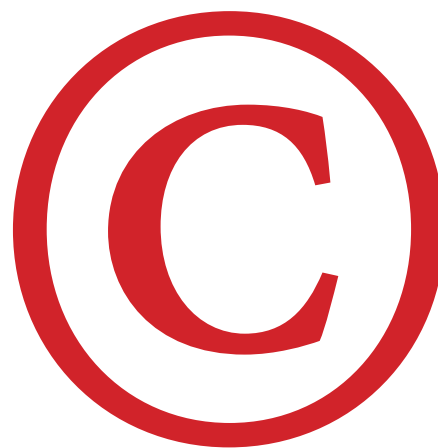


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Deep Ecology

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Michael P. Nelson

DEEP ECOLOGY

Adherents of the *deep ecology* movement share a dislike of the human-centered value system at the core of European and North American industrial culture. Deep ecologists argue that environmental philosophy must recognize the values that inhere objectively in nature independently of human wants, needs or desires.

The popularity of deep ecology spans from headline-grabbing environmental activists dressed in coyote costumes to scholars of an astonishing assortment of backgrounds and interests. Authors have made connections between deep ecology and ecological science (Golley 1987), religions from around the world (Barnhill and Gottlieb 2001), New Age spirituality (LaChapelle 1978), direct action/ecological sabotage (Foreman 1991), the poetry of Robinson Jeffers (Sessions 1977), the land ethic of Aldo Leopold (Deval and Sessions 1985), the monism of Baruch Spinoza (Sessions 1977, 1979, 1985; Naess 2005), and the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (Zimmerman 1986). Such variety is invigorating, but it makes it difficult to find the common thread in all these diverse manifestations of deep ecology. As one commentator has observed, "Any one who attempts to reconcile Heidegger's with Leopold's contributions to deep ecology finds the going rugged" (Oelschlaeger 1991, p. 304). (To differentiate between the broad popular and narrow academic usages of *deep ecology*, the term *Deep Ecology* will be used to denote the latter.)

Much more narrowly, deep ecology represents the psychologization of environmental philosophy. Deep ecology in this sense refers to an *egalitarian* and *holistic* environmental philosophy founded on phenomenological methodology. By way of direct experience of nonhuman nature, one recognizes the equal intrinsic worth of all biota as well as one's own ecological interconnectedness with the lifeworld in all its plenitude.

Understanding Deep Ecology in its academic sense demands reading the work of four environmental philos-

ophers: the Norwegian Arne Naess, the Americans George Sessions and David Rothenberg, and the Australian Warwick Fox. Deep Ecology is inextricably associated with Naess (Katz et al. 2000, p. xv) and owes its prominence to him. Naess's many strengths—strong will, humble demeanor, playful personality, estimable academic reputation, aversion to judgment, predilection for inclusivity, and an odd mix of interests—have stimulated many others to spend considerable amounts of time, talent, and energy teasing out the nuances of his creative insights.

ORIGINS OF THE DEEP ECOLOGY MOVEMENT

Arne Naess invented the term *deep ecology* in a famous 1973 English-language article, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary." By "ecology movement" Naess means a cosmology or worldview. Naess faults European and North American civilization for the arrogance of its human-centered instrumentalization of nonhuman nature. He contrasts his new "deep" (or radical) ecological worldview with the dominant "shallow" (or reform) paradigm. The shallow worldview, which he finds to be typical of mainstream environmentalism, is merely an extension of European and North American anthropocentrism—its reasons for conserving wilderness and preserving biodiversity are invariably tied to human welfare, and it prizes nonhuman nature mainly for its *use-value*. The deep ecological worldview, in contrast, questions the fundamental assumptions of European and North American anthropocentrism—that is, it digs conceptually *deeper* (Fox 1995, pp. 91-94). In doing so, deep ecological thinking "is not a slight reform of our present society, but a *substantial reorientation of our whole civilization*" (Naess 1989, p. 45 [italics in original]). This radicalism has inspired environmental activists of many stripes to hoist up Deep Ecology as their banner in calling for nothing less than the redirection of human history (Manes 1990).

Naess, like Socrates, makes no claims to certainty. In word and deed, Naess instead has inspired others to engage in deep philosophical questioning through example. Naess's own environmental philosophy, *ecosophy T* (1986, pp. 26–29)—named for his secluded boreal hut, Tvergastein (Naess 1989, p. 4)—is meant to serve as a template for other personal *ecosophies* (philosophies of ecology).

