

HOW 'DEEP' IS DEEP ECOLOGY?

Andrew Heywood

Deep ecology is often thought of as the cornerstone of ecological thinking, in that it provides green politics with a philosophical basis. Nevertheless, it also has a controversial role within larger ecological thought, attracting as much criticism as support. What is deep ecology? How does deep ecology differ from other forms of ecologism? Why and how has deep ecology attracted criticism from other green thinkers?

What is deep ecology?

The term 'deep ecology' was coined by Arne Naess in 1973. He used it to distinguish between two types of ecological thought, one of which is 'deep' while the other is 'shallow'. (The terminology, of course, is not neutral, 'deep' implying profound, well-founded or authentic, while 'shallow' suggests superficial, insubstantial or inauthentic.) For Naess, deep ecology (sometimes called 'ecocentrism', 'ecosophy' or 'ecophilosophy') is deep because it persists in asking deeper questions concerning 'why' and 'how' and is thus concerned with fundamental philosophical questions about the impacts of the human species on the biosphere (the parts of the Earth's crust and atmosphere inhabited by living organisms). The key issue here is the relationship between ecology and anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism means human-centeredness. It is an approach to understanding that places human beings as the centre of creation, thereby according human needs and interest overriding moral and philosophical importance. Such a view is taken for granted by most westerners, suffusing western academic life as well as western culture generally.

For supporters of deep ecology, however, ecology and anthropocentrism are simply irreconcilable; indeed, anthropocentrism is an offence against the principle of ecology. This is because, as the study of the relationship between living organisms and the environment, ecology stresses the network of relationships that sustain all forms of life. In emphasising interconnectedness and interdependence, ecology thus makes it difficult, and perhaps impossible, to accord priority to any particular species, or any single part of nature. In that sense, deep ecology can be said to be 'deep' in that it takes the principle of ecology to its logical extreme, providing, in the process, an underpinning moral and philosophical vision for the whole of green thought. Supporters of so-called shallow ecology are concerned, by contrast, to harness the lessons of ecology to human needs and ends. They are therefore unashamedly anthropocentric, and embrace what can be called humanist ecology or anthropocentric ecologism. From their perspective, anthropocentrism may be either good or bad, ecological or anti-ecological. Ecology and anthropocentrism are reconcilable when the latter focuses on long-term human well-being, taking the interest of future generations into account and recognising that human beings can only flourish in conditions of ecological sustainability. This can be dubbed 'enlightened

anthropocentrism'. Ecology and anthropocentrism are nevertheless irreconcilable if the latter is geared to short-term human interests and misguidedly treats nature as if it were an unbounded or infinite resource.

However, if deep ecology is defined by its rejection of anthropocentrism, what does this mean, and what does it imply? Deep ecology emerged, in a sense, in two stages. These dealt, first, with morality and then with metaphysics:

- Deep ecology has a challenging and distinctive ethical character. By contrast with conventional morality's emphasis on human rights, needs or interests - its moral anthropocentrism - deep ecologists view nature as the source of moral goodness. Nature thus has 'intrinsic' or inherent value, not just 'instrumental' value deriving from the benefits it brings human beings. A classic statement of the ethical framework of deep ecology is articulated in Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* (1948) in the form of the 'land ethic': 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise'. Such a moral stance implies 'biocentric equality', the principle that all organisms and entities in the biosphere are of equal moral worth, each being an expression of the goodness of nature. Naess expressed this in the idea of an 'equal right to live and bloom', highlighting also the benefits of biodiversity, on the grounds that the wider the range of diversity within the biotic community, the healthier and more stable that community will be.
- Deep ecology's new ethical thinking was nevertheless accompanied by a deeper and more challenging philosophical approach that amounted to nothing less than a new metaphysics, a new way of thinking about and understanding the world. Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of existence, or being. It is not merely a matter of academic interest, but also, and crucially, affects our deepest values and how we engage with the world. In addressing metaphysical issues, deep ecology is radical in a way and to a degree that does not apply elsewhere in ideological thought. Deep ecology calls for a change in consciousness, specifically the adoption of 'ecological consciousness', or 'cosmological consciousness'. At the heart of this, is the capacity to transcend the self, or individual ego, and to recognise that each person is intrinsically linked to all other living things, and indeed to the universe itself. The Australian philosopher Warwick Fox thus links deep ecology to what he calls 'transpersonal ecology', by which he means the realisation that 'things are', that human beings and all other entities are part of a single unfolding reality. In this way, deep ecology transcends philosophical anthropocentrism.

