

## PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

# Practice and Ecology

## *Viewpoints from three professional ecologists*

### Perceiving the World as Self

#### *The Emergence of an Environmental Ethic*

By Ames B. Colt



Throughout Western history, we have valued the natural world according to its utility to humans. In viewing nature as the supplier of raw materials, a receptacle for waste and a vehicle for our pleasure, we have subordinated the needs of the natural world to the needs of humanity. In the past this may have been an appropriate view, given the need to prevail in an often harsh, inhospitable world.

But there are too many of us now to continue consuming the resources of the planet without regard for future consequences. In recognition that we must begin to transform our roles from conquerors to planetary stewards, the environmental movement has sought to reform our view of nature.

The Buddhist teaching that what we see as separate is fundamentally one has struck a chord within me. My practice helps me explore the ecology of our world simply as it is: the world is none other than self, whether I am immersed in a forest's green coolness or in the concrete jungle of a vast city.

Yet, as someone paid to find ways for government to better protect the environment, I am challenged daily with the problem of translating this teaching into practical advice. How can incorporating the entire world into our view of self enable us to fulfill both our real material needs and the needs of the planet? Such a conflict between two "rights" confronts those who endeavor to live an ethical life. As "stewards" of the planet, we must look, precisely and scientifically, at our interactions with the environment. The power to dominate confers the responsibility to understand the consequences of that domination. What dismays me is not so much that many people do not value the natural environment, but that we have so little awareness of our impact on the creatures with whom we share the planet.

By consciously recognizing the intrinsic value of all beings (the first precept does not distinguish between human beings, animals and plants) we recognize our duty to cherish nature and begin to question our overriding emphasis on satisfying

personal desires. Whether we realize it or not, we are faced with a fundamental choice: sustain the natural world or perpetuate an obsessively materialistic society. To date, the resolution of this conflict has almost always favored materialism.

Things are beginning to change. A clear example of how we are beginning to cherish the environment is the Endangered Species Act. But simply enacting the law was easy compared to implementing it. The Endangered Species Act proclaims the right of all creatures to live in a healthy environment and perpetuate their own kind. Some of us have asked: "Does this law require us to protect at all costs every single species and subspecies threatened by the advance of civilization? Extinction is part of nature's cycle of birth and death. Why should humans sacrifice their livelihoods to guarantee the survival of, say, that reclusive northern spotted owl? Aren't there plenty of other species of owl around that are doing just fine?"

Such rhetoric belies an instrumental view of nature; nature is seen as a means to an end, with no intrinsic worth. For example, northern spotted owls are approaching extinction because their habitat, the Pacific Northwest's temperate rainforests, is being rapidly destroyed. Northern spotted owls aren't "useful," but harvesting the trees they live in provides jobs. Harvesting these trees is of greater short-term, economic value to humans than saving the northern spotted owl from extinction; and, when jobs are at stake, for some the decision to log is simple.

Environmentalists are trying to save the northern spotted owl and the Pacific Northwest's temperate rainforest through the Endangered Species Act. Protecting these forests would provide benefits other than habitat for an endangered species. We would be preserving the recreational benefits these rare forests provide, and the salmon fisheries which depend upon their streams. Protecting forests which are the home for many wild creatures also provide a means for humans to recreate and attune with a world that is truly wild. Over the long term, intact temperate rainforests appear to me to be considerably more valuable than the lumber produced by their destruction.

In other environmental issues where business and government leaders argue "it's either jobs or the environment, folks," close examination of the situation reveals the fallacy of these simplistic arguments.

But if we use economic arguments to counter those of, say, the timber industry, aren't we still valuing the natural world solely because of its benefit to humans? To a degree, the projection of values onto the natural world is inevitable. We protect coastal fisheries from overfishing and toxic contamination because humans depend upon their extractive value, not necessarily because we recognize the inherent right of fish to flourish in their environment.

Using the natural world for human benefit is to a large extent inevitable. But if untempered by an appreciation of the intrinsic value of all beings, this kind of attitude will lead us into a rather grim future. For if the value of the natural world is contingent solely upon our uses of it, we will protect it only as long as it provides valuable resources. If in the future we learn how to manufacture plastic trees which meet our needs more economically than real trees, our utilitarian view of the natural world will encourage the replacement of living forests with plastic ones.

