

■ THE CUTTING EDGE

Deep Ecology And Its Critics

KIRKPATRICK SALE

For me, the first indication that there was a concerted campaign afoot came at the Socialist Scholars Conference a year ago, where I appeared on a panel with Murray Bookchin, the author and co-founder of the Institute for Social Ecology, to discuss "The Politics of Ecology." Bookchin gave one of his elegant, impassioned, learned presentations, but I was surprised that it had a harsh edge to it of sourness and rancor—directed, it became clear, against those who might hold to any of the tenets of deep ecology, particularly the ideas embraced in the term "biocentrism." Deep ecology, it seemed, was a part of the broad ecological movement in America that was wrongheaded and dangerous, diverting attention from the serious tasks of eliminating capitalism and restructuring class society, and was in some way a threat to the reasonable, right-minded form of ecological truth—whose name was, so I gathered, social ecology.

Until that moment, I sincerely and naïvely thought that Bookchin and I were on the same wavelength (indeed, friends), that there was really only one great big ecology movement and that we shared an essentially similar position on the environmental destruction of the earth. But I suddenly realized that, in Bookchin's mind anyway, there was a battle going on within this movement and that the *social* ecologists were determined to distance themselves from—and argue their work superior to—all *other* sorts of ecologists. Not only that, but from the tone of his remarks (which was echoed by a colleague he had installed on the panel, Ynestra King, also from the Institute for Social Ecology) it seemed clear that they were actually out to destroy the influence of those thinkers and activists they found distasteful: the deep ecologists, in particular, but also members of the Earth First! and bioregional movements, who might have similar ideas, and those they regarded as in the "spiritual" wing of the American Green and ecofeminist movements. The awful, acrid smell of righteous factionalism was in the air.

Next came a broadside presented by Bookchin to the national Green gathering in Amherst, Massachusetts, last July, a paper starkly and forthrightly called "Social Ecology Versus 'Deep Ecology.'" In extraordinary language that was, I understand, shocking to and totally unexpected by most of the participants, Bookchin laid into those who fell short of the social ecology ideal, attacking the deep ecologists in particular with a vengeance—literally—that I don't think has

been equaled in political disputes since the 1930s. "They are barely disguised racists, survivalists, macho Daniel Boones and outright social reactionaries," Bookchin said, who offer "a vague, formless, often self-contradictory and invertebrate [*sic*] thing called 'deep ecology'" and a "kind of crude eco-brutalism" similar to Hitler's. Deep ecologists "feed on human disasters, suffering and misery, preferably to Third World countries"; their ideas are "a bottomless pit . . . an ideological toxic dump"; they are guilty of "a sinister function [that] legitimates extremely regressive, primitivistic and even highly reactionary notions." And so on and on, twenty-three pages of it.

Thereafter, the arrows from the social ecology quiver fairly flew. A special issue of the *Fifth Estate*, a Detroit-based alternative newspaper, featured a twenty-eight-page article, "How Deep Is Deep Ecology?"; a widely circulated, photocopied manuscript purporting to discredit Earth First!, the radical environmental group whose members have largely identified with deep ecology in the last few years arrived in the mail; the December 1987 *Utne Reader* gave somewhat scandalized prominence to an *Earth First!* article that spoke favorably of AIDS as, in effect, a welcome and necessary control on human global population; a lengthy, heated letter from Ynestra King was printed in *The Nation* [December 12, 1987], attacking deep ecology as "a philosophy utterly bereft of compassion for human beings, with no analysis of U.S. imperialism" (she followed that with a column in *Zeta* saying that "the sooner the [American] greens are rid of deep ecology the better"); and the winter issue of *Kick It Over*, a Toronto quarterly, carried a special double-barreled section attacking deep ecology, one salvo from a Bookchinite ecofeminist, who charged that it requires "that women remain egoless, unformed, and supine," the other a reprint of Bookchin's July blast.

Quite a parade. And, however much light, obviously a lot of heat.

So, now let us ask: What is this deep ecology, and why does it arouse so much passion?

