

Summer 1992

The Practical Relevance of Deep Ecology

David Johns
Portland State University

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/polisci_fac

 Part of the [Environmental Policy Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Citation Details

Johns, D., (1992). The Practical Relevance of Deep Ecology. *Wild Earth*, 2: 62-68.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

The Practical Relevance of Deep Ecology

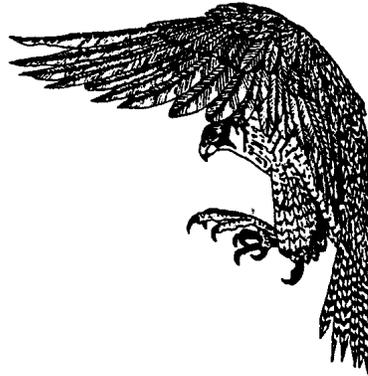
by David Johns

As proponents of Deep Ecology and Biocentrism have begun to define both a vision for the future and a critique of the existing human relationship with the rest of nature, they have often been the subject of criticism from the Third World and from leftists in the developed world concerned with Third World issues. They are commonly charged with failing to adequately take into account the complexity of the human social dynamic involved in destruction of the environment; ignoring that human societies are under the control of elites who benefit from the degradation of nature while most people suffer; failing to recognize that much degradation in the Third World is directly attributable to an international political-economy dominated by the rich countries; and proposing misanthropic solutions which would exacerbate further the problems of the poor. Critics have charged that biocentrism has essentially North American roots and is therefore elitist, and that biocentrism focuses narrowly on the issue of wilderness preservation to the exclusion of human problems. Some have called deep ecology/biocentrism irrelevant to the most important problems facing the world, namely overconsumption, overpopulation, militarism and related problems.

These criticisms need to be addressed. Movements for biosphere preservation, to be relevant, must address issues within a global framework. That can only be done in conjunction with other movements around the globe. Only through a genuine amalgamation of the various and specific historical experiences can we chart a new direction(s) for human society. Cross cultural criticisms are extremely valuable because they help clarify assumptions of other traditions or cultures.

WILDERNESS: ORIGINS AND VALUES

Deep ecology has been criticized for equating environmental protection with wilderness preservation and for failing to recognize the impact of its commitment to wilderness in the Third World. Preservation of wilderness is viewed as a North American



idea and therefore suspect.

Deep ecology is obviously rooted in the culture of those who espouse it; that is true of every movement. The very process of transcendence or dialectical working through assumes a history. But to point out the origins of a particular historical experience does not invalidate it.

There is no question that the circumstances of development in the United States — including the pattern of settlement over the huge geographical area available — have helped shape U.S. deep ecologists' response to environmental degradation. In the face of its rapid destruction, it was possible to see clearly what was being lost and what remained to be saved. And we were rich enough to be able to afford it. In this last respect the wilderness may "fit in" our consumer society's cultural categories as another commodity. Notwithstanding this seeming incorporation of wilderness into the existing order, in most respects it does not "fit." From the very beginning and increasingly, the wilderness system, wildlife refuges, and old-growth forests have been attacked by those who say they interfere with an economy based on endless growth.

The real issue, however, is whether a position that calls for returning large areas of the Earth to wilderness is wrong-headed in substance. Related is the question of how humans should interact with those portions of the biosphere not preserved as wilderness.

The deep ecological support for wilderness is predicated upon an important fact and related value: the Earth can support a limited amount of biomass, and the more of it is composed of humans or turned to human use, the less is available for other life; humans do not

have the right to so alter the composition of the biomass that we damage, in Leopold's words, "the integrity, stability and beauty" of the ecosystem. The basis for this value may lie in the experience of self-actualization—identification with nature as the real community of which one is a part. Whether it is termed a transcendence of alienation in its various forms or healing a crippled heart, the thrust is that human life is no more valuable than any other form of life, life being broadly construed to include plants, animals, ecosystems, rivers, mountains, the earth.

