

Introduction To Deep Ecology

Deep ecology is a new way to think about our relationship to the Earth - and thinking is a prelude to action

An Interview with Michael E. Zimmerman, by Alan AtKisson

One of the articles in Global Climate Change (IC#22)
Summer 1989, Page 24



*A philosophy is, among other things, a system of thought that governs conduct. But in the original Greek it meant "**love of wisdom**" - and we need all the wisdom we can get to face the implications of global climate change. Several new philosophies have developed in response to the worsening environmental crisis, and among the most interesting is something called "**deep ecology***

." It calls for nothing less than a complete overhaul of the way humans live on the Earth.

Deep ecology is not without its critics, nor its competitors. And like any radically new way of thinking, it raises more questions than it answers. But since every major change of direction in humanity's recent history has been supported - or ignited - by a new philosophy, its appearance is a very hopeful sign.

Michael E. Zimmerman is Professor of Philosophy at Tulane University, New Orleans, and was recently named to the Chair of his department. He has written widely on technology and the environment and recently completed a second book on the work of Martin Heidegger. In our issue on militarism (IC #20), he wrote on the distorted mythologies that drive the arms race and the new mythologies we must develop to achieve "something other than war."

Recently Michael was in Seattle to deliver a lecture on deep ecology to philosophy students at Seattle University. We took the opportunity to speak with him about deep ecology, its relationship to ecofeminism, the mystery of postmodernism, and how a philosophy might change the world.

Alan: What is "deep ecology?"

Michael: Deep ecology is an environmental movement initiated by a Norwegian philosopher, Arnie Naess, in 1972. He wasn't the first to dream up the idea of a radical change in humanity's relationship to nature, but he coined the term "deep ecology" and helped to give it a theoretical foundation. Deep ecology portrays itself as "deep" because it asks deeper questions about the place of human life, who we are.

Deep ecology is founded on two basic principles: one is a scientific insight into the interrelatedness of all systems of life on Earth, together with the idea that *anthropocentrism* - human-centeredness - is a misguided way of seeing things. Deep ecologists say that an *eco*centric attitude is more consistent with the truth about the nature of life on Earth. Instead of regarding humans as something completely unique or chosen by God, they see us as integral threads in the fabric of life. They believe we need to develop a less dominating and aggressive posture towards the Earth if we and the planet are to survive.

The second component of deep ecology is what Arnie Naess calls the need for human self-realization. Instead of identifying with our egos or our immediate families, we would learn to identify with trees and animals and plants, indeed the whole ecosphere. This would involve a pretty radical change of consciousness, but it would make our behavior more consistent with

what science tells us is necessary for the well-being of life on Earth. We just wouldn't do certain things that damage the planet, just as you wouldn't cut off your own finger.

Alan: *How does deep ecology relate to ecofeminism? Or do they relate?*

Michael: There are many ecofeminists - people like Joanna Macy for example - who would call themselves deep ecologists, but there are some ecofeminists who've made an important claim against it. They say the real problem isn't anthropocentrism but *androcentrism* - *man*-centeredness. They say that 10,000 years of patriarchy is ultimately responsible for the destruction of the biosphere and the development of authoritarian practices, both socially and environmentally.

Deep ecologists concede that patriarchy has been responsible for a lot of violence against women and nature. But while they oppose the oppression of women and promote egalitarian social relations, deep ecologists also warn that getting rid of patriarchy would not necessarily cure the problem, because you can imagine a society with fairly egalitarian social relationships where nature is still used instrumentally.

Alan: *And then there's a third big player on the scene, "**social ecology**," with its own critique of deep ecology.*

Michael: Right. According to social ecologist Murray Bookchin, deep ecology fails to see that the problem of the environmental crisis is directly linked to authoritarianism and hierarchy. Bookchin says *those* are the real problems, and they're expressed both socially and environmentally.

Alan: *So social ecologists see things like homelessness as being caused by the same mechanisms that cause rainforest devastation?*

Michael: Also racism, sexism, third world exploitation, mistreatment of other marginalized groups - they're all phenomena on the same spectrum. By supposedly not recognizing the social roots of the environmental crisis, deep ecologists invite themselves to be accused of

nature mysticism. Social ecologists say we need to change our *social* structure, and that the elimination of authoritarianism and hierarchy in human society will end the environmental crisis.