Deep ecology is a perspective—a "philosophy," some call it, others prefer simply movement—that stems from the work of Arne Naess, a Norwegian academic philosopher, done in the early 1970s. He used the term "deep" to distinguish his sense of a probing, questioning, challenging kind of ecology from the more conventional, apolitical kind, drawing a line between the biocentric vision of deep ecology (which regards the human strictly as an equal participant in the biosphere) and the anthropocentric stance of most professional ecologists and environmentalists (by which the human species, regarding itself as superior, deems all other species and resources as there for its use and enhancement). Shallow ecology, Naess said, the kind found in the universities, "does not ask what kind of a society would be the best for maintaining a particular ecosystem—that is considered a question for value theory, for politics, for ethics." In short, for deep ecologists.

After nearly a decade of writing, Naess joined with George Sessions, professor of philosophy at California's Si-

This article is part of a continuing series on new trends and ideas in nontraditional politics.

erra College, to develop a set of fundamental propositions for deep ecology. These basic principles, first published in 1984, contain what there is of a platform for the movement. In summary, they stress three points:

First, all life, human and nonhuman, has value in itself, independent of human purposes, and humans have no right to reduce its richness and diversity except for *vital* needs.

Second, humans at present are far too numerous and intrusive with respect to other life forms and the living earth, with disastrous consequences for all, and must achieve a "substantial decrease" in population to permit the flourishing of both human and nonhuman life.

Third, to achieve this requisite balance, significant changes in human economic, technical and ideological structures must be made, stressing not bigness, growth and higher standards of living but sustainable societies emphasizing the (nonmaterial) quality of life.

From these original basic ideas, deep ecologists have articulated a series of other key concepts in the last few years, around which general agreement seems to have developed:

The primacy of wilderness. Wilderness has a special value of its own, not only as a place where humans may understand "the intuitions of organic wholeness" (as Sessions and his colleague Bill Devall have put it), an essential and long-neglected need for true psychological health, but also where the intricate panoply of other species may "live and blossom for themselves," unhindered and apart. In the words of *Earth First!* editor Dave Foreman, "Wilderness is the real world [and] preservation of wildness and native diversity is the most important issue."

A sense of place. Basic to human well-being is rootedness, a sense of knowing a particular stretch of earth, experiencing a home. One seeks to find, and learn to live in, a particular place and to let it be, as ecologist Paul Shepard has said of the Australian aborigine, "the archive where the individual moves simultaneously through his personal and tribal past, renewing contact with crucial points, a journey into time and space refreshing the meaning of his own being."