Flowing from this understanding is the recognition that in much of the world almost any human impact damages the biosphere. In many ecosystems human livelihood — beyond very minimal numbers and very limited technology — is simply not compatible with maintaining the integrity of the biosphere. Integrity here means wilderness, that is "self-willed land," self-regulating, not transformed by human attempts to control it. Loss of integrity is obvious when one looks at the fate of other large mammals. Ecosystems must normally be healthy to support them. Their disappearance is an indication of degradation. Grizzly Bears, Orangutans, Tigers, elephants and many other species cannot easily coexist with humans in large numbers or with very exploitative technologies. Many ecosystems cannot easily accommodate significant human presence without serious deterioration in diversity and balance. Recognition of other species, of ecosystems and the Earth as valuable in and of themselves, individually and collectively, apart from their usefulness to humans, means that in practice much of the Earth cannot be used for permanent human settlement.

Existing devastation and the spread of humans into new areas makes the task of protecting areas still in their natural state urgent. Returning large areas to wilderness is only slightly less urgent.

While preservation of wilderness may seem to be the overriding focus of deep ecology, deep ecologists recognize that humans have their place in nature as well. Where it is appropriate for humans to settle, the issue of

how to combine livelihood with ecosystem integrity is a major emphasis. Reestablishment of real community, embedded in the local ecosystem, is a priority of the deep ecology movement. It may be a valid criticism that much of the thinking in this area is fuzzy or naive, but wilderness is not the only goal of deep ecologists. Given the understanding of human/rest-of-nature relationships that deep ecologists espouse that to be effective in allowing nature to heal itself one must also heal

one's own self and community it is odd to suggest they are unconcerned with human community.

SOURCES OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Another criticism made of deep ecology is that it focuses on humans in general as the problem, obscuring the real causes of environmental degradation, namely overconsumption and militarization and the underlying social

forces that produce these. There is some merit to such criticism but it is usually overstated. Some environmentalists do see the problem as simply too many people behaving stupidly, without any regard for the nature of the system in which people live and the fact that it victimizes most people as well as nature.

Most proponents of deep ecology, however, recognize the great inequality that exists in the world with regard to consumption, and the great differences in the existing power of various groups to shape a society's relationship with nature. Deep ecology advocates acknowledgment that most people are victimizing (of nature) victims (of the social order); and that problems must address the issues of class, gender, and ethnicity. Deep ecologists recognize that all forms of domination are linked, as is evidenced in the ongoing debate between deep ecology and social ecology, between deep ecology and eco-feminism, between deep ecology and marxism and other socialisms. The question is really one of emphasis and priority: do we focus on the threat to Earth as a whole or to a part of it (humans); where do we bring ourselves to bear on the juggernaut carrying out such destruction.

The nature of the linkages between various forms of domination is certainly not settled, but deep ecology may be distinct in believing that the resolution of equity issues among humans will not automatically result in an end to human destruction of the biosphere. One can envision a society without class distinctions, without patriarchy, and with cultural autonomy, that still attempts to manage the rest of nature in utilitarian fashion with resulting deterioration of the biosphere. Such a society would probably be less destructive because much of the technology of the last 300 years is incompatible with a truly egalitarian society and much of the alienation that distorts the expression of human energy into schemes of control would not exist. But the end of domination in human relations is not enough to protect the larger biotic community. Only behavior shaped by a biocentric view can do that.

For example, deep ecologists would point out that in terms of the integrity of an ecosystem, it makes little difference whether an old-growth forest is destroyed to build one house for a North American or fifty simple structures in the Third World. From a strictly human standpoint the latter is much more justifiable than the former. Deep ecologists widely agree that fewer humans (and especially less extensive occupation of the globe) and equitable and drastically curtailed consumption are essential to restoring the balance of the planet. Overpopulation remains a sensitive issue and I will return to it below



Jim Nollman

While those of us engaged in political activity in North America are used to confronting the issue of jobs versus environment, it is important to understand that in the Third World "jobs" often equates with actual survival. Sparing old-growth in the US within the existing economic structure may cause hardship for a few loggers. Sparing tropical forests within the existing economic structure may mean immediate hunger for many landless peasants. (Clearing tropical forests may mean eventual hunger as well, depending on the quality of the land cleared.) Critics of deep ecology argue that efforts to protect wilderness in the Third World cost the poor; that this approach is just one more example of imperialism — the same imperialism that pushes the poor and others into the wilderness in the first place. Wilderness proponents do need to heed this criticism.

