet tall and located near the Gulf of Mexico, a common stopover for many species during spring and fall migrations. The suit was filed by the American Bird Conservancy, Friends of the Earth, and the Forest Conservation Council, which want the FCC to require existing towers to use warning devices (such as colored lights and high-pitched sound) to keep birds away. They also want all future tower proposals to be reviewed for likely impacts on bird populations. The affected critters include some of the nation's most endangered songbirds — the black rail, Bell's vireo, the golden-winged warbler, and Henslow's sparrow.

MSNBC.com, Associated Press, 20 Feb 2003

## Everybody Must Be Yellowstoned

Snowmobiles will be permitted in Yellowstone and Grand Teton under the National Park Service's final environmental impact statement, released last month. The park service acknowledges that the plan is not the best one in terms of improving air quality, reducing noise, or protecting the health of park workers, visitors, and wildlife. The plan caps the number of machines allowed in the parks at 1,100 per day (about how many enter currently) and distribute the total load over different entrances to reduce congestion. Park officials said the plan strikes a balance between today's unlimited use and the Clinton proposal to phase out snowmobiles entirely, but former National Parks Service Director Roger Kennedy criticized the proposal for giving equal weight to snowmobile access and human and environmental health: "It says to the world we are striking a different balance, and commerce will supervene the health of the world."

Billings Gazette, Mike Stark, 21 Feb 2003

## Crying Shaman

A new oil pipeline to run from the Russian region of Buryatiya into China is being hailed by industry officials and government leaders as a major economic boon, but many local residents beg to differ. Construction of the pipeline will involve bulldozing land and felling trees — environmental problems anywhere and cultural travesties in a region characterized by Buryat shamanism, a belief system built around respect for nature. The proposed path of the pipeline would cut through Tunykinsky National Park, where development is banned. But Yukos, the oil company behind the project, has figured out a way around that concern: It wants the park's boundaries moved. The company claims Buryatiya's grassroots environmentalists, who fear logging and oil spills, are financed by the U.S. in a secret plot to thwart Russia's economic development.

New York Times, Sabrina Tavernise, 19 Feb 2003

## Good Citizens of the North

Canada has set aside \$1.3 billion over five years to slash its greenhouse gas emissions and another \$660 million for other environmental initiatives. The government has also approved a tax break for cleaner diesel and agreed to prioritize infrastructure projects that will help reduce pollution. Ottawa has not yet decided how to spend most of the \$1.3 billion earmarked to help the country meet the terms of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Options on the table include pumping money into alternative-energy projects and backing initiatives to retrofit buildings to improve energy efficiency.

Toronto Globe and Mail, Steven Chase, 19 Feb 2003

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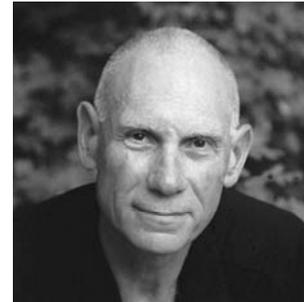
# March Events

## Big Mind Zen Life Intensive

Along with *Bridging The I System*

led by **Genpo Roshi**, Richard Segal M.D. and Stan Block M.D.

Saturday and Sunday March 15 & 16 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m



In conjunction with Richard Segal M.D. and Stan Block, M.D. author of *Bridging the I-System*, Genpo Roshi will conduct a two-day intensive, directed at the expression of Big Mind in every day life. The purpose of this workshop will be to unlock Zen enlightenment in order to manifest wisdom, love and compassion. This retreat is specifically designed to see clearly how our I-System hinders our innate wisdom from manifesting from moment to moment. This workshop is for anyone willing to participate.

**Genpo Merzel Roshi** is the founder of the Zen Life Intensive (1979), the Big Mind Process (1999), President of the White Plum Lineage and Kanzeon Sangha. He is the author of *The Eye Never Sleeps*, *Beyond Sanity and Madness* and *24/7 Dharma*.

**Dr. Stan Block**, adjunct professor of Law and Psychiatry at Seattle University Law School is the founder and author of *Bridging the I-System*. Psychiatrist, Psychoanalyst, and Zen Practitioner with 30 years of experience.

**Dr. Richard Segal** is a psychiatrist with 30 years of spiritual practice.

**Introduction to Zen Level 2** with **Genpo Roshi** Tuesdays 7:30 p.m. to 9:15 p.m. Begins March 4

For More Information and to Register contact Kanzeon Zen Center 801-328-8414 • [www.zencenterutah.org](http://www.zencenterutah.org) • [office@zencenterutah.org](mailto:office@zencenterutah.org)

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