

Do We Know Where Our Deep Ecology is?

John Johnson

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Way back in the 1970s, a few nature-oriented philosophers came up with a visionary framework for viewing the world. They called it deep ecology, or biocentrism. The premise is pretty simple: Humans are not the end all, be all of evolution, but merely a strand in the web of life, with no inherent right to wreck everything and spoil the grand evolutionary pageant for everyone else. Deep ecology says that all living beings and life-giving systems are equal and have an intrinsic value, beyond what value humans may ascribe. In other words, all life and life-giving systems have inherent worth and a right to exist for their own sake, regardless of what kind of money people think they can make off them. This new worldview remained relatively obscure throughout the 70s.

Enter Earth First!, which exploded onto the environmental activist scene in 1980. Vowing not to compromise, EF! promised to use nonviolent direct action to protect wilderness and wild nature—in North America and around the globe—in accordance with a biocentric outlook. With its radical analysis and equally radical actions, EF! scandalized the mainstream conservation movement and scared the piss out of the protectors of the US corporate-welfare state. As EF! chapters spread like wildfire, physical and ideological attacks inevitably followed. A surprising amount of this came from the left, which claimed a monopoly on advocating for the victims of capitalism. Many of the left's armchair quarterbacks resented a new worldview horning in, especially one claiming that humans might not be the center of the universe after all. Despite these ideological attacks, and repression from the Long Arm of the Law, deep ecology spread.

Now, it must be said that some of the early and most vocal proponents of deep ecology in and around EF! were not the most socially minded folks. They denigrated humans and the role that humans could play in a healthy ecosystem. Unfortunately, many folks took this misanthropic tendency to represent the entirety of the biocentric movement; some still do. There were some, however, who saw no conflict between biocentrism and other strains of anticapitalist, anti-oppression and anti-hierarchical thought. Many of these folks joined EF! and insisted that deep ecology was not anti-human but pro-nature, pro-diversity and pro-freedom.

The debates that followed, in the pages of the *EF! Journal* and other publications (as well as around the campfire), contributed much to the evolution of bio-centric worldviews. However, the combination of government repression, ego battles and ideological conflict put a tremendous strain on EF! as a cohesive movement. The 1990s saw the remains of the EF! movement become more socially conscious in an effort to promote a revolutionary worldview that was still biocentric, but not anti-human.

Judi Bari's brilliant essay, "Revolutionary Ecology/" explains why deep ecology and biocentrism are an excellent framework for developing a coherent critique of the dominant industrial paradigm:

@“The fact that deep ecology is a revolutionary philosophy is one of the reasons EF! was targeted for disruption and annihilation by the FBI. The fact that we did not recognize it as revolutionary is one of the reasons we were so unprepared for the magnitude of the attack. If we are to continue, EF! and the entire ecology movement

must adjust their tactics to the profound changes that are needed to bring society into balance with nature. One way that we can do this is to broaden our focus.

“Of course... it is entirely appropriate for an ecology movement to center on protecting irreplaceable wilderness areas. But to define our movement as being concerned with ‘wilderness only/ as EF! did in the 1980s, is self-defeating. You cannot seriously address the destruction of wilderness without addressing the society that is destroying it. It’s about time for the ecology movement (and I’m not just talking about EF! here) to stop considering itself as separate from the social justice movement. The same power that manifests itself as resource extraction in the countryside manifests itself as racism, classism and human exploitation in the city. The ecology movement must recognize that we are just one front in a long, proud history of resistance.

“A revolutionary ecology movement must also organize among poor and working people. With the exception of the toxics movement and the Native land rights movement, most US environmentalists are white and privileged. This group is too invested in the system to pose it much of a threat. A revolutionary ideology in the hands of privileged people can indeed bring about some disruption and change in the system. But a revolutionary ideology in the hands of working people can bring that system to a halt. For it is the working people who have their hands on the machinery. And only by stopping the machinery of destruction can we ever hope to stop this madness.”~ In addition to opposition from the human-centered left, EF! and deep ecology suffered a major ideological counter-offensive by defenders of the status quo. From Christian extremists to pro-industry property rights advocates, deep ecology was soundly flogged in mainstream arenas of debate. Always on the defensive, many activists felt that they had no choice but to focus on their specific campaigns to protect nature; they simply did not have the energy to engage in a philosophical war. After all, it’s the Earth that comes first, not Earth First! or deep ecology. After the government repression manifested, many onetime EF!ers chose to express their worldview and activism in ways that were not so blatantly radical, tactically or philosophically.

Despite the ongoing attacks from the left and the right, and despite the fact that EF! is a much smaller movement than it once was, we have had a huge impact on conservation and radical politics. Many former EF!ers now run small, grassroots conservation projects that promote biocentrism in deed if not in name. Deep ecology and biocentric thought are now included in environmental ethics textbooks and have taken a rightful place in the spectrum of environmental philosophy.

But where is our deep ecology *today*?

