

The Heart of Deep Ecology

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In the last few hundred years, industrial society has encircled the earth and, in requiring massive disruptions of ecological processes for its ordinary functioning, threatens all forms of life on this planet. Both capitalist and socialist variants of expansionary industrialism routinely require the destruction of species and ecosystems. Industrialism now threatens to disrupt atmospheric conditions fundamental to the whole biosphere. If ecological problems have roots in industrialism, then a perspective which takes industrialism itself as part of the problem is needed.¹

The transformation of industrialism will, I believe, involve a multifaceted struggle over several generations. The changes required are of the magnitude of the agricultural and industrial revolutions.

Deep Ecology is one perspective which beckons us in the right direction. In just two decades, Deep Ecology as a theory—as distinct from Deep Ecology as a social movement—has become a benchmark in defining varieties of environmental philosophies.² In the course of its relatively short history, there has been considerable controversy surrounding Deep Ecology, but most of it has been misdirected. One reason for this has been the failure of critics to notice that the "logic" of Deep Ecology differs fundamentally in form from many other philosophical positions.

The heart of Deep Ecology is its platform, which consists of a number of inter-related factual and normative claims about humans and their relations with the rest of nature. The platform was intended as a description of a Deep Ecology social movement and as a basis for a larger unity among all those who accept the importance of nonanthropocentrism and understand that this entails *radical* social change.

The platform, articulated by Arne Naess and George Sessions, while they were camping in Death Valley in 1984, is a nontechnical statement of principles around which, it is hoped, people with differing *ultimate* understandings of themselves, society, and nonhuman nature, could unite. Thus, from the start, the platform was meant to be a terrain of commonality which allowed, recognized, and even encouraged differences in more logically ultimate philosophies.

The Deep Ecology Platform

The platform itself consists of eight points.

1. *The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.*

Essentially, this is a rejection of anthropocentrism. It is an assertion that human and nonhuman life should flourish. "Life," in this context, is understood broadly to include, for example, rivers, landscapes, and ecosystems. Accepting the idea that humans are not the *only* valuable part of nature is the watershed perception from which Deep Ecology flows.

This plank should not be taken as implying a commitment to any philosophically precise theory about intrinsic or inherent value. When Deep Ecologists use the language of moral discourse they are not usually trying to construct a formal ethical theory. If one wishes to speak outside the academy, one must use language which communicates in popular contexts. That language right now uses concepts of intrinsic or inherent value and rights. To take Devall and Sessions literally,

when they ascribe an "equal right" to all things and claim they are "equal in intrinsic worth," is interpreting them out of context.³ In the passage in which those phrases appear, they are writing with the intent of having practical effect within the environmental movement. They are not writing with philosophical precision, and for them to do so would counter their main purpose.⁴

Perhaps the search for some sort of value in nonhuman nature, be it inherent, intrinsic, or some other sort of nonanthropocentric value seems necessary because we cannot now fully imagine an adequate environmental ethic. Often an ethic is supposed to constrain people from doing what they otherwise would do. As both Warwick Fox and Val Plumwood point out, many ethical theorists implicitly assume that we would care about nonhuman nature "for itself" *only* if it has intrinsic value.⁵ This assumption motivates the search for the elusive intrinsic value, but it may be overly constraining in the search for an environmental ethic. Simply put we *can* care for the rest of nature for reasons which have nothing to do with whether or not it has intrinsic, inherent, or whatever sort of value. Such a caring can spring, for example, from a felt sense of relatedness to the rest of nature or a love of existence.

2. Richness and diversity of lifeforms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.

This, along with the first point, is intended to counter the often-held image of evolution as resulting in "higher" forms of life. It involves a re-visioning of life and evolution, changing from understanding evolution as "progress" from "lower" to "higher" forms to understanding evolution as a magnificent expression of a multitude of forms of life. Cherishing diversity appreciates differences and rejects any single standard of excellence.

Valuing diversity means freeing large areas of the earth from domination by industrial economy and culture. Expand wilderness! But in interpreting this injunction, it should be remembered that "wilderness" is an outsider's construct. Most of what appears to industrial peoples as wilderness has been steadily occupied or traversed by indigenous peoples for eons. Thus, preserving such areas from industrial regimes is not only protecting wilderness, but is, in some cases, also preserving indigenous peoples. The struggle for wilderness is both for biological and human diversity.