ACADEMIC DEFINITIONS OF DEEP ECOLOGY

Deep ecology in its narrow academic sense rests on two fundamentals: an axiology (The study of the criteria of value systems in ethics) of "biocentric egalitarianism" and an ontology (the study of existence) of metaphysical

holism which asserts that the biosphere does not consist of discrete entities but rather internally related individuals that make up an ontologically unbroken whole. Both principles are rooted in an intuitive epistemology reminiscent of Descartes' "clear and distinct" criteria—once you grasp them, their truth is beyond doubt.

The first principle, biocentric egalitarianism—known also by other phrases that combine *biocentric*, *biospherical*, and *ecological* with *equality* and *egalitarianism* (Naess 1973, p. 95; Devall and Sessions 1985, pp. 67-69)—holds that biota have *equal* intrinsic value; it denies differential valuation of organisms. In the words of Naess, "*the equal right to live and blossom* is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom" (1973, p. 96 [Naess's emphasis]). In the words of the sociologist Bill Devall, writing with George Sessions, "all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth" (1985, p. 67). Naess shrewdly preempts invariable attacks on this idea of the equal worth of all organisms by adding the qualifier "in principle" because "any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppression" (1973, p. 95). This qualifier has not, however, staved off criticisms of biocentric egalitarianism.

The valuing of human beings over other life forms in the teleology of a great chain of being (Lovejoy 1936) has been a key feature of the European–North American intellectual tradition—and, to the dismay of deep ecologists, also a feature of some prominent variants of environmental ethics (Birch and Cobb 1981; Bookchin 1982; Rolston 1988). Biocentric egalitarianism aims directly at this target. By denying humans special moral consideration, Deep Ecology is not just nonanthropocentric, but *anti*-anthropocentric (Watson 1983).

Sessions has categorically rejected any differential axiology on the grounds that hierarchies of value lay the groundwork for claims of moral superiority. Quoting John Rodman (1977, p. 94), Sessions cautions that any comparative axiology merely reinstates a "pecking order in this moral barnyard" (Sessions 1985, p. 230). At a 1979 conference devoted to reminding philosophers of the purpose of their discipline (namely, deep questioning), Sessions warned environmental ethicists of the temptation of looking to a metaphysics based on intensity of sentience. "The point is not whether humans in fact do have the greatest degree of sentience on this planet (although dolphins and whales might provide a counterinstance), deep ecologists argue that the degree of sentience is *irrelevant* in terms of how humans relate to the rest of Nature" (Sessions 1985, p. 18). The second principle is *metaphysical holism*. One can apprehend ontological interconnectedness through enlightenment or "self-realization" (Devall and Sessions 1985, pp. 67–69; Naess 1987). As Fox says, "It is the idea that we can make no firm ontological divide in reality between

the human and the nonhuman realms. . . . [T]o the extent that we perceive boundaries, we fall short of deep ecological consciousness" (Fox 1984, p. 196). Through this awakening, the ontological boundaries of the self extend outward, incorporating more and more of the lifeworld into the self. This insight discloses that there is in reality only one big Self, the lifeworld, a notion developed in the article "The World Is Your Body" (Watts 1966).

This method of self-realization is identification: By recognizing the intrinsic worth of other living beings, one recognizes the solidarity of all life forms. Naess, upon watching a flea immolate itself in an acid bath under a microscope, empathized with the suffering flea, identified with it, and thereby felt deeply connected with the entire lifeworld (1987, p. 36).

Once ontological boundaries between living beings are recognized as illusory, one realizes that biospherical interests are one's own. Devall and Sessions assert that "if we harm the rest of Nature then we are harming ourselves. There are no boundaries and everything is inter-related" (1985, p. 68). In the words of the environmental activist John Seed, the statement "I am protecting the rain forest" develops into "I am part of the rain forest protecting myself." I am that part of the rain forest recently emerged into thinking. . . . [T]he change is a spiritual one, thinking like a mountain, sometimes referred to as 'Deep Ecology'" (Devall and Sessions 1985, p. 199). Because the rainforest is part of the activist Seed, he is inherently obliged to look after its welfare. The rainforest's well-being and needs are indistinguishable from Seed's.

Naess and Sessions have emphatically emphasized the phenomenological spirit of deep ecology and downplayed dicta; the psychological realization of metaphysical holism makes ethics superfluous. As Naess has said, "I'm not much interested in ethics or morals. I'm interested in how we experience the world. . . ." (Fox 1995, p. 219). In Sessions words, "The search . . . is not for environmental ethics but for ecological consciousness" (Fox 1995, p. 225).

