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A defence of the Deep Ecology Movement[[1]](#footnote-1)

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There is an international deep ecology social movement with key terms, slogans, and rhetorical use of language comparable to what we find in other activist "alternative" movements today. Some supporters of the movement partake in academic philosophy and have developed or at least suggested philosophies, "ecosophies", inspired by the movement. R.A.Watson does not distinguish sufficiently between the movement and the philosophical expressions with adacemic pretensions. As a result, he falsely concludes that deep ecology implies setting man apart from nature - a kind of "anthropocentrism" in his terminology: humans and only humans have no right to interfere with natural processes. What the deep ecology movement insists on is rather that life on Earth has intrinsic value and that human behavior should and must change drastically - and soon.

I

In a recent article Richard A.Watson criticizes a position he calls "anti-anthropocentric biocentrism".[[2]](#footnote-2) He also attacks what he considers to be misplaced mysticism and religion. According to Watson, man should learn to behave in an ecologically sound manner simply because this is necessary for human survival. To touch deeper issues is unwarranted. The value of human survival he (implicitly) takes to be an intrinsic value - and I agree. But those who have dedicated, and wish to dedicate, much of their life and energy to protecting nature against destruction have had this planet with all its life forms in mind. In order to be heard they have had to argue almost exclusively in terms of human health and well-being, even though their motivation has been both broader and deeper.

Very few, and probably none, of the pioneers in the fight against the destructive activity of human beings on our planet in this century have envisaged that this activity would or could lead to the extinction of the human species. The possibility that there would be no areas where a sufficient number of humans could survive, is one that has not concerned them.

Consider a recent example. A handful of wolves in southern Norway kill sheep and frighten parents who imagine that the wolves will attack their children on their way to school. Parents should be able to feel that their children are safe, all agree, but it costs a lot of money to hire "shepherds" for the children. Conclusion: kill the wolves. Professional hunters try hard to do this, but Norwegian wolves know too much about hunters and how to avoid them.

Those who might argue that man should not try to kill the wolves, since they are good for human survival, are unlikely to stop the hunters. Human survival is a weak argument not only from the point of view of parents, sheep owners, and hunters, but also from that of politicians.

The strong opposition to killing the wolves stems from people who (1) consider these animals to have intrinsic value, every one of them, and maintain that in principle each of them have the same right to live and blossom as we and our children have and (2) who consider it the duty of a rich industrial nation to safeguard both sheep and wolves. We cannot send sheep, who are rendered helpless through thousands of years of human manipulation, into wolf territory without a shepherd, if at all. The opponents also dig into cultural history explaining how wolves came to have a worse public image than bears, for instance, and how this bad public image has been exploited by great authors like the brothers Grimm, resulting in baseless fears that children may be attacked on their way to school. Last but not least they work out proposals on how to solve the economic problems involved, for instance, the payment of shepherds.

Abstract reasons about living in harmony with the natural order, about the possible medical and scientific value of every species, are important, but man has a heart, not only a brain. Strong philosophical or religious views are required. Among non-academics they are mostly unarticulated, but are influential if they are appealed to.

Watson argues against the views of those he calls the "ecosophers". From the names he mentions it is more appropriate to consider his argument to be against the members of the deep ecology movement. The tenets of this movement may perhaps be roughly formulated as follows: (1) The well-being of non-human life on Earth has value in itself. This value is independent of any instrumental usefulness for limited human purposes. (2) Richness and diversity in life forms contribute to this value and is a further value in itself. (3) Humans have no right to interfere destructively with non-human life except for purposes of satisfying vital needs. (4) Present interference is excessive and detrimental. (5) Present policies must therefore be changed. (6) The necessary policy changes affect basic economic and ideological structures and will be the more drastic the longer it takes before significant change is started. (7) The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (focusing on situations involving inherent value) rather than enjoying a high standard of living (measured in terms of available means). (8) Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation to directly or indirectly try to implement the necessary changes.

As exponents of anti-anthropocentric biocentrism Watson mentions George Sessions, myself, and some others, but I do not know anybody who fits the description he offers. Although Watson concludes that the position is internally contradictory, a "position" with the vagueness and ambiguity of anti-anthropocentric biocentrism can scarcely aspire to be contradictory. That would demand a minimum of preciseness.