Wilderness is needed in the Third World as much as it is in Europe and other long-settled parts of the globe; but it is necessary to understand that the structure of imperialism often makes the manner in which wilderness is protected in the Third World unjust from a human standpoint. Environmentalists must begin to take this into account. How? First, by understanding how imperialism created and continues to feed much of the dynamic that threatens ecosystems in the Third World, from the Amazon to Malaysia; by understanding how countries that have broken or are attempting to break from their historical place in the existing structure find themselves, in an effort to survive, adopting environmentally destructive economic strategies; and by understanding how the wealth extracted from the Third World makes possible the culture of consumption in the First World.

Second, based upon the understanding just set out, we must acknowledge the limits of what can be achieved to protect the environment within the framework of a system based on endless material growth and extreme socio-economic inequality. Only by pushing beyond the limits of what is acceptable to the existing political-economic order can constraints on ecological-political choices be transcended.

Finally, we must recognize that we cannot alter the existing biocidal order without broad-based support. Only with an understanding of human social relations can we develop successful strategies for protecting the Earth's diversity. To move beyond the existing order, we need to understand who our potential allies are, as well as what the obstacles are. The poor, we must remember, go to the rainforest to farm because they have been driven off land they formerly cultivated by the wealthy, who can make higher profits producing cash crops for

the international market. If we treat the poor as the problem, rather than the system that constrains their choices, we will fail. We must forge alliances with those who oppose the existing order — albeit on the basis of its injury to the poor, to women, to oppressed ethnic groups. The work of EPOCA [Environmental Project On Central America] in Nicaraguan reforestation efforts and in Central America generally, and the Rainforest Action Network and Greenpeace campaigns directed at the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and World Bank, are examples of environmental action with at least some of the necessary elements.

In the short term — given the continued existence of an international political system committed to growth and great inequality, given an international state system in which those who would resist such domination must adapt to it to survive — how do we resolve conflicts between particular groups of humans, often the most oppressed, and other species? Even if wilderness advocates do attempt to ensure that preservation measures are not taken at the expense of the oppressed, they will not always be able to protect both the environment and the poor. There is no getting around these uncomfortable questions and previous attempts to address them are not adequately developed.

Arne Naess has suggested that conflicts between humans and other species can be resolved by balancing the competing interests based upon how "near and vital" the interests are to the species involved. Given the large numbers of *Homo sapiens* and their extensive settlement, it is difficult to see how this would lead to a redress of the current imbalance unless one takes a global perspective. Globally there can be little question, for example, that humans need to give way to Tigers, Chimps, Grizzlies and other species. With five billion people and only small populations of other species, restoring ecosystems to diversity can only mean movement in one direction: more room for other species. But the impact on humans of making room for other creatures will not affect all humans equally. Specific humans will have to make way. How are the costs to be spread?

If one takes a strictly local perspective, trying to balance the interests of a local human population with the interests of a local non-human population, an assessment of competing interests gives a result less favorable to non-human life. If one accepts extensive human presence as given, human interests in their existing livelihood must be weighed without taking into account significant human numbers elsewhere or lack of others elsewhere. The pressure on already diminished populations of other species would continue to grow.

OVERCONSUMPTION

In what ways, then, is a biocentric system of values meaningful in dealing with overconsumption and militarization? Let's begin with overconsumption. The very meaning of overconsumption differs depending upon whether one takes a bio- or anthropocentric view. A biocentric view, by giving moral consideration to other species and ecosystems, sharply limits human consumption — not only as individuals or groups, but as a species, i.e., it implies a limit on human numbers — much more than an anthropocentric view which sees value in nature only insofar as it is useful to humans.

If non-human nature is valued for itself, then human consumption that disrupts it is wrong: it constitutes overconsumption. Most modern forms of agriculture, forestry, mining, energy extraction and use, housing, transportation and the like clearly can be called overconsumption.

In a human-centered system of values, overconsumption is primarily seen as a social problem, a problem of distribution between wealthy and poor, a problem of economic ownership. Overconsumption occurs when some consume more than they need at the expense of those who do not have what they need. Generally speaking, material growth and rising levels of consumption are equated with quality-of-life improvement; the poor can become better off through economic growth and/or through more egalitarian distribution. To this end technology and social organization need to be applied. Such a view does not admit to any finite limit on consumption nor does it consider injury to the biosphere except insofar as it may affect the continued use of the biosphere for human benefit.