I spoke with several other EF!ers to get their thoughts on this matter. An activist from Cascadia told me that he thinks we have ceded many valuable avenues of debate and action to the mainstream sectors of the movement. He thinks that we focus excessively on direct action, to the detriment of street theater, writing, and good, old-fashioned outreach and education. Another activist, who splits time between the Sonoran Desert and the southern Appalachian mountains, feels that the historical lack of recognition for social issues on the biocentric scene has led to a sort of over-

compensation by EF!ers, in that now biocentrism gets pushed to the background in favor of an increased focus on social issues. She recommends that the movement not shy away from either one: “Biocentrism is about our relationships with the Earth and can easily be connected to anti-oppression, as that is about relationships with and among people. It all boils down to respect.”

However, an activist from Ireland reports that his collective consists of a hybrid mix of anarchists, eco-anarchists, deep ecologists, social ecologists and socialists, and, “Our feeling is that this is the direction the movement is going (at least in Ireland) among those who are seriously involved/’ Yet another activist, from Florida, disagrees: “I think the ‘unbridgeable chasm’ that the social ecology scene used to babble about has turned out to be quite crossable after all. Fve been seeing many urban people trying to connect themselves deeply to the Earth, despite the spreading diseases of concrete and injustice acting as barriers.

Are we doing enough to answer Bari’s call to synthesize an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal critique with the insights of biocentric thought? I hope so.

Deep ecology remains a viable worldview and belief system. The problem is that EF! and others have chosen to focus more on tactics, campaigns and actions than on proclaiming that a new paradigm is needed and that a different way of looking at the world is possible. An influx of movement-hoppers and social justice anarchists has further diluted this message. The radical ecology movement has been watered down.

Now, don’t get me wrong—I think that cross-pollination with other movements is important. But we have a unique and important contribution to bring to the table, and we should be proud of that uniqueness rather than trying to downplay or hide it. Nature teaches us that there is strength in diversity and that some specialization is important to the functioning of healthy biotic communities. EF! and deep ecology have made lasting and important contributions to the overall critique of the modern, industrial commodification of life, and anarchist and social justice philosophies have added important insights to the radical environmental movement. But we must maintain our identity. Solidarity is not necessarily served by subsuming our worldviews and actions to those of others. We are all stronger when we say, loud and clear, that we want justice for wild nature, including humanity.

The radical ecology movement has also become increasingly young, urban centered and—judging , from attendance at gatherings—overwhelmingly punk. Now, this is not a bad trend in and of itself. However, like the anarchist scene in general, I see the EF! scene becoming cliquish and insular. If you do not have a dirty pair of Carhartts with punk patches, 10 facial piercings and/or cool tattoos, then you must be an infiltrator. At the last Eastern Forest Defense Action Camp in Virginia, a straight-looking, veteran forest campaigner overheard folks whispering about whether he was a cop; he almost left. At the Wyoming Round River Rendezvous in 2001, a friend of mine was accused of being an “eco-yuppie” or cop because he had some new Patagonia gear on. At the rendezvous in Maine, I saw folks camping in the middle of a patch of blooming Pink Lady’s Slippers. This rare orchid is losing important forest habitat across the eastern

US. But a bunch of radical environmentalists were camped on them and trampling them on the way to get drunk at the rowdy fire. Now, I like punk rock, have a pair of dirty Carhartts, and I like the rowdy fire, but let's be realistic, y'all: The revolution will not be made wholly by Crass fans.

If we are going to survive the current round of repression, we have got to be a more tolerant and diverse bunch. Now, I'm not interested in replicating the long-lost glory days of EF!, but a lot of those folks developed some amazing rhetorical, tactical and philosophical skills and insights that we would be remiss not to learn from and, where appropriate, revive.

Never mind your deep ecology, where's mine?

Of course I've been guilty of subsuming my deeply held biocentric beliefs in the interest of a campaign. During the lead up to Mountain Justice Summer (MJS), we discussed how we were going to be presenting the issue of protecting the Appalachian mountains and forests from the depredations of the coal industry. Time and time again, it came up that we would have greater appeal if we kept the focus on the impacts of mountaintop removal on the human residents of the mountains. Many folks even went so far as to say things that devalued a biocentric approach to the issue and that invalidate my right to defend the mountains because I am not a "member of the community." Well I am a member of the community, I may not live in the coalfields, but the forests, rivers, critters, plants and mountains are my kin and life-support system, I have a vested interest in stopping their destruction. It doesn't matter if i'm from there or not. Despite the ideological conflicts, MJS managed to present the ecological and cultural dimensions of this struggle.

I don't want to come across as too harsh, I am proud of the progress that Earth First! and others in the radical environmental movement have made over the last 25 years. However, the question remains: What M are we going to do in the next 25? I hope that we will get more people out in nature, I hope we will facilitate more people falling in love with the wild and recognizing its inherent worth, I hope we will continue to integrate social justice and deep ecology, I hope that we will see more permaculture, urban and rural, I hope that we will defend diversity in nature and culture. And I hope we will continue to contribute to the resistance by offering life-affirming, ecological worldviews as alternatives to the current death machine and its selfish, destructive dominant paradigm.

John Johnson is an activist affiliated with Katuah Earth First! and Mountain Justice Summer. He looks forward to discussing this topic with y'all around the campfire at the 2006 Round River Rendezvous in Southern Appalachia.

The Ted K Archive

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