The absence of anti-anthropocentric biocentrists does not, in my mind, make the article of Watson uninteresting or unimportant. Let me try to substantiate this, but at the same time try to eliminate some misunderstandings.

The term ecosopher, which he uses, usually refers to a philosopoher whose total view is inspired by ecology and the deep ecology movement. Both Sessions and myself are supporters of the movement and we are also ecosophers, but the great majority of the supporters have not developed any ecosophy. Moreover, the important groups of Christian supporters tend to repudiate the term because they find their total view is primarily inspired by the Bible. In what follows I write as if Watson had used the term "support of the deep ecology movement" rather than the term ecosopher.

II

Watson is right if he is of the opinion that supporters of the deep ecology movement sometimes write or talk as if human needs, goals, or desires should under no circumstances "be taken as privileged or overriding" in considering "the needs, desires, interests, and goals" of a nonhuman living being (p.245). Such a norm if followed uncritically, would, of course, make humans into a strange kind of proletarian and would result in their extinction. Rather, what engages the supporters of the deep ecological movement is the question "under what circumstances..." This question is not capable of any precise, general answer.[[3]](#footnote-3) A short formula runs as follows: "A vital need of the nonhuman living being A overrides a peripheral interest of the human being B." There is substantial support of this vague sentence among large groups of people as long as the set of A's is restricted to the set of those mammals and birds which are not used for food. Supporters of the deep ecology movement are in favor of a much wider set of beings under a wider set of circumstances, but there are of course large individual and cultural differences. It is undesirable to try to establish complete conformity.

III

The sentence expressing Watson's definition of anti-anthropocentric biocentrism (p.245) might conceivably be interpreted in such a way that some supporters of the movement might find it suitable as an expression of their position. The same holds true of many other sentences in his article, but rarely have I found semantical considerations as relevant as when I try to understand a colleague in environmental debates! For example, the second of five alleged principles of the "movement - and here (p.251) Watson uses the term movement - runs as follows: "The human species should not change the ecology of the planet." Inevitably, humans change and will change the ecology of the Earth, if ecology here implies "at least one of the ecosystems." This holds even if the human population mercifully is reduced to one-tenth of the present population, and even if the "ecological consciousness" (Sessions) deepens considerably. But Watson may interpret his sentence differently. Anyway, many of us subscribe to the maxim of Barry Commoner: "... any major man-made change in a natural system is likely to be detrimental to that system." This is a typical maxim of a movement, not a proposition in an ecosophy, a systematic philosophy. It has a comparable rhetorical function to Commoner's fourth "law": "There is no such thing as a free lunch" and to the maxim "Nature knows best". Confusion increases when the rhetorics of a movement is treated like seminar exercises in university philosophy.

IV

According to Watson, he has exposed "five principles" of anti-anthropocentric biocentrism. I have already commented on number two. Number one is similar to a part of Watson's proposed definition: "The needs, desires, interests, and goals of humans are not privileged." For some interpretations ("not" = "not in every case") the formulation of the "principle" is acceptable: however, if "not privileged" is interpreted in the direction of "never privileged", it is obviously unacceptable, whatever the plausible interpreation of privileged.

The third principle runs as follows: "The world ecological system is too complex for human beings ever to understand." It seems that this formulation is an absolutistic modification of Aldo Leopold's expression "... may never be fully understood" (quoted by Watson on p.246). If there is a question of understanding fully what goes on in one gram of soil when a thousandth part of a milligram of a certain poison is administered, we must answer, I think, in the negative. We would have to understand countless millions of living beings in their close interaction. But if only general notions about what happens on our planet are implied, some humans, including Watson, already understand quite a lot. Again vagueness and ambiguity render it difficult to be for or against the "position".

The fourth principle, according to Watson, is that "the ultimate goal, good, and joy of humankind is contemplative understanding of Nature". This principle apparently has something to do with a misunderstood interpretation of Spinoza and has little to do with the deep ecology movement. Activeness is a basic concept in Spinoza and active life in nature is a goal of most participants in the movement.