Even "weak anthropocentrism" — a view that is sensitive to long range sustainability — can and does justify monoculture, high use of energy, massive reclamation projects, conversion of self-regulating ecosystems into agricultural land and so on. Such a value system continues to view nature as primarily a resource and only places limits on consumption so as to maintain sustainability of exploitation. In contrast, constraints imposed by regarding the ecosystem and other species as valuable in and of themselves sharply narrow the range of appropriate human behavior: if it injures the biosphere, don't do it.

The distinction between the two views is seen to be much deeper when we examine the roots and social function of high consumption levels. On a psychological level, much consumption is a result of alienation, from nature and self (nature within). Endless accumulation and the distractions it offers are essential

features of developed societies and of upper classes elsewhere in the world. Such attempts to substitute possessions for empowerment, sense of place, and authentic relationships are never satisfactory. A hunger for more remains.

On a social level, consumption is used by elites to manage large segments of the population. Give people enough stuff and they forget their pain and powerlessness. The poor make do with the promise of some distant level of consumption and in the meantime turn to other forms of distraction, often drugs qua drugs.

Dominant Western and liberal capitalist views do not acknowledge such a thing as overconsumption. To liberalism, high levels of consumption are viewed as a measure of the success of our civilization and individuals within it, representing the triumph of control and technique, of humans over nature. Liberalism embraces dualism, hierarchy, atomism, all the machinery of control; nature is fodder, the "other," something to be mastered and managed. Man (intentional masculine) is the centerpiece of the universe.

Many human-centered theories do recognize the roles that high levels of consumption play in many societies. The marxisms of Reich, Marcuse, Gorz and others are concerned with how high-consumption both results from and further feeds alienation. But most marxist views remain wedded to some kind of control over nature and thus embrace dualism as well as open-ended material growth through progress in technology and social organization. Marxism espouses an unlimited faith in human intelligence and rationality: the evolution of human consciousness will keep pace with any problems. But marxism does reject the view of the world as essentially atomized. As Ollman has ably demonstrated, Marx saw things as constituted by their relationships and the field of relationships. One cannot change nature without changing oneself nor change an element in a system without changing the system. A profound ecological truth is recognized in such a perspective.

Much radical feminist theory rejects all institutionalized hierarchy. According to many feminists, the social problem is not so much who has power, but power or domination itself. Relationships and community are essential values in this understanding. Both feminists and those concerned with domination based on ethnic differences have shown how the category of "the other" runs throughout civilization, justifying oppression and exploitation of anything that falls within it.

Thus, several anthropocentric worldviews do object to Cartesian dualism and liberal atomism. But nature and other species remain excluded from the community either explicitly or by silence. One is left with the

gulf between humanity and nature, and with an ungrounded faith in the human mission to manage the planet.

Some anarchist, marxist and feminist theory does suggest that part of realizing one's fullest humanity, i.e., part of the process of transcending alienation, involves embracing one's place in nature. With these views, non-alienated being may require recognizing the natural as well as the human community as valuable. However, where one simply values the human interest in non-alienation, dualism and anthropocentrism remain, and serve as a theoretical foundation for structures of control.

This is not to say feminist, anarchist or other critical social theory is fundamentally incompatible with biocentrism; but insofar as such theories accept the assumption that the rest of nature exists solely for humanity's use, they fail to address a central form of domination. If species hierarchy is justified, then hierarchy is justified. Thus much of what such critiques abhor follows from any human-centered view.

Biocentrism draws a clear line. To reject the human/nature dualism is to reject the "triumph" of the enlightenment attempt to control nature. It is to reject the triumph of knowledge and technique and analysis over earth wisdom, understanding and connectedness. It is to reject the focus on things rather than relationships. By rejecting these and valuing nature in and of itself, a biocentric view limits human consumption more fundamentally than any anthropocentric view can; it does so by thoroughly rejecting the roots of such consumption. In its place biocentrism values the web of life, as well as its parts, of which we are one.

MILITARISM

As with overconsumption we might ask what system of values would constrain militarism more: human or biosphere centered? By recognizing the value of nature and other species apart from their usefulness to humans, a significant constraint is imposed on the conduct of warfare and more importantly the economic activity essential to preparation for war. Indeed, the consumption of "resources" to create and maintain the industrial capacity geared to arms production — for whatever purpose — assaults the biosphere, even more than war itself: All human-centered value systems necessarily fall prey to the easy rationalization of militarism.