3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.

The key point in this claim is the implied distinction between "vital" and other needs. This distinction is denied by the consumerism inherent in industrialism. To lose sight of it is to become trapped within an endlessly repeating cycle of deprivation and temporary satiation. Making the distinction opens to the possibility of more enduring forms of happiness and joy. Of course, the distinction cannot be drawn precisely, since what is a vital need in one context may be a trivial one in another. There is a real difference between an Eskimo's wearing the skin of a seal and one worn for social status in an affluent society.

4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease in human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.

Once recognition is given to other forms of life, then it is clear that we humans are too many already. We have already jostled many species out of existence and the near future promises an expansion of such extinctions. Recent projections by the United Nations indicate that current trends in population growth will involve converting about 80 percent of current nature reserves to

human use.⁶ This would drastically accelerate the already alarming trends towards the extinction of myriad species of life?⁷

The continuing increase in human numbers also condemns many humans to a life of suffering. Parents within industrial societies easily recognize that many children means fewer life prospects for each and limit themselves to fewer children, hoping to give them each a better life. We should collectively recognize that an increase in numbers is not in the best interest of humans, much less the rest of life.

It is to the credit of the Deep Ecology movement that it clearly gives priority to human population as a problem and calls for a gradual decrease.⁸ This does not imply misanthropy or cruelty to presently existing humans. In fact, it implies the reverse for there is considerable evidence indicating that the best way of moderating and then reversing the growth of human population is to find ways of providing a decent life for all.⁹

There is, of course, much more that might be said about the problem of overpopulation and the ways the human population might decline. In this regard, alliances between Deep Ecologists and Ecofeminists may be very helpful. The problem of coerced motherhood exists in all societies to some degree, but it is most acute in poorer countries where population growth is most rapid. Current evidence indicates that there has been a global increase in coerced pregnancy and motherhood and this trend must be reversed for there to be much hope in slowing population growth.¹⁰ The worldwide struggle for the rights of women to choose the number of children they will bear will help in at least slowing the growth of human populations. Such a right includes the right to choose sexual partners and manage fertility in safe ways, which includes the right to access to safe abortions. Ecofeminists have much to contribute both theoretically and practically to success in this struggle.

5. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.

This directs attention to current trends and claims that current levels of "interference" with the rest of nature are excessive. There are at least two sorts of such interference which need to be addressed. One sort is the destruction of existing areas of wilderness, such as old growth forests. This is irreparable within any moderate time scale and is wrong. In fact, the guiding principle should probably be the continuation of biological history, creating large enough wilderness areas to allow for the continued speciation of plants and animals. This does not involve dispossessing indigenous peoples who have found ways of living within those ecosystems without destroying them.

Another sort of interference is based on particular forms of technology. Many technologies disrupt natural cycles far more than is necessary. For example, agricultural practices involving large scale monocropping create expanding needs for fertilizer and pesticides. Multicropping, integrated pest management, and a variety of organic farming techniques interfere less with natural cycles and can enhance the fertility of soils.

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.

The scope of the changes needed is great. However, significant work is being done in trying to create adequate models for change. Although the concept remains obscure and controversial, "sustainability" is becoming a slogan in thinking about how economies should be restructured, even among those who remain within an anthropocentric perspective. We need to be clear about

precisely "what" is to be sustained. For Deep Ecology, at least, we need to sustain the very conditions for the diversity of the myriad forms of life, including the cultural diversity of human life.

7. *The ideological change is 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 big and great.*

This point is especially important for industrial peoples enmeshed within an ultimately unsatisfying consumerism.¹¹ With a focus on quality, people can see that existing patterns of labor and consumption are not satisfying, but rather involve chronic dissatisfaction. Moving towards an appreciation of the quality of life, instead of quantities of things, leads to an increase in happiness, not a decrease. This is fundamental, since people are more apt to change when they experience change as improvement, rather than a grudging submission to necessity. As long as environmentalism seems to require only denial and sacrifice, its political effectiveness will be lessened. Deep Ecology seeks a more satisfactory way of living, an increase in vitality and joy.