Deep ecologists say there's no certainty that would happen. Again, you can imagine a case where social hierarchy is eliminated and yet the new egalitarian society dominates nature just as badly. The problem is that anthropocentrism can take on different forms.

Alan: *So what's their political agenda? What, in practicality, do deep ecologists want?*

Michael: That's an interesting question, because I don't think anyone knows what the best political vehicle is for this new way of thinking. Certainly the old ideologies of left and right are pretty bankrupt, in terms of their ability to address these issues.

Critics have latched onto the fact that on one or two occasions, certain deep ecologists have called for *very* Draconian measures to save the planet from destruction at the hands of human beings. The danger that social ecologists and others see is that what these deep ecologists envision will become a new kind of a totalitarianism or "eco-fascism" - in other words, some kind of world government which would compel people to change their social practices and totally control their behavior to make it consistent with the demands of the ecosphere.

But most deep ecologists talk about the need for decentralization, bioregions, the breakdown of the totalizing impulse of industrialism, an *end* to authoritarianism, and the development of a much more fragmented society with new kinds of relationships. This seems far closer to the truth about deep ecology, and none of it seems consistent with the possibility of totalitarianism.

Alan: *The fact that you're lecturing about deep ecology indicates that it's entered mainstream academic world to some extent. How do you interpret that?*

Michael: That the modern academic world is being taken over by people who were raised in the 1960s, and many of these people have now developed the theoretical language and insights to bring their critiques of racism, sexism, industrialism, authoritarianism, and other "isms," into the

academic marketplace. They make use of the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger and other postmodern theorists who have criticized the whole of western history since Plato as being a series of hidden power trips. The ecological nightmare is supposedly just the latest manifestation of the consequences of those power trips.

Alan: *What's a short definition of "postmodernism?"*

Michael: Postmodernism is a complex phenomenon. It's a movement that looks for alternatives to the basic political, social, epistemological, metaphysical, scientific and gender-oriented categories of modernity. Now, what is "modernity?" Well, you might say it's the Enlightenment and its consequences. It's the assertion of a universal conception of what it means to be human, and this conception turns out to have the same characteristics as educated, white European men.

So postmodernism rejects that conception. It rejects the belief that there's only one kind of rationality, called "analytical scientific" rationality. It rejects anthropocentrism to some extent, and certainly ethnocentrism, as well as sexism and patriarchy. It rejects the belief that we have absolute foundations both for our scientific and our political claims. Postmodernism is about the world that we have lived in since the 1960s, where authority of all kinds has been questioned.

Alan: *In the popular culture, where the term gets thrown around most cavalierly, it seems also to refer to pluralism and a rejection of the linear model of time and progress.*

Michael: Exactly. I just heard a talk by Daniel Dennet, the author of *Brainstorms* and *The Intentional Stance*

. He's a well-known contemporary philosopher, and he said that neurophysiologists are learning to live with the possibility that there is no "central processing unit" in the brain that controls and filters everything, and that there are parallel temporal sequences going on there. For example, when you're dreaming a dream that ends up blending into the sound of the alarm clock, how does that happen? It may be that the sound of the alarm clock triggers off a dream sequence *in reverse*

, but we reorder it in our consciousness so it's dreamt the right way.

Now this sounds to me like another instance in which scientific discovery parallels changes in

political and social views. It's possible that the brain has many different centers which interact - and it *works*. So we can imagine a society which is similarly decentralized, and it can work. We don't have to worry about holding it all together with a centralized, global control system.

Another important postmodernist idea is that modernity is organized by totalizing narratives, or "metanarratives," such as "the triumph of the proletariat" or "the conquest of nature by man." These narratives make a claim to universality and objectivity, but in fact they express some kind of ideological and power-oriented perspective which needs to be deconstructed and examined.

Alan: *This sounds more and more like the anatomy of a shift in consciousness. You know it's serious if it's even reached into the university.*

Michael: But many of these university people have not yet moved beyond the level of critique. It's much more difficult for them to formulate a vision or say what they want the world to look like, possibly because they're afraid of making a new totalizing statement. Also, the role models aren't there in the academic world yet. Foucault and Derrida and so on haven't said many positive things about the future.