Many human centered value systems, religious and secular, are critical of militarization; but all are largely ineffective. The failure comes in part from the wedding of values to structures of power — church or state — that depend upon force for their survival.

Insofar as pacifist values are taken up by those "outside" these structures, they provide some check. But because they are human-centered — the point of opposing militarization is to end human waste and suffering — it is easy to neutralize them by appeal to other human values, other forms of suffering even worse than war or the costs of deterrence. The other great weakness is that much pacifist thinking does not address adequately the roots of militarism, something I shall attempt to do below.

If one values nature in and of itself, then human goals and needs are placed within the context of a larger community. The value placed on the integrity of that community militates heavily against any human-centered rationalization for exploitation. A biocentric view limits the conversion of biomass to human use. Such a view poses a threat to the survival of particular social systems and even the historical system of social systems; but it does not pose a threat to the survival of the species, as some would argue. Quite the opposite — the threat to both us and the planet comes from this system of systems.

Because modern militarism is particularly virulent, attempts to understand this blight are often limited to the modern period. Certainly the combination of enlightenment arrogance with science and technology, embedded in the international political economy resulting from the European expansion, has produced a dangerous world. But we must look deeper into human history to grasp the underlying dynamic of militarism. Though it has reached new proportions, militarism is an essential feature of something very old: civilization. It is inseparable from social systems based upon hierarchy (class, gender and ethnic), control of nature, and denial of self. It is an essential feature of societies where the state exists, where the state attempts to substitute itself for authentic human community, and where limited conflict between communities has been replaced by the institutionalized conflict of center and periphery and of competing centers. The history of civilization, beginning with its emergence in the Neolithic, is the story of the human attempt to control nature through technology and social organization. This attempt to control nature splits us from it and becomes the driving force behind a social development that includes patriarchy, class domination, statism and militarism.

Though most (but by no means all) human-centered value systems eschew militarism, they almost all hold civilization as a crowning achievement. Some value systems praise the military spirit. Most condemn it as a necessary evil; i.e., they justify it even as they condemn it. The point here is that civilization is based upon and constituted by relationships

of domination that necessarily produce the conflict and inequality which make militarism inevitable. Human-centered critics maintain a fervent faith in the human mission to manage, in the human ability to disentangle what is inextricably linked. They speak from within the perspective of civilization, and cannot see the need to transcend the precarious ground on which they (we) teeter.

Critical theory shares much in common with liberal theory in this area. Some marxist analysis of the genesis of modern militarism is sound. The notion that many human ills would be solved with the end of class society is also appealing. But the end of class is not the end of the state nor of domination, and hence not the end of social systems that produce militarism. (Nor is the end of capitalism the end of class.) The control of nature and of social and cultural evolution are values deeply embedded in most marxism. So although Marxism has developed useful models for understanding social transformation, the assumptions, perspective and content of the transformative vision are very much within the human-centered tradition.

Some feminism gets much closer to the source of the problem in its critique of hierarchy generally, and particularly its understanding of the centrality of patriarchy to militarism and to producing humans amenable to domination. At times, however, feminist theory falls into a kind of intra-specific dualism, i.e., human males are the problem (at the same time claiming that females created agriculture, which became the economic foundation for the emergence of hierarchy), ignoring that systems adapt to and alter the environment, and individuals adapt to (even while they resist) the roles created by the system's division of labor. Even where this dualism is not at issue, most feminism, like marxism, remains human centered. Feminist values such as community, spontaneity, and integration of emotion and intellect militate against the worst features of mainstream human-centered values, but still fail to take account of our flawed relationship with nature, which underlies the social structures that produce militarism.

Marxism, feminism and other critical social theory have contributed to understanding the dynamic of our civilization, but they tend to miss the point that if nonhuman life is not valued for itself, then life is not valued for itself. Any system of values that does not transcend nature-as-other cannot limit destruction of the biosphere as effectively as one that embraces all life as intrinsically valuable. Nor can such a value system help to heal the fundamental split in the human psyche which makes possible civilization and militarism.

Biocentrism offers a direction for human society based on finding our place *in* nature. Such a transformation, if effected world-wide, would be as fundamental as the Neolithic or industrial revolutions.