Opposition to industrial society. The very basis of in-

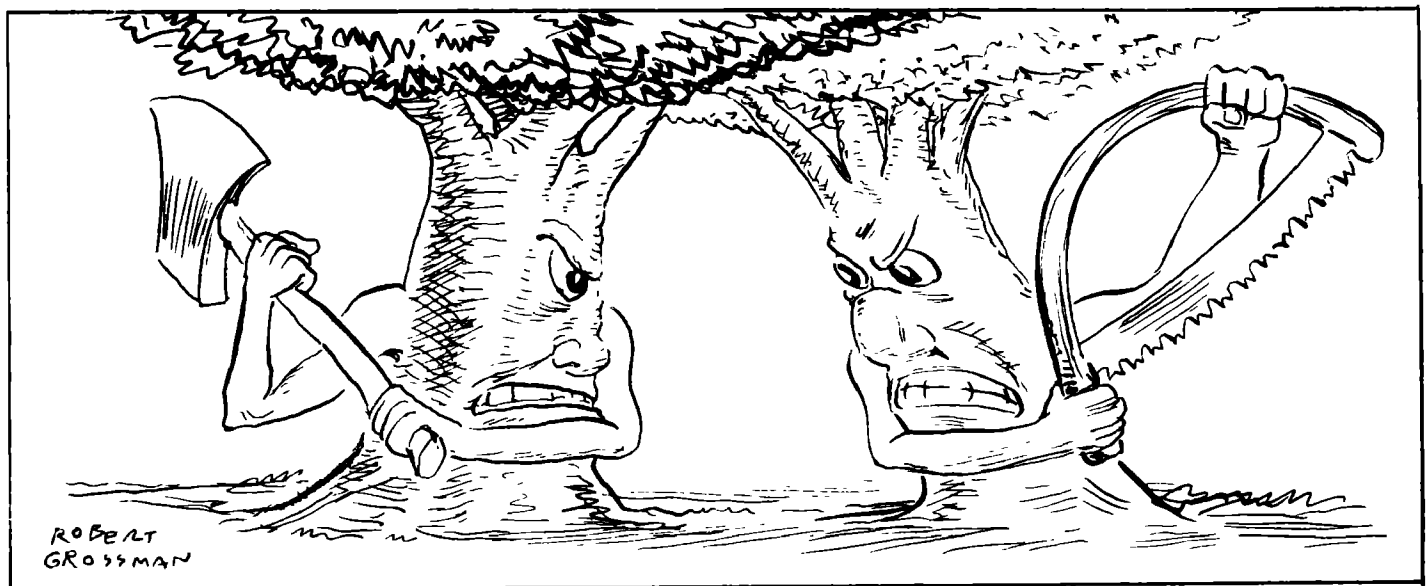
dustrial civilization, in both its state-capitalist and corporate-capitalist forms, is the separation from and exploitation of the natural world. Deep ecology therefore opposes the industrial system and the myths of progress and technological dominance that drive it, and offers itself, as scholar and *Earth First!* member Christopher Manes says, "as an alternative to the whole of Technological Culture, exposing its irrationality within the larger context of Earth's natural cycles."

Opposition to stewardship. The trouble with the supposedly benign idea of the "wise stewardship" of nature is that it implies human decision-making, human intervention, human use and control—as in the root sense of the word, *sty-warden*, the master of the pigsty. As Sessions has said, "It still views the world as a collection of natural resources primarily for human use."

Identification with primal peoples. In general, it is in the traditions of the nature-based peoples of the world—the "primal" peoples such as the American Indians and other representatives of the paleolithic tradition—that teachings and models for ecological consciousness are to be found. As historian J. Donald Hughes puts it, "The American Indians' cultural patterns, based on careful hunting and agriculture carried on according to spiritual perceptions of nature, actually preserved the earth and life on the earth."

Spirituality. Rationality has its place, but part of one's understanding of nature may also come from intuition, emotion, experience and a spiritual connection with the non-human world. Arne Naess has written: "Most people in deep ecology have had the feeling—usually, but not always, in nature—that they are connected with something greater than their ego. . . . Insofar as these deep feelings are religious, deep ecology has a religious component . . . fundamental intuitions that everyone must cultivate if he or she is to have a life based on values and not function like a computer."

Self-realization. The true realization of the individual self is in a close and unfolding identification, spiritual and intellectual, with the larger biotic "self"; the more diverse and complex the larger one, the richer and more developed the



smaller one. As Naess has put it, "The self-realization we experience when we identify with the universe is heightened by an increase in the number of ways in which individuals, societies, and even species and life forms realize themselves."

Now those hardly sound like the elements of fascism, do they?

By listing such a set of general concepts, I don't mean to suggest that there is any absolute agreement among people who call themselves deep ecologists, or that all of them formulate their beliefs exactly this way. There is no oath-taking, no litmus-testing, in this any more than in any other such movement—people differ, as do interpretations and emphases and slogans. Nevertheless, after a decade of fairly extensive work, I think one can determine at least the outlines of a deep ecology perspective and see the beginnings of a real movement [see box, page 674].

Now, it is easy enough to see why all of this might be upsetting to those in the political mainstream and to traditional socialists as much as diehard capitalists. Taken in the broad, it represents a fundamental challenge not only to the typical American technological way of life but to much of what constitutes Western civilization itself.