In coming to perceive the human community as part of a planetary community, we assume an obligation to link human interests with the interests of all sentient beings. If our nuclear family can expand to our planetary family, we can acknowledge the importance of strictly harboring and equitably dis-

*Continued on next page*

POETRY

*thanksgiving '89*

*we reached bear mountain summit  
midday on a cloudy thanksgiving.  
early snow made the ascent a trial,  
the highest point in connecticut  
barely two thousand feet.*

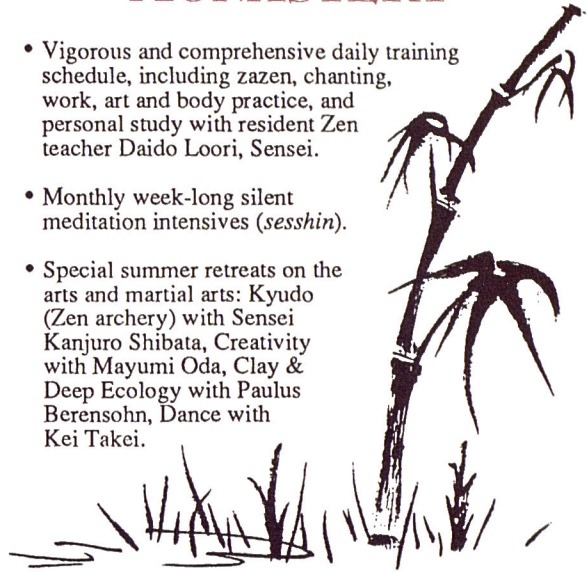
*hills rolled out in all directions,  
north and west to new york and massachusetts,  
east to connecticut's naugatuck valley.  
we rested briefly,  
the wind sharp against wet wool shirts.*

*a final sweep of the horizon  
confirmed a circle of ragged orange,  
the illuminated pollution of working cities  
captured and pressing each hill.*

*Paul Bloom  
November 26/27, 1989*

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## Perceiving the World as Self

*Continued from previous page*

tributing material resources. It will be easy to cherish that which we are intimate with.

How do you perceive the natural world? How do you define your needs in relation to the needs of the planet? For me, addressing these questions is possible only as I become more

aware that human needs are the same as planetary needs. To paraphrase the Buddhist poet Gary Snyder, the great challenge of my life has become learning to “walk lightly upon the earth.”

*Ames Colt works and studies in the Environmental Science program at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. He is a member of the Cambridge Zen Center. □*

## Pine Forest Teachings

*Bringing joy and compassion to the environmental wars*

*By Anne Rudloe*

The four ancient elements are still the best way to describe the natural world as we see it and live in it.

- Earth: prairie, forest, desert, mountain.
- Water: flowing springs, rivers, ocean.
- Air: morning calm, hurricanes, weather.
- Fire: the sun that gives it all energy and motion.

Life arises from these four together. Individuals by the billions flash on and off, like fireflies in the night. These impermanent beings make up a continuum — the flowing life force that has shaped the planet for countless millions of years. This life shares the power and essence of the four elements. So a butterfly fluttering across the coastal dunes is as powerful as a mountain; it contains all life's strength within its small vast self.

Today we wonder what will become of our Earth and all its life. We struggle to protect it from pollution, development, and waste. But to act effectively we must first understand our relationship to this life. And to continue the struggle over time, we must learn to act with compassion and joy. Anger and desperation may produce energy for a while, but over the long term it takes the joy out of life, draining our strength in the process. Once we learn to act with joy, we will be stronger, more energetic, and therefore more effective.

How can we gain this understanding, compassion, and joy? In the Orient, Zen practice and the way of the warrior have a long traditional relationship. The idea is to be as clear as cut glass and just as dangerous. Zen is equally useful for those whose modern Warrior Way is the way of the Earth. Traditional warriors and today's environmental activists each require certain things: high energy; the ability to make personal security a secondary rather than a primary goal; and the ability to continue over time through defeats as well as victories. These qualities often arise spontaneously out of Zen practice as we gain insight into the living universe and how we fit into it.

A good way to learn about this living world is to practice outdoors as much as possible. In Zen temple practice the master is a very formal figure surrounded by certain barriers



Anne Rudloe (in cowboy hat) teaching a university class in a Florida salt marsh.

that inhibit access. The barriers preserve an essential space, keeping the student from confusing the teacher of reality with the whole of reality; they also test whether the student has the clarity and strength to knock them down. But if a human teacher is formal, how much more formal is the teaching of a tree in the wind, or light flashing on water? It manifests reality in every moment with its total being, with no wanting anything and no way for our individual egos to get involved.

Understanding our relationship to the planet, and acting out of love and compassion to protect and restore it, are the only defenses against burnout and despair. But sometimes this is easier to say than to do. For example, a while back I faced a series of environmental setbacks over two days, one on top of the other. Whatever clarity or calm I thought I achieved vanished into frustration.

I fled to a nearby longleaf pine forest. These forests, which once dominated the Southeastern coastal plains, have been largely destroyed by logging and other human activities, and their native species have been relegated to the endangered list. On this day the tree trunks were black in the distance against a wall of green pine needles. The open forest glowed blue,