OVERPOPULATION

The debate over human population is particularly passionate and wide ranging. My purpose here is to explicate the differences a biocentric approach makes to ecosystem degradation. Even as it limited overconsumption, a biocentric approach would result in reduced human numbers. For biocentrists, human reproduction is not an absolute right, but is constrained by the overall value accorded to ecosystem diversity and integrity. Thus from a biocentric view what is important is that dams kill rivers, whatever the human purpose behind them: whether to irrigate 10,000 subsistence farms or a single agribusiness enterprise growing corn for hog feed.

Anthropocentric approaches to population vary, but none offers significant biosphere protection. Die-hard enlightenment groupies argue there is no such problem as overpopulation. They believe we will always find ways to support human numbers without destroying the life-support system of the planet. Others see environmental degradation not as a result of population per se but of the level and type of consumption, as if human numbers made no difference. They see existing human numbers as manageable with egalitarian consumption, implying much reduced levels in the developed world. While this might reduce the overall impact, how much is questionable; and with continued population growth that difference could easily be eaten up again. Still others, mostly in the developed world, are concerned about overpopulation in the Third World because it threatens limited resources which those in the developed world would like to continue to consume disproportionately to protect their lifestyles.

Certainly all the above approaches might allow the preservation of wilderness for human needs, ranging from solitude to biological sustainability. But the narrow protection they offer is inadequate to preserve ecosystem integrity. And under the press of increasing numbers, preservation and long-term concerns are put aside, and an unending series of "fixes" is pursued. Rivers are dammed and "replaced" with fish hatcheries and recreation areas.

The only anthropocentric approach to population that is wary of large numbers is that thread of the anarchist tradition which recognizes that democracy and freedom, autonomous collective and individual action, are only possible in a human-scale, face to face com-

munity. But this is an argument against large concentrations of people, not necessarily against the overall size of the human population. Such a notion could simply lead to turning the planet into one large countryside of villages, with little room for wilderness. It is also questionable whether the planet could support five and a half billion people in villages, i.e., without the highly organized structures and technologies that are based on human domination of other humans. (William Catton and others have argued persuasively that even with high energy economies we cannot sustain existing numbers; the structures that support — and exploit — them are not sustainable, built as they are on phantom carrying capacity. Moreover these economies have so degraded the Earth that real, i.e. long-term, carrying capacity has been reduced.)

The notion that population concentrations limit human autonomy, i.e. freedom of collective and individual action in a wide variety of ways, needs further exploration. Clearly the large existing human populations are an integral part of the hierarchical order of industrial society. Human history suggests that large human populations make hierarchy inevitable. A powerful implication of this is that large human populations may so restrict human perceptions and ability to act that devolutionist strategies are inevitably frustrated. The revolutionary process in the modern period is a good analogy. While the rhetoric of revolution has touched the human yearning for both liberation and bread, the outcome of revolution has invariably meant stronger centralized institutions and more hierarchy (and greater exploitation of the earth). Recent human history lends itself to the conclusion that attempts to reform large (in terms of population density) hierarchical societies don't result in less hierarchy, notwithstanding stated goals. Large human numbers may make it impossible to implement policies needed to allow Earth to heal, i.e. policies that reduce population, consumption, etc.

Throughout human history egalitarian and nature-embedded societies have been conquered or destroyed by more "advanced", hierarchical societies. In the world today, any society can protect nature only at its own peril. To do so, it must resist the enormous pressure of a world economic system driven by greed. And resistance itself requires resources.

Deep ecologists recognize that the negative human impact on the rest of nature is attributable to particular forms of social structure, and that human numbers are shaped by such structures as well as by biological factors. Social structure influences, if not determines, cultural beliefs concerning birth, the desirability of children and so on, as well

as affecting more directly the need for children to work, provide for their parents, etc. Structure affects relative human health, i.e. both birth rates and death rates. Changed structures do result in changed population numbers, density, etc.

But while structure clearly shapes population, population also shapes structure. The emergence of human hierarchy and its evolution are in significant part responses to population pressure.