But that's starting to change. The Center for a Post-modern World, David Ray Griffin's group in California, is a step in that positive direction.

Alan: *How do these kinds of developments in philosophy and other academic disciplines filter their way out into actual social change?*

Michael: That's a very good question, and it's an unfortunate response I have to give. I think that philosophy has made itself socially useless. No one cares what philosophers say. Now, that wasn't true before World War II. Dewey and other American pragmatists had an enormous impact on American education and social reflection. But after the war philosophers, with their interest in analytic philosophy and epistemology, made their questions and their research not relevant to the larger public. They engaged in much less reflection upon the categories and presuppositions of culture, and their reflection became so rarefied that they just took themselves out of the ball game.

Alan: *But now we see deep ecologist philosophers and others actually energizing social movements, like the Greens or the Earth First!ers.*

Michael: Right. These changes come about peripherally. When Peter Singer wrote his famous book *Animal Liberation* in the middle 1970s, he legitimized - because of his status as a philosopher - an area of discourse called "animal rights." This has now burgeoned into an enormous amount of writing in the ethics journals about the moral considerability of non-human beings, which wasn't there before. That was the wedge which cracked the door of anthropocentrism open. Feminism and the civil rights movement also cracked open the door, because they revealed that our ethical systems and our assumptions about selfhood were rather narrow and in need of expanding. Now deep ecology is able to attack anthropocentrism more directly.

Alan: *A critique I hear often is that deep ecologists want to return to a way of life that's totally tied to the rhythms of the Earth, but at this point we have so disturbed those rhythms that we can't even consider going back. To retreat to a pre-technological state would in fact be dooming the Earth to destruction, whereas what we need now is to be more engaged in trying to repair the damage. How would a deep ecologist respond?*

Michael: I think deep ecologists have mixed emotions about that, but I would agree with that critique. For example, if we stopped our development at the current level, it would be a catastrophe, because our production methods are so dirty and inefficient and destructive that if we keep this up, we're really in trouble.

Some deep ecologists say that it would be all for the best if the industrial world were just to collapse, despite all the human suffering that would entail. If such a thing ever occurs, some people have suggested, we could never revive industrialization again because the raw materials are no longer easily accessible. I hope that *doesn't* happen, and yet it *may* happen.

Now, social ecologists say that deep ecologists flirt with fascism when they talk about returning to an "organic" social system that is "attuned to nature." They note that reactionary thinkers often contrast the supposedly "natural" way of life - which to them means social Darwinism and authoritarian social systems - with "modernity," which in political terms means progressive social movements like liberalism and Marxism. But deep ecologists recognize this danger. They call not for a regression to collective authoritarianism, but for the *evolution* of a mode of awareness that doesn't lend itself to authoritarianism of any kind.

So I think the only thing we can do is to move forward. We need to develop our efficiency and production methods so that we'll be able to take some of the pressure off the environment. We also need to develop increasing wealth for the highly populated countries so their populations will go down. [Ed. Note: See Lappé and Schurman, "The Population Puzzle," in *IC* #21.]

There's a necessity for new technology. The question is, can it be made consistent with our growing awareness that the planet is really hurting?

Alan: *And will it be developed in time?*

Michael: Well, in time for what? It may not happen in time to save America's supremacy as an industrial power, for instance. A lot of horrible stuff may happen in the next twenty years, and there may be tremendous political fallout. The 1990s are going to be really weird, because of millennial thinking as the year 2000 approaches. Some people are going to become increasingly frightened as economic, political and natural events become more problematic. There may be a lot of mass movements, some of them regressive and reactionary. But it may be that those will be the last gasp of an old way of being. That's how some people view Reagan, as the last stand of a dying ideology.

Alan: *Will the new ideology be deep ecology?*

Michael: Who knows? Deep ecology claims we need a wider identification with nature. Now, why would we even hope for such a transformation? To hope for it means to believe in the possibility of *human evolution*, and that, I think, is where deep ecology comes into connection with the Enlightenment and with social ecology.