It does seem surprising, though, that these positions would have so alarmed other parts of the ecological world that there should suddenly be an outpouring against it. I must say I am at a loss to explain it adequately. It can't really be a battle over turf, since there's obviously plenty of room for all kinds of viewpoints here, or over power, since so far there is none. And of course, there is a great danger that this sort of a frontal attack is far more likely to lead to enervating and fractious bickering and backbiting of the kinds that destroy social movements than it is to a thoughtful, accommodative synthesis and a restrengthened movement. To me it is not only all very sad but bewildering. But, in the spirit of accommodation rather than confrontation, and in the hope that the fissures can be bridged rather than broadened, let me discuss what I see as the three major issues the critics of deep ecology have raised.

The first and probably most fundamental charge is that deep ecology has no explicit "social" analysis—that is, it does not adequately talk about matters of class, race, injustice, capitalism, imperialism and the like, and instead tends to regard humans collectively and hence tar the whole species for environmental degradations with a brush that would be more appropriately aimed at specific social institutions and systems. Bookchin sees it as preaching "a gospel of a kind of 'original sin' that accuses a vague species called 'Humanity'—as though people of color are equatable with whites, women with men, the Third World with the First, the poor with the rich, the exploited with their exploiters."

I think it is true that most deep ecologists *have* tended to see humans as a species, since that is, after all, the ecological way to regard this particular large mammal of *Homo* genus, and I think that this has largely been useful: useful to help see, in planetary terms, overriding nation and culture and ideology, the large consequences of a triumphant, exploitative species enjoying a population boom and technological prowess. From this larger perspective, it does not really

matter what the petty political and social arrangements are that have led to our ecological crisis, or even what dire consequences those arrangements have had for certain individuals, types, nations or races. What matters is to understand the total effect of this crisis on the living earth and our fellow species, and the peril we have brought to them. This perspective does not deny the awful character of industrial society or its inherent destructiveness (to humans as well as nature); it says, rather, that the path to fundamental restructuring best comes about through the development of a new and profound ecological consciousness, which itself can only come about through, in philosopher Thomas Berry's words, "the reinvention of the human at the species level" and the understanding that "we must reapply for admission to the biosphere."

It is not that the social dimension or an analysis of capitalism or a perception of racial injustice is absent from the deep ecology philosophy. In fact, Devall and Sessions, among others, are quite explicit about the evils of what they call the "dominant world view" and the need for direct action to challenge it, and most of the deep ecology activists I have met have quite a clear idea of the nature of repression and subjugation in this society and have often put their bodies on the line in resistance to it. But it is probably accurate to say that deep ecologists think primarily in biotic rather than social terms. They regard the fundamental issue to be the destruction of nature and the suffering of the rapidly dying species and ecosystems as distinct from those who regard the basic issue as the absence of justice and the suffering of human populations.

That, as I see it, is a clear difference in emphasis, in concern, in dedication—but not, God knows, such an extreme difference that it should prompt invective and opposition and outrage. There is no need, I would have thought, for pistols-at-dawn rhetoric.

The second and related issue is that of population size, specifically the deep ecologists' contention that a significant reduction in human numbers is essential for the proper balance and functioning of the biosphere. This, it is said, is Malthusian, holding, as *Fifth Estate* claimed, that "there are too many people and not enough resources to keep them alive" and that "scarcity and famine are thus explained as natural phenomena." This, it is said, is callous and cruel, akin to genocide, since it must have in mind targeting the poorest, the darkest and the sickest, designing their demise, according to Bookchin, "by measures that are virtually eco-fascist."

It is always difficult to deal with the population question, but for starters it should be noted that those deep ecologists who have confronted it do *not* begin with Malthusian assumptions and certainly do not arrive at Malthusian conclusions. Their argument is not—repeat not—that population reduction is necessary because of inadequate food in the world, since it is fairly evident (and the work of Frances Moore Lappé tends to confirm) that present populations could be adequately fed if political and economic arrangements were different, although long-term food stability would certainly depend on both intra- and interregional

population distribution. The argument is, rather, that sustaining human population at present (not to mention predicted) levels puts too great a strain on all the resources, life forms and systems of the earth. This affects most particularly our fellow species, whom we are killing at the estimated rate of one an hour to maintain ourselves at these numbers, but also the world's fertile soil, its waters, its air, its climatic and hydrologic systems—in short, the ability of the biosphere to survive.