Mark Nathan Cohen has argued that when migration for dealing with increased numbers is no longer possible, one alternative is more intense exploitation of the limited area available. More intense exploitation involves technology and social organization based on increased division of labor, social differentiation, and ultimately hierarchy and domination. The means developed to exploit and control nature involve the control of people by an elite. The structures and technologies resulting from adaptation to population pressure (and other factors), in turn both allow and require larger populations, greater growth, which in turn tends to lead to breakdown or more intense forms of exploitation based on greater hierarchy and differentiation. This is not merely a vicious circle but a downward spiral.

Thus, large human numbers not only convert great amounts of Earth's biomass to human use, they also contribute to the proliferation of structures of control. These structures, in turn, make it difficult to organize for significant reform—which both human liberation and ecological health require. It is difficult to overcome the inertia of socialization, and even if large numbers could be awakened, they might not be able to effect change. Not only because of the violent resistance of the political-economic hierarchy, but because reform programs would only work with populations small enough to not need extensive economic and political institutions to survive.

A life-centered or planet-centered value system requires that we transcend the split with nature within our own psyches and in our material relationships: how we consume and alter the biosphere. Far fewer humans; far lower levels of consumption for many, much improved levels for others; the re-creation of authentic communities that reintegrate the human into nature — these are a few of the implications of such an ethic.

In contrast, a human-centered approach focuses on wiser if not greater human control. In its more progressive forms we hear words like 'stewardship' rather than 'ownership'. But underlying the concept of stewardship of resources, as well as the concept of ownership of resources, is the notion we are not only

unique (every species and ecosystem is, as even humanists would admit), but better. In short, the same arrogance, the same split that has brought us to the current crisis.

VALUES AND CULTURE

All value systems are part of a broader cultural framework that mediates human behavior by shaping personality and thought. Culture organizes human experiences and gives it meaning. Biocentric values are no exception — they are part of a larger cultural framework, albeit an emergent one which includes an understanding of the role of culture generally as well as the critique of particular cultures.

To point to the Neolithic as the origin of the culture of control is not enough. A biocentric view places these events in a larger context. It is necessary to understand how the capacity for culture itself and the resulting plasticity in human behavior, thought and emotion, and our ability to learn and pass on learning (attitudes and world views as well as technical or social information), enables us to divide ourselves. This capacity for culture allowed human populations threatened with localized overshoot in the Neolithic to increase the human carrying capacity by altering both their behavior and the environment substantially. The split itself was probably never very obvious, partly because changes were cumulative over a long time. Moreover, the very capacity for culture allows us to deny the estrangement, even requires such denial for both psychological and social reasons. And the emerging social dynamic of hierarchy distrib-

utes the costs and benefits of the new adaptive strategies unequally, favoring the decision makers and shapers of a society's values.

Culture, then, allows us to trade our place in nature for larger human numbers spread over the entire planet, converting large amounts of the biosphere to our purposes, so long as we are willing to pay the price of the various forms of domination and alienation. The plasticity with which evolution has endowed us allows us to create alienating and biocidal sociocultural systems, but does not require it; such systems are not natural in the sense of necessary or in the sense of being in tune with our deepest nature. (We should not forget that while cancer is part of nature, it kills its host.) There are other cultural possibilities, including biocentric ones. Indeed, for most of the time humans have been around we have lived in communities that included the rest of nature. We can do so again, this time with full knowledge of the alternatives and their price. To limit our biocidal possibilities is not unnatural, as Baird Callicott quite rightly argues, because cultural systems always limit behavior. Culture is always prescriptive.

Deep ecology does not deny or seek to end human cultural evolution, but to see that human cultural evolution does not end or impoverish biological evolution. Deep ecology calls for human cultures that are respectful of the biosphere, for cultural evolution within a broader biospheric evolution, an evolution in which humans are a part, not would-be directors. We are not wise enough to be directors; true wisdom is the recognition of place and process. So it is not human cultural evolution



that deep ecologists see as the problem, but the particular paths taken over the last several thousand years. There are alternatives to the carnage, both of the biosphere and other cultures, that civilization brings.

To say that much of what we call civilization must somehow be fundamentally transformed is to say that the human social and cultural dynamic founded on and constituted by various relationships of domination must be overcome. It may represent a kind of return to the past, but in the service of the future. For the last several thousand years our species has behaved much like one might expect adolescents from a severely dysfunctional family to act. We must go back to where things went wrong — to the origins of our estrangement — and pick up from there. In doing so we would make use of all that has occurred in the interim. We have already paid dearly for the lessons.