THE EIGHT-POINT PLATFORM

Growing out of the knowledge of nature's concrete contents is the recognition of the need for some kind of political action. To this end Naess and Sessions laid out an oft-cited eight-point program (that they conjured while camping in Death Valley in 1984) For example (Naess 1986, p. 24), in the diagram Buddhist, secular philosophical, and Christian first principles (the bust) converge in the eight-point platform (the waist), which then justifies an array of activisms (the skirt [see Figure 1]). Buddhist metaphysics might channel through the waist of deep ecological principles calling for environmental action to

Deep Ecology

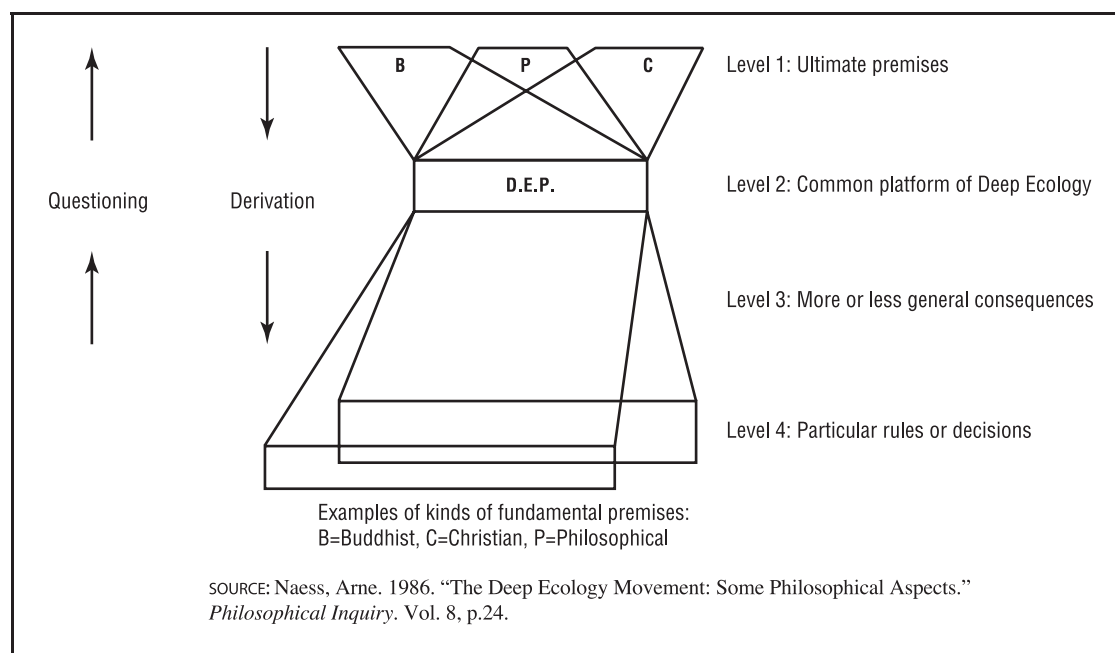


Figure 1. Arne Naess's Apron Diagram. CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

reduce consumption; secular metaphysics might channel through the waist of Deep Ecology calling for action to reduce human population growth; or Christian metaphysics might channel through the waist of Deep Ecology to call for action to preserve biodiversity. Both the eight-point platform and the apron diagram imply that Deep Ecology is above all an ontology and incidentally an ethic.

CRITIQUES OF DEEP ECOLOGY

The deep-ecological principles of biocentric egalitarianism and metaphysical holism have elicited robust critiques. Some of the most interesting debates have centered on the normative status of Deep Ecology. Naess maintains that Deep Ecology is essentially *descriptive*. For Naess unmitigated empiricism or "ecophenomenology" (Brown and Toadvine 2003) promotes a direct experience of the qualities of nature—its "concrete contents" (Naess 1985). Deep Ecology, he argues, is simply an enumeration of general principles that command the assent of persons open to the direct apprehension of nature.