Arne Naess (1912-2009)

Norwegian philosopher, writer and mountaineer, who some describe as the 'father of deep ecology'. Naess did much of his thinking and writing in isolation, at a self-built hut (the Tvergastein hut) high on a Norwegian mountain; this was the highest privately-owned dwelling in Norway. His philosophy, Ecosophy T. (the 'T' is for Tvergastein), which was influenced by the ideas of Spinoza, Gandhi's ethic of non-violence and Taoist thought, was based on the assertion that 'the Earth does not belong to human beings' as all creatures have an equal right to live and bloom. He wrote over 30 books and articles and founded the interdisciplinary philosophical journal, *Inquiry*.

Distinctive ideas of deep ecology

Deep ecology amounts to a distinctive form of ecologism in at least three senses. In the first place, it develops a deeper critique of the environmental crisis that confronts humankind. This is not seen to be linked to particular policies or to a particular political, social or economic system (be it industrialisation, capitalism, patriarchy or whatever), but is believed to be rooted in a more profound cultural and intellectual shift. The source of environmental degradation, from the perspective of deep ecology, is the world-view that has dominated the thinking of western society since about the seventeenth century, and has subsequently affected most of the globe. Deep ecology's critique of anthropocentrism thus springs out of a critique of modernity. In *The Turning Point* (1982), Fritjof Capra traced the origins of this world-view to the ideas of scientists and philosophers, such as René Descartes (1596-1650) and Isaac Newton (1642-1727). Whereas the world had previously been understood in organic terms, what Capra calls the 'Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm' advanced a mechanistic, reductionist and instrumentalist world-view. Above all, this paradigm is dualistic: it understands the world in terms of distinctions – mind/matter, reason/emotion, self/other, humankind/nature, individual/society and so forth – rather than in terms of oneness or interconnectedness. Such mechanistic thinking made it easier to think of nature as inert and valueless in itself, making it merely a resource that is available to satisfy human ends.

Second, if environmental degradation has cultural or intellectual roots, deep ecologists believe that it can only be challenged by a 'paradigm shift', a change in how we understand the world. If anthropocentrism has led to the 'disenchantment of nature', new ideas and theories must be developed to 're-enchant' nature'. Deep ecologists have looked to a wide range of ideas and theories for this purpose, including primitive religions, Eastern mysticism (Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism) and modern physics, especially the quantum mechanics of physicists such as Niels Bohr (1885-1952) and Verner Heisenberg (1901-76). What these ideas have in common is that each of them is an example of radical holism. In emphasising that the whole is more important than its individual parts, they are clearly non-dualistic and provide a basis for an ecocentrism that prioritises the maintenance of ecological balance rather than the achievement of human ends. This can, for example, be seen in the case of the Taoist idea of *wu-*

wei, literally meaning 'not-doing', in which human actions are characterised by spontaneity and naturalness – going with the 'natural flow of things' – rather than by conscious premeditation or wilfulness, still less by a desire to control or exploit. As a Taoist teaching puts it, 'Tao never does; yet through it all things are done'.

Third, deep ecology is characterised by a series of key goals that flow from the adoption of a holistic or non-dualistic paradigm. These include the following:

- Wilderness preservation. Deep ecologists seek to preserve nature 'wild and free', based on the belief that nature, unspoilt by human intervention, is a repository of wisdom and morality. Preservationism is nevertheless different from conservationism, in that while the former implies restricting the impact of humans on the environment, the latter is usually taken to imply protecting nature in order to satisfy long-term human ends. The wilderness ethic of deep ecology is often linked to the ideas of the US libertarian thinker, Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), whose quest for spiritual truth and self-reliance led him to flee from civilised life and live for years in virtual solitude, close to nature, an experience described in *Walden* (1854).
- Population control. Although ecologists from many traditions have shown a concern about the exponential rise in the human population, deep ecologists have placed a particular emphasis on the issue of population. They have often called for a substantial decrease in the human population as the only way of ensuring the flourishing of non-human life. To this end, some deep ecologists have rejected aid to the developing world, called for a reduction in birth rates, especially in the developing world, or argued that immigration from the developing world to the developed world should be stopped.
- Simple living. Deep ecologists believe that humans have no right to reduce the richness and diversity of nature except, as Naess put it, to satisfy vital needs. This is a philosophy of 'walking lighter on the Earth'. It certainly implies an emphasis on promoting the quality of life ('being') rather than the quality of possessions ('having'), and is often linked to a postmaterial model of self-realisation, commonly understood as self-actualisation. Self-actualisation implies the transcendence of egoism and materialism, enabling people to be 'inwardly rich but outwardly poor'.
- Bioregionalism. This is the idea that both nature and human society should be reconfigured in line with naturally-defined regions, each 'bioregion', in effect, being an ecosystem. Such thinking is clearly at odds with established territorial divisions, based on national or state borders. Although deep ecologists seldom look to prescribe how humans should organise themselves within such bioregions, there is general support for voluntary associations of self-reliant, self-supporting, autonomous communities.