The roots of biocentrism are deep and its emergence in modern form is a result of both the resilience of earth wisdom and the current crisis — just as surely as human centered values and cultural systems are a result of the Neolithic crisis.

By accepting biocentric limits on our behavior we undermine the wall we erected between ourselves and nature and the resulting culture of domination. In doing so we accept constraints on overconsumption, militarism and human numbers that no human centered system of values could impose. Domination and hierarchy, the attempts to control that give rise to high levels of consumption and militarism, will be unshakable problems until we recognize we cannot substitute our intellect for nature.

ALLIANCES

Wilderness is the result of four billion years of evolving Earth wisdom. The land ethic espoused by Aldo Leopold is not compatible with most of the existing human order. But we will lose the battle for the planet unless we realize that it is not some generalized and amorphous anthropocentrism or egocentrism that is the problem. Human alienation has its roots in a particular historical dynamic that must be understood to be overcome. We cannot dismiss the struggles over human social structure and realize a deep ecological vision. That vision in the hearts of a few will not be enough. Nor can we wait for all persons to find their way through their unrootedness. In between is a strategy of pursuing alliances against common economic, political, social and cultural structures, always keeping a healed Earth as our central goal.

David Johns is a some time teacher of politics who plants trees in Portland, Oregon.

The Language of Owning

by Eric T. Freyfogle

Last fall, when the yellows and oranges began to creep onto the Illinois plains, a weary caravan of state lawmakers pulled into the college town where I teach. They came to hear what the people had to say about wetlands and whether the state ought to protect them.

Illinois's landscape once boasted expanses of wet meadows and wooded floodplains, lands that for millennia added richness and stability to the tallgrass prairies and the oak-hickory forests. These days only scattered wetlands remain. Six wet acres out of 7 have been drained or filled, or so we're told by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Environmental leaders put the figure higher, at something like 10 acres out of every 11.

Many at the wetlands hearings wanted to talk about ecology. Local environmentalist Bruce Hannon spoke from the head and from the heart as he related the Illinois version of the standard wetland tale—the tale of water quality, wildlife habitat, silt-removal, and abundant beauty. Hannon was followed by Virginia Scott of the Illinois Environmental Council, who spoke more stridently, about short-sightedness, destruction, and greed.

On the north side of the ballroom floor the first four rows were filled with somber men in suits. These were farmers and they had come because the state's remaining wetlands are mostly in farmers' hands. Some came as prosperous grain harvesters; others faced hard times and knew personally the economic storms that have bruised and battered the Midwest's small towns.

These men were there to speak, not about ecology and interdependence but of world foodstocks, of centennial farms, and of confiscation-without-compensation. Above all, they came to talk about private property, and how and why it must be protected against limits on what landowners can do. Like the environmentalists, their words were earnest, passionate, and clear.

This, then, was the evening's dialogue,

words about ecology followed by words about private property. The lawmakers, it seemed, were in luck, for they could agree with everyone. The state could protect wetlands, but only when the endless budget crunch left money to buy the land.

Twenty years ago a hearing like this would have fostered sharp debate on the value of marshes and floodplains. Back then wetlands were worthless until drained or filled. But on this crisp September evening in central Illinois, no farmer stood up to discredit the now-clear lessons of ecology. The language of interdependence has spread too wide. The issue was no longer one of science, it was about land ownership and the many things that private ownership means.

At one time, public lands seemed to offer the key to a healthy Earth strategy. Long before the Wilderness Act of 1964, lovers of wild areas were pushing hard to protect our nation's forests, grazing lands, and other public spaces. But it is clear now that a sound Earth requires more than just well maintained public fragments, more than islands of health surrounded by an ailing countryside. The push for land health is turning toward private land, the kind of land that Illinois farmers own and put to hard annual use.

When Illinois farmers talk of private property, they draw upon an age-old vocabulary and tradition. To America's founders private land offered protection against an overreaching state. Property served as a source of strength to resist intrusions on liberty, a source of independence in the face of venality and vested interest.

Today our culture carries on this 18th century ideology. Our inherited sense of property sticks with us, and its fiber is strong enough to resist prodding into the ecological age. As we move to protect the Earth, one of our biggest tasks will be to grab hold of this concept of property and give it a vigorous shake. So long as private ownership means