8. *Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.*

Although this is clear in claiming that we must begin to act now, it is vague in not indicating particular priorities. At this point in history, priorities cannot be made more specific. No one now knows exactly what positive changes are necessary. The problems with economic growth and the emptiness of consumerism are clear enough, but they do not show just what needs to be done now. People who accept the Deep Ecology platform may disagree about what is most urgent now, and there are many ways to attempt the needed changes. In the light of the value of diversity, such differences should be respected and not become occasions for sectarian squabble.

The Logic of Deep Ecology

The eight-point platform is not "ultimate" or "basic" in a logical sense. That is, it is not put forward as requiring or allowing no further justification. Rather, it is basic in being the most general view that supporters of Deep Ecology hold in common. There is no expectation nor need for wide agreement on logically more ultimate premises which might be used to render a deductive justification of the platform. In fact, disagreement on such ultimate premises is to be expected.

From a historical perspective, the platform as articulated by Naess and Sessions is unique to Deep Ecology. However, were it to become grounds for widespread unity within a movement directed toward transforming industrial society and creating a nonanthropocentric society, it might no longer be called a specifically "Deep Ecology" position. The platform is part of a program for what Robyn Eckersley calls an "ecocentric" Green political movement, a movement which will encompass many who might not identify themselves as "Deep Ecologists."¹² Thus, while it is now a specifically "Deep Ecology" platform, should it achieve its intended end, it might no longer be identified as a "Deep Ecology" platform. If it is successful in its intent, it might dissolve as a distinct position.

If one seeks a *justification* for the Deep Ecology platform, then discussion might proceed to more ultimate premises characteristically espoused by some deep ecologists. But other justifications might depend on "ultimate premises" of some other ecocentric perspective, such

as ecofeminism or some variant of social ecology. The central point is that there is not only one possible justification for the platform.

The *platform* is the heart of Deep Ecology, and it is this platform, not the various justifications of it, which should be the focus of argument about the value of Deep Ecology.¹³

The development of a radical ecology movement must start its collective discussion somewhere, and the Deep Ecology platform is a good beginning. People may come to adopt this platform from quite diverse directions and for differing reasons. Those who start from social concerns and come to believe that an ecological perspective must be taken very seriously may come to the Deep Ecology position through an understanding of the ecological inadequacy of more traditional social ideologies. On the other hand, those who start with a concern about nonhuman nature are likely to arrive at the Deep Ecology platform more directly by reflecting on what follows from a rejection of anthropocentrism and a recognition of the worth of the flourishing of *all* of nature.

Although some Deep Ecologists have emphasized the process of expanding one's sense of self towards a larger identification with all of nature to arrive at a denial of anthropocentrism, this is surely not the only path. The Ecofeminist Marti Kheel argues persuasively that the differences in the ways men and women now typically form their identities makes *any* gender neutral concept of the self suspect. This means that different genders now may find different paths toward the Deep Ecology platform. Ecofeminism, in speaking to this historically conditioned difference between men and women, offers other routes to a justification of the platform. But, as Kheel argues, this unique strength of Ecofeminism does not entail any fundamental opposition between Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology.¹⁴

Even the *kinds* of reasons which might persuade a person to adopt a version of the platform may range from rational to nonrational to irrational. For example, acceptance might be based on philosophical reflection, religious conviction, personal experience, intuitions, mystical experience, aesthetic perception, or some other basis. *Allowing for a variety of paths to the same position is precisely the intent of the Deep Ecology platform.* It is not intended to be, nor is it, a systematic philosophical position; it proposes a common ground for defining an ecocentric movement for radical social change. Even the particular formulation of the platform is not final or the only acceptable expression.¹⁵ The point of these principles is to define the Deep Ecology movement, create clarity within the movement, and make clear where real disagreement might exist.¹⁶

When the structure of Deep Ecology is understood this way, much of the controversy surrounding Deep Ecology can be seen as irrelevant. While argument directed against one, some, or all of the eight points is of great importance, criticism directed to one of the underlying philosophical positions used to justify the Deep Ecology platform is far less relevant. Clearly, one could reject a particular philosophical or religious justification of the platform, yet still believe that the platform is correct at this point in history. I think it has been a failure to appreciate this aspect of the structure of the Deep Ecology position which has led to much heated but fruitless controversy. Focusing on the platform may help us find the basis for unity among those who may disagree on more philosophically ultimate issues.