For all its problems, there was a liberatory dimension to the Enlightenment which is part of the American experience, and I think American environmentalists need to tap into that. We don't need to reject science and the Enlightenment and American political values. We need to understand more deeply what the roots of those values are. The ideal of freedom is a *radically* important idea in human history. The idea that each individual person is deserving of respect, is deserving of right treatment, is deserving of consideration, should not be made a slave, should

not be exploited - these are
incredibly

novel ideas in human history. These ideas have to be preserved if we're to take any further steps. We can't happily expect to treat the natural world appropriately if we don't even treat other human beings appropriately.

We have to *finish* the job of human liberation - and this is where social ecology is right - at the same time that we have to tackle the problem of the domination of nature. You can't take care of the environment while people in the Sudan or Nicaragua are being cut up by imperialistic practices, east or west. It's all connected together. Deep ecology hasn't articulated this view very well because it's afraid we'll fall back into anthropocentrism.

But humanity is part of nature too, and the development of our awareness and our human freedom is an important step in ending the environmental crisis. I would say that deep ecology is part of the great liberation movement that culminated in the Enlightenment and now is trying to move beyond the Enlightenment's limitations. It's not just about freeing white men from the control of the king, and it's not just about freeing women or blacks anymore. It's about freeing *all* beings from unnecessary kinds of control and exploitation.

Alan: *There are certain schools of psychotherapy which say, in essence, that you have to love yourself first. You have to build self-esteem in the individual before you can worry about tackling the individual's relationship to others. Yet there's an element of human self-loathing to some aspects of deep ecology that strikes me as unhealthy.*

Michael: That's an important point, because people tend to forget that *we* - our bodies - are nature. The way we control and repress our own bodies and feelings is reflected, I think, in our treatment of all other life. Statements from some of the Earth First!ers would give you the impression that the whole species is screwed up, but again, I think this is a minority dimension. Warwick Fox, a deep ecology theorist in Australia, says we have to distinguish between being *misanthropic*

- hating humanity - and being
anti-anthropocentric

. There's a difference between saying we want to get rid of all human beings, and saying that humans aren't the most important species on the planet.

Alan: *My sense is that these competing environmental views are all in the same boat, and*

they're just arguing over which side of the boat to sit on.

Michael: Our paranoia and our "I'm right and you're wrong" mentality are reflected in the arguments you hear among deep ecologists and social ecologists and ecofeminists and whatever. We're not really transformed yet. We would like to be, but our behavior shows that we're not. We're groping for an alternative way of having conversation.

We've got a long way to go, and I don't despair about it. The other day I saw a TV program about the burning of the Amazon rainforest, and I felt terrible. I became anxious and I felt this tremendous sadness, a sense of irreparable loss. I thought, this is what a child must feel when his home is being destroyed. The planet we've grown up on is being changed. It's a real loss for us and for the other species that are being killed. And yet, who knows what this means? Ninety-five percent of the species that ever lived are dead. Why? Evolution isn't sentimental - it does what it does.

I'd like to stop the burning of the rainforests right now, but that's not going to happen. Some of it will get saved, but you know, we cut down a forest that stretched from New York to the Mississippi River and from the Gulf coast into Canada in just a century or two. We don't miss it because we never saw it. We see the Brazilian rainforest burning and we miss it. And it's a threat to us - there's a lot of self-interest in our concern about that.

I'm increasingly trying to acknowledge the mourning I have and to say, "I don't know what this environmental crisis really means. I can't control it, I can't stop it, and I don't know where it's headed." At the same time I do my best to try to develop the awareness, the economic and political practices, the new attitudes and so on which can contribute to preserving the biosphere. That's as much as I can hope for.

I'm what you might call a Buddhist Roman Catholic, and at mass I hear the priest now talking about the need to heal our relationship to the Earth. The idea of a personal salvation - that I can be saved but the rest of creation can't - isn't understandable to me anymore. So I'm also hopeful that as our crisis deepens there will be an alternative Judeo-Christian theology available to people, one which calls for the affirmation of life, for taking care of the Earth, and for fostering the sisterhood and brotherhood of all other living things.

<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC22/Zimrrman.htm>