Criticisms of deep ecology

The role and importance of deep ecology within larger green political thought has been a matter of considerable controversy. Not only has the significance of deep ecology in terms of the philosophical and ethical debates it has stimulated, greatly outweighed its practical importance as an within the green movement, but it has also attracted sometimes passionate criticism from fellow ecologists. Although most of these criticisms are rooted in the perspective of humanist ecology, some of them have been specifically associated with social ecology. Humanist ecologists roundly reject the idea that their views amount merely to a 'shallow' version of deep ecology, arguing instead that deep ecology is flawed philosophically, morally and politically. The philosophical flaw of deep ecology, from this perspective, is the belief that anthropocentrism and ecology are mutually exclusive. In reality, human needs and ends can only genuinely be served by an appreciation of ecological balance. A concern with human well-being, or at least long-term and sustainable human well-being, thus requires respect for ecology rather than its betrayal. Moreover, to throw into question the entirety of modern western thought, on the grounds that it is mechanistic and reductionist, as some deep ecologists suggest, is dangerously unbalanced and risks, for instance, rejecting all the developments that have been associated with modern medicine. The moral flaws of deep ecology stem from the idea of the 'intrinsic' value of nature. In the humanist view, environmental ethics cannot be non-anthropocentric because morality is a human construct: 'good' and 'bad' can only be defined in terms of human well-being, or at least the well-being of complex and sophisticated species that have a capacity for self-reflection and suffering. Any attempt to construct a non-anthropocentric ethical theory runs into contradictions and confusions. For example, if nature is an inherently benevolent force, how can earthquakes, droughts and floods be explained, and is it possible to sustain the idea of biocentric equality when this implies that the smallpox virus and a dolphin have equal value?

The political flaws of deep ecology derive from the fact that by refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of human interests, deep ecology has a very limited capacity to promote political activism or attract widespread popular support. Deep ecology thus tends to be apolitical and elitist, in part because it is so openly dismissive of the values and aspirations of the mass of humankind. In addition, the political activism that deep ecology has inspired has commonly attracted criticism. This is because deep ecology's assumption that conventional politics is tainted by anthropocentric concerns and priorities has encouraged activists to engage in direct action, which often involves damage to property and sometimes extends to wider threats and intimidation. Examples of this can be seen in the case of radical environmentalist groups such as Earth First! and the Animal Liberation Front. Such direct action tends, nevertheless, to be counter-productive (because it portrays green activists as reckless and irresponsible), and it may be linked to an anti-human philosophy that, arguably, allows activists to disregard the suffering that is inflicted on people.

The tensions between deep ecology and social ecology have been exposed in particular by the US anarchist social philosopher, Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), the leading proponent of 'social ecology'. In the first place, social ecologists have condemned deep ecology for failing to recognise the impact on the relationship between humankind and nature of social or economic systems, in which case industrialisation, capitalism, patriarchy or whatever are merely seen as expressions of the 'Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm'. Deep ecology is concerned about 'inner' revolution, a transformation of consciousness, which it naively believes can be achieved without an accompanying process of radical social change. In that sense, deep ecology can be said to be socially conservative. Second, Bookchin placed special emphasis on the extent to which deep ecologist's attempts to 're-enchant' of nature have encouraged them to turn their backs on rationalist thought and to embrace instead mysticism, dismisses by Bookchin as 'vulgar Californian spiritualism' or 'Eco-la-la'. From the perspective of social ecology, reason and critical approaches to thinking are part of the solution to the environmental crisis, rather than its underlying cause.