The more complex fifth principle (see p. 251) may sound adequate to many deep ecologists, but some of the terms such as harmonious and equilibrium, which were highly valued as key terms in the sixties, are, I think, less adequate today. Every species in the long run alters ecosystems and mankind cannot be an exception. It is the kind of alteration that matters. Humans have special responsibilities because of their capacity at least to pose the problem of long-term consequences of their behavior.

V

Watson does contribute effectively to the fight against superficial views about diversity, complexity, and ecological balance:

Another obvious anthropocentric element in ecosophic thinking is the predilection for ecological communities of great internal variety and complexity. But the barren limestone plateaus that surround the Mediterranean now are just as much in ecological balance as were the forests that grew there before man cut them down. And "dead" Lake Erie is just as much in ecological balance with the life on the land that surrounds it as it was in pre-Columbian times. (p.254)

The "maximum diversity and complexity" norms of ecosophy cannot be derived from the science of ecology. Often supporters of the movement write as if they believed in such a derivation. In part it is due to broad, normative usages of the term ecology, including much that cannot be part of a science. But the term ecosophy - eco-wisdom - was introduced in order to contrast normative, philosophical views from facts and theories within the science of ecology. It was also introduced to stress the necessity of clarifying the relation between abstract principles and concrete decisions. Wisdom, not science, implies such a relation.

Neither giraffes nor crocodiles have developed any ecosophical norms or theories of gravitational waves. These are specific human products. I do not see, however, why ecosophy or theory of gravitational waves should therefore be classed as "anthropocentric". Human "predilections" are human. Thus far I agree with Watson.

VI

Watson mentions a "hands-off-nature" position and shows convincingly that it implies "setting man apart". Excellent. The supporters of the movement are, in my view, intensively active in their relation to nature, but not in the sense of large-scale digging, cutting, and altering ecosystems. However, are they mainly meditating? Life in and with nature may or may not involve contemplation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Nils Faarlund has introduced the potent slogan "traceless ferd [movement and conduct] in nature" as a main slogan for his international school of outdoor life. Cross-country skiing? Yes. Vast machinery of slalom centers? No. As other valuable slogans of the movement, they are useless or false when interpreted in an absolutistic way. (Traceless? Impossible!) As objects of analysis they are in my view indispensible in philosophical seminars at universities, but not as concepts and propositions.

Wilderness experience often includes meditation in certain senses, but it also includes the active use of natural resources. Heidegger, I suppose, does not contrast use of tools, for instance, the use of an axe, with "letting beings be". Zimmerman says only that Heidegger is against treating beings "merely as objects for the all-powerful Subject". We may be active in relation to a flower almost every step. That is not a sufficient reason not to live in deserts after rain falls. There is no general norm in ecosophy against our full life in nature, and this implies acceptance of hurting and killing. Ecosophy, as I conceive it, says yes to the fullest self-realization of man.

Tom Regan's "preservation principle" (quoted on p.246) is a slogan that lends itself to passivist, utopian interpretations, especially out of context, but it is also capable of reasonable applications in everyday life, for instance, in the offices of regional planners: when interfering with this river, are we just meddling, or are we doing something necessary in order to satisfy basic needs of humans? Are we destroying this forest or are we merely chaning it in a non-destructive way?

In conclusion, I think it may be appropriate to note that in Protagoras' statement about homo mensura nothing is said about what is measured. Man may be the measure of all things in the sense that only a human being has a measuring rod, but what he measures he may find to be greater than himself and his survival.

1. Published in Environmental Ethics 6, No.3, 1984, pp.265-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard A.Watson, "A Criticque of Anti-Anthropocentri Biocentrism", Environmental Ethics 5, (1983): 245-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paul W. Taylor, "In Defense of Biocentrism." Environmental Ethics 5 (1983): 237-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This reference of Sessions to perennial philosophy, quoted by Watson on p. 246, is misleading. I do not think that Sessions insists that meditation is a central feature of man/nature relations. Nor does he think that this is so for Spinoza. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)