Such a position does not argue that capitalism is not egregiously at fault for much of this assault, although it is patently clear that industrialized socialist systems are every bit as guilty in kind if not degree, as are many of the colonized states in the orbit of either empire. Indeed, the logic holds, as Devall and Sessions say explicitly, that it is the industrialized societies—particularly the most rapacious, exploitative, wasteful and polluting one of all, found in this country—that are overpopulated the most, if I may put it that way. *Their* numbers (especially their wealthier numbers) are sustained at far higher living standards and do far greater ultimate damage to the biosphere. Nowhere here is there the idea that it's desirable or inevitable—or even useful, in biospheric terms—for poor people to die off; quite the contrary.

There is even less of a basis for the charges of genocide

and fascism. In the deep ecology literature a good deal of attention has been given to the levels at which it might be desirable for the human population to stabilize—the figures I've seen range between 100 million (Naess's suggestion) and 1 billion—but very little to the means for doing this, except Naess's "without revolution or dictatorship." The only other references I've found are to such vague ideas as Foreman's "over the long run," Naess's "through mild but tenacious political and economic measures," and Devall and Sessions' "the longer we wait, the more drastic will be the measures needed." There is nowhere any hint of a suggestion that people should be gassed, forced into starvation or sterilized against their will, that one type or race or nation is to be preferred, that there is to be some agency or government or ruler to achieve this—all that is born, unfortunately, in the minds of deep ecology's detractors.

The third substantial charge, following from this, has to do with the issue of biocentric egalitarianism, or the place of the human in the natural world. Deep ecology, it is said, is essentially misanthropic, emphasizing as it does a reduction in human numbers and a relegation of the welfare of the human to a status secondary to that of the biosphere as a whole. "Deep ecologists have inverted the relationship of domination of people over nature," Ynestra King has written, "into one of nature over people." *Fifth Estate* charges that, "taking pains to defend every form of life from whales down to even the . . . smallpox virus," deep ecologists want "only human beings . . . banished from creation for their depredations."

Deep ecologists would hardly deny the specialness of the human animal, I feel sure—Naess himself emphasizes that humans have "extraordinary" and particular traits—but they would probably argue that this specialness has tended to separate the human from nature in such a way as to allow the species' destructive characteristics to dominate, for which human societies since the Neolithic have been particularly notable. Now that these characteristics, embodied and empowered in industrial society as never before, threaten the globe with nothing less than ecocide, it is hard not to feel a certain antipathy to them and a certain fear and suspicion of the species that has been endowed with them.

Misanthropy, in my dictionary, is defined as "a hatred or distrust of mankind," but it seems useful to distinguish between the two. It is probably true that most deep ecologists are distrustful, or fearful, of the human role in the biosphere, but very doubtful that they hate the human species and wish its extinction. I am sure there are in the movement those who are led to despair of the human condition and those who would say that the ongoing survival of the living earth and its biosphere is more important than the survival of the human species. Indeed, it is plausibly argued that the survival of arboreal (especially tropical) species is far more important to the health of the biosphere as a whole than the survival of any mammalian primate, inasmuch as it is the former that are chiefly responsible for the processing of carbon dioxide and oxygen necessary for most of life. I do not see how that position, however, could be regarded as equivalent to the hatred of humans or the desire for their banishment.