This approach to Deep Ecology does not make clear what is philosophically distinctive in the writings of deep ecologists. Although this question may be of great interest to theorists of Deep Ecology, it may be of less importance to movement activists. The platform is a proposal for us now, in this particular historical context. When that context changes, the platform may change. Perhaps Deep Ecology would even disappear as a distinctive position.

Without understanding the platform as the heart of Deep Ecology, attempts to justify the platform tend to create needless schisms. For example, the most exhaustive attempt to define what is distinctive about Deep Ecology is Warwick Fox's *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*. He focuses on the nature of the self and explains Deep Ecology as involving an identification of self with all that is. But his specification of Deep Ecology, *unless* it is understood as one among many alternative justifications for the platform, creates unneeded friction. It leaves out others who accept the platform, but do not agree with Fox's notion of identification. Richard Sylvan and Jim Cheney, for example, both accept the platform, but are critics of Fox's Transpersonal Ecology.¹⁷ Which is more important—finding differences or realizing unity?

If Deep Ecology is understood primarily as the attempt to spark profound social change, then the question of who is and who isn't a Deep Ecologist can be settled by referring to the platform. But disputes over possible justifications are of pressing importance only if they lead to differences over the platform.

The platform, then, is a proposal for a set of general agreements among radical ecocentrists, a common ground for those who value *all* nature. Deep ecologists have done a valuable service in bringing such a platform to the fore. Our urgent task is social change.

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Notes

¹ I have argued at length that industrialism is the core problem which we must confront. See Andrew McLaughlin, *Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

² See Warwick Fox, *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1990), 44-5 and the works referenced there. Deep Ecology as a social *movement* has origins which predate Naess's formulation of deep ecology as a *theory*.

³ Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1985), 67.

⁴ See Warwick Fox's "Approaching Deep Ecology: A Response to Richard Sylvan's Critique of Deep Ecology," *Environmental Studies Occasional Paper 20* (Hobart: University of Tasmania, 1986). 37ff, and Fox's *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* for extended discussions as to why it is an error to interpret Deep Ecology as an alternative axiology. For further discussion, see note 25 of chap. 9 in *Regarding Nature*.

⁵ Fox, "Approaching Deep Ecology," p. 79. Val Plumwood, "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," *Hypatia* 6 (1991): 10. See also Anthony Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 321-39.

⁶ Nafis Sadik, *The State of World Population: 1992* (New York: United Nations Population Fund, 1992), ii.

⁷ See Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), for a sobering discussion of this problem.

⁸ "Population reduction towards decent levels might incidentally require a thousand years." Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, translated by David Rothenberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 127.

⁹ See Sadik, *The State of World Population: 1992*.

¹⁰ See Jodi L. Jacobson, "Coerced Motherhood Increasing," in Lester R. Brown et al., *Vital Signs: 1992* (New York: Norton & Co., 1992), 114-15.

¹¹ See chap. 4 of my *Regarding Nature* for a fuller discussion of consumerism.

¹² See Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), especially chap. 3.

¹³ The centrality of the platform has been claimed by a number of Deep Ecology writers. See, for example, Arne Naess, "The Deep Ecological Movement," *Philosophical Inquiry* 8, nos. 1-2 (1986): 23-6; Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 27-32; Bill Devall, *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1988), 12-18.

¹⁴ Marti Khecl, "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology: Reflections on Identity and Difference," *The Trumpeter* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1991).

¹⁵ Other sketches are possible, even encouraged. Naess regards his own formulation as tentative. (See Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, 31.) He expects that others who identify with the Deep Ecology movement "will work out their own alternative formulations" (*Ecology*, 28). Bill Devall, one founder of Deep Ecology, prefers the concept of "worth" to "value." (See Devall, *Simple in Means*, 14.)

¹⁶ Naess, *Ecology*, 32.

¹⁷ See Richard Sylvan, "A Critique of (Wild) Western Deep Ecology," unpublished manuscript, 2; Jim Cheney "The Neo-Stoicism of Radical Environmentalism," *Environmental Ethics* 11, no 4 (Winter 1989): 295.