Scholars have found the disclaimer that Deep Ecology is not a normative system—and ought not be judged as such—disingenuous. They have treated Deep Ecology as the legitimate object of the analysis of moral philosophy. Some regard Deep Ecology as strident axiological egalitarianism that is useless in adjudicating conflicting interests. If all organisms are of equal value, then there is no basis upon which to make prescriptions because the kind of value distinctions necessary for evaluating the

moral situations of environmental ethics are deliberately disqualified. The principle of biocentric egalitarianism, on this view, renders Deep Ecology impotent as an ethical theory. Environmental ethics is predicated on the possibility of a *nonegalitarian* axiology. In the words of the American philosopher Bryan Norton, "The 120,000th elk cannot be treated equally with one of the last California condors—not, at least, on a reasonable *environmental* ethic" (1991, p. 224). Baird Callicott has surmised that environmental ethics must manifestly not "accord equal moral worth to each and every member of the biotic community" (1980, p. 327). These scholars argue, therefore, that biocentric egalitarianism must be scrapped (Sylvan 1985).

In a similar vein Fox has argued that the leveling axiology of orthodox Deep Ecology must be forsworn. If all organisms are really of equal intrinsic worth, the deep-ecological doctrinaire might just as well eat veal as vegetables (Fox 1984). In reality, Fox predicted, deep ecologists probably tend to be vegetarians, because—in the words of Alan Watts—"cows scream louder than carrots" (Fox 1984, p. 198). Orthodox Deep Ecology, Fox contends,

does itself a disservice by employing a definition of anthropocentrism which is so overly exclusive that it condemns more or less *any* theory of value that attempts to guide "realistic praxis. . . ." Unless deep ecologists take up this challenge and employ a workable definition of anthropocentrism, they may well become known as the

advocates of “Procrustean Ethics” as they attempt to fit all organisms to the same dimensions of intrinsic value. (Fox 1984, pp. 198–99).

Not eager to be labeled a procrustean ethicist, Fox persuasively argues for a position that abandons biocentric egalitarianism and instead asserts that all biota *have* intrinsic value but are not *equal* in intrinsic value because the “richness of experience” differs (Fox 1984, p. 198). On this point Fox aligns himself with the Whiteheadian-inspired environmental ethics based on intensity of sentience (Ferré 1994) that Sessions so adamantly opposes.

To mark the difference between his sophisticated reformulation of deep ecological thinking from orthodox Deep Ecology, Fox rechristened his theory transpersonal ecology (1995). Fox has since moved beyond Deep Ecology and has developed a more integrated approach that encompasses interhuman ethics, the ethics of the natural environment, and the ethics of the human-constructed environment (Fox 2006). In contrast, Sessions has reasserted the importance of deep ecology’s ecological realism as opposed to social constructivism (2006) as the philosophical foundation for a “new environmentalism of the twenty-first century” (1995).

Naess has steadfastly resisted any gradations or differentiations of intrinsic value among organisms in light of such criticisms. Responding to Fox, Naess wrote that *some* intrinsic values *may* differ, but not the kind he talks about. He and Fox, said Naess, “probably do not speak about the same intrinsic view” (Naess 1984, p. 202). Naess has reiterated his intuition that “living beings have a right, or an intrinsic or inherent value, or value in themselves, that is *the same* for all of them” (Naess 1984, p. 202). As Naess conceded early on (1973), brute biospherical reality entails some forms of killing, exploitation, and suppression of other living beings; the aim is to do more good than harm, to respect on an equal basis the right of every life form to flourish (Naess 1984). Nevertheless, some philosophers have found such a guideline essentially vacuous, like vowing honesty until lying is warranted (Sylvan 1985a), thus undermining the very foundation of the principle itself. If any realistic practice deals with few situations where biota may be valued equally, then the principle is empty.

According to some critics, there are irresolvable structural tensions between biocentric egalitarianism and metaphysical holism in ecological value systems (Keller 1997). They argue that, in light of the real functions of living natural systems, it is impossible to even come close to affirming both the ability of all individuals to flourish to old age and the integrity and stability of ecosystems. The necessity of exterminating ungulates such as goats and pigs for the sake of the health of fragile tropical-island ecosystems is but one example. Regard for the health of whole ecosystems might, therefore, require

treating individuals differently, because individuals of different species have unequal utility (or disutility) for wholes; if that were the case, then viewed from the standpoint of an entire ecosystem, biocentric egalitarianism and metaphysical holism might be mutually exclusive and inconsistent with each other to the extent that at least one would have to be abandoned—or perhaps both (Keller 1997).

DEEP ECOLOGY, SOCIAL ECOLOGY, AND ECOFEMINISM

Social Ecologists and ecofeminists have also formulated robust critiques of Deep Ecology. Social Ecologists, speaking as secular humanists of the European Enlightenment tradition, have excoriated biocentric egalitarianism as misanthropic. In particular Murray Bookchin criticized Deep Ecology for reducing humans from complex social beings to a simple species, a scourge that is “overpopulating” the planet and “devouring” its resources (1988, p. 13). Bookchin argues that Deep Ecologists’ ahistorical “zoologization” prevents them from seeing the real *cultural* causes of environmental problems (1988, p. 18).