DEEP ECOLOGY IN DEPTH

The basic deep ecology library includes:

Deep Ecology, by Bill Devall and George Sessions (Gibbs M. Smith, Layton, Utah, 1985)

Deep Ecology, Michael Tobias, ed (Avant Books, San Diego, 1985)

The Trumpeter, Fall 1986, Spring and Fall 1987

Shifting Paradigms: From Technocrat to Planetary Person, by Alan Drengson (Lightstar Press, Victoria, B.C., 1983)

Inquiry 16, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements: A Summary," by Arne Naess (Oslo, 1973)

Philosophical Inquiry 8, "The Deep Ecology Movement," by Arne Naess (1986)

Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: An Outline of Ecosophy, by Arne Naess (Cambridge University Press, 1988)

Natural Resources Journal 20, "The Deep Ecology Movement," by Bill Devall (1980)

Environmental Review 11, "The Deep Ecology Movement: A Review," by George Sessions (1987)

The Ecologist 14, "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of Our Time," by Warwick Fox (1984)

Earth First!, June, September, November 1987

Deep ecology study groups exist in both Europe and Australia, and many Green organizations in Europe have worked to incorporate specifically biocentric policies into their agendas. In this country, many parts of the bioregional movement have embraced the deep ecology perspective, and the first North American Bioregional Congress, in 1984, endorsed the Naess-Sessions basic principles. *Earth First!* groups around the country have explicitly identified themselves with deep ecology concepts.

Now it is true that, in trying to put its quite radical message across, both Dave Foreman and *Earth First!* have printed careless things that have, generally out of context, upset some people and led to charges of misanthropy of the "hatred" kind. Foreman once asserted, when asked in an interview about starvation in Ethiopia, that he thought "the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve there," certainly an unnecessarily heartless way of putting it, although the point he was trying to make is that the Ethiopian population has overshot the capacity of its devastated environment to produce food, and that outside aid might alleviate that for the moment but wouldn't do anything to achieve the population reduction that is necessary for ecological balance there. Similarly, the *Earth First!* article on AIDS argued that, in spite of the suffering involved, it was a "welcome development" in the necessary reduction of human population, especially since (unlike war or environmental catastrophe) it appears to affect only humanity and not other species. Call it callous, if you will, but it is meant to be descriptive, not prescriptive—to suggest that the earth as a living ecosystem might have its own defense mechanisms, including viruses that strike at species that overstress it, to protect it in times of crisis. Agree or disagree, that is not misanthropy or fascism.

Other criticisms of deep ecology have been raised over the past year, mostly of the same order and too elaborate and arduous to rehash here. I suspect more will emerge in coming years, as the tenets of the biocentric point of view become more developed and widespread and the need for some such ecological consciousness in the face of ecocide becomes increasingly obvious to the population at large. There is every reason to suppose that some of those criticisms, the ones given to civil discourse and respectful language, will lead to rethinking and reformulation of elements of the philosophy, which after all is still quite new and still has much homework to do.

But there can hardly be any alteration of the basic deep ecology principles or the world view, may I say the paradigm, in which those are embedded. As I have tried to elucidate them here, they represent not only a new (and to their adherents, necessary) way to re-evaluate the world and the place of the human in it but also the core of the ecological vision that is leading people to reorder their lives and renew their actions. The tenets may not be perfectly formulated yet, and may admit of emendation as the struggle continues, but they certainly seem informed by exactly the kind of ecological consciousness that will permit us, if anything will, to save the biosphere before it is too late.

I cannot see why those principles should evoke anger and calumny, even among those whose analyses may differ and whose interests may lie elsewhere. Some participants in the debate may of course disagree, but I do think the questions here are ones of emphasis and priority, not of fundamental incompatibility. Social ecologists may want to say that ecological exploitation stems from social exploitation and concentrate their critique on what they see as hierarchy and patriarchy; deep ecologists will probably say that social exploitation stems from ecological exploitation and prefer to

concentrate on biocentrism and wilderness. These both seem like sensible paths, and I don't see the point of either school trying to trash the other, working toward some imagined dominant theoretical purity, particularly since the ranks of ecologists of any kind are not all that numerous to begin with, and the job we have to do in reversing the trend of five centuries of Western civilization is enormous.

Perhaps there is a basic natural principle we all ought to take to heart—that of cooperation with diversity, much as the rain forest works, or a coral reef or an oak tree. As usual, I would suggest, nature has the answer. □