In the estimation of ecological feminists, the idea of self-realization is patriarchal. The Australian philosopher Val Plumwood, for instance, argued that the notion of the expanded self results in “boundary problems” stemming from the impulse of subordination (Plumwood 1993, p. 178). There are serious conflicts of interest between constituent members of larger wholes, and, she has argued, expansionary selfhood does not adequately recognize the reality of these conflicts. In the political arena, she contends, the expansionary holist is forced into the arrogant position of implying that anyone in disagreement does not in fact *understand* what is in her or his own best interest. Instead of approaching a situation of conflicting interests with a conciliatory attitude (e.g., “I realize your interests are different from my interests, so here we have a real conflict of interest that we need to resolve by compromise”), the expansionary holist approaches the situation, tacitly or overtly, self-righteously (e.g., “I know what your *real* interests are, and here we have a conflict because you don’t seem to understand what your own interests are—whereas I do, fortunately for you.”) Ecofeminists suspect that self-realization is a front for an imperialistic philosophy of self, springing from “the same motive to control which runs a continuous thread through the history of patriarchy” (Salleh 1984, p. 344).

Consider the activist John Seed. According to the ecofeminist critique, there is nothing to guarantee that the needs of the rainforest should govern those of Seed: Why should Seed’s needs not dictate the needs of the rainforest? (Plumwood 1993). Or why should the needs of unemployed loggers not trump the needs of Seed and the forest?

Deep Ecology

THE EIGHT-POINT PLATFORM OF DEEP ECOLOGY

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantially smaller human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires a smaller human population.
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change will be mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between bigness and greatness.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes (Naess 1986, p. 14).

Even while consenting to some of the insights of deep ecological questioning, for the unemployed logger the need to feed and cloth her or his children might easily outweigh any concern for ecosystemic integrity and stability.

Furthermore, some ecofeminists argue, affirming the ontological interconnectedness of all human and nonhuman organisms and the nonliving environment does not necessitate an embrace of the holism of self-realization. In an article that has become required reading for students of Deep Ecology, the Australian philosopher Richard Sylvan notes that the premise that individuals are not

absolutely discrete does not entail the conclusion that all relations are internal and that individuals are ontological chimeras: “Certainly, removing human apartheid and cutting back human supremacy are crucial in getting the deeper value theory going. But for this it is quite unnecessary to go the full metaphysical distance to extreme holism, to the shocker that there are no separate things in the world, no wilderness to traverse or for Muir to save. A much less drastic holism suffices for these purposes” (1985b, p. 10).

CONCLUSION

Taken together, these various critiques have contributed to a significant consensus that Deep Ecology has reached its logical conclusion and has exhausted itself (Fox 1995). For example, in the respected textbook *Environmental Philosophy* (Zimmerman et al. 2005), the section on Deep Ecology, which enjoyed a coveted place in the first three editions, was eliminated in the fourth.

Compared to other prominent theories, Deep Ecology has not crystallized into a complete system. As Rothenberg states in the English revision of Naess’s earlier *Økologi, samfunn, og livsstil*, deep ecological thinking is process without end (Naess 1989, Rothenberg 1996). For Rothenberg (1996), Deep Ecology is a set of prescient “hints” about the real relations of culture and nature. These hints are to environmental philosophy as a tree trunk is to roots and branches (Rothenberg 1987). Inverting the apron diagram, Rothenberg visualizes the platform of Deep Ecology as a tree, its conceptual roots deriving nourishment from various religious, aesthetic, and speculative soils and its branches reaching out into the world, enjoining various types of political action (1987). Rothenberg’s ideas have stimulated new ways of thinking about the ways in which humans experience nature and about the limits of human language (1996).

Deep Ecology is less a finished product than a continuing, impassioned plea for the development of ecosophies (roots and branches) that merge shared nonanthropocentric core principles (the trunk). At the same time it is clear that Deep Ecology has earned a permanent and well-deserved place in the history of environmental philosophy; that this outlook has generated an abundance of academic articles and books in the field of environmental philosophy is ample testimony to its enduring influence and importance.

SEE ALSO *Biocentrism; Ecological Feminism; Holism; Naess, Arne.*

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DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE

With its howling wolf logo, the environmental group Defenders of Wildlife is one of the better-known North American nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that