

What is Deep Ecology?

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The Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess first used the term “Deep Ecology” in a 1973 essay relating to the global environmental movement in which he sought to describe the differences between a “shallow ecology movement” and a “deep ecology movement.” His summary of the characteristics of the two is as follows:

1. The Shallow Ecology movement:

Fight against pollution and resource depletion. Central objective: the health and affluence of people in the developed countries. . . .

2. The Deep Ecology Movement:

a. Rejection of the man [sic]–in–environment image in favor of the relational, total–field image. Organisms as knots in the field of intrinsic relations. An intrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same things. The total field model dissolves not only the man–in–environment concept, but every compact thing–in–milieu concept -- except when talking at a superficial or preliminary level of communication.

b. Biospherical egalitarianism -- in principle. The “in principle” clause is inserted because any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppression. The ecological field worker acquires a deep–seated respect, even veneration, for ways and forms of life. He reaches an understanding from within, a kind of understanding that others reserve for fellow men and for a narrow section of ways and forms of life. To the ecological field worker, the equal right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom. Its restriction to humans is an anthropocentrism with detrimental effects upon the life quality of humans themselves. This quality depends in part upon the deep pleasure and satisfaction we receive from close partnership with other forms of life. The attempt to ignore our dependence and to establish a master–slave role has contributed to the alienation of man [sic] from himself.[1]

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The environmental movement has always been characterized by efforts to preserve wild spaces around the world as well as efforts to slow down, stop and /or reverse environmental degradation. The arena for action of these efforts has been primarily political: enacting legislation, establishing regulatory agencies, levying fines, restricting access to land areas, etc. In Naess's definition, the shallow ecological movement restricts its activities to fighting pollution and the depletion of "resources." There is an implicit social critique involved with this definition. Shallow ecological work seeks to preserve the affluence and health of people in developed countries, so the non-human, natural world consists of "resources" whose existence can be used by humans to increase human well-being or pleasure.[2] In addition, environmental work in this view is directed solely at increasing the well-being of those who can afford it, or who possess the economic and political means for affecting change upon their local environment. Shallow ecology, for example, will work to see that a hazardous waste dump is not built in the communities of those with time and ability to lobby for its placement elsewhere. A shallow ecological approach may also seek to find technological solutions for environmental threats, but never engage in a direct challenge to technological assumptions, processes and philosophies. In essence then, shallow ecology seeks to maintain a certain quality and style of life devoid of the negative effects engendered by that same lifestyle.

This approach is often referred to as "reform environmentalism." Bill Devall and George Sessions describe this as when

(e)nvironmentalism is frequently seen as the attempt to work only within the confines of conventional political processes of industrialized nations to alleviate or mitigate some of the worst forms of air and water pollution, destruction of indigenous wildlife, and some of the most short-sighted development schemes.[3]

While Sessions and Devall acknowledge the value of this work, they also point out the liabilities of working within the confines of a political-economic system and accepting the rubrics and presuppositions of that system. Peter Berg presents an apt analogy for understanding the limits of this approach:

Classic environmentalism has bred a peculiar negative political malaise among its adherents. Alerted to fresh horrors almost daily, they research the extent of each new life-threatening situation, rush to protest it, and campaign exhaustively to prevent a future

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occurrence. It's a valuable service, of course, but imagine a hospital that consists only of an emergency room. No maternity care, no pediatric clinic, no promising therapy: just mangled trauma cases. Many of them are lost or drag on in wilting protraction, and if a few are saved there are always more than can be handled jamming through the door. Rescuing the environment has become like running a battlefield aid station in a war against a killing machine that operates just beyond reach, and that shifts its ground after each seeming defeat. . . . [4]

In contrast to this approach, the deep ecology movement seeks to look at the deeper structures of philosophical and religious thought which inform action at the political, economic and social or cultural levels. Alan Drengson characterizes the contrast between “deep” and “shallow” as follows:

The word “deep” in part referred to the level of questioning of our purposes and values, when arguing in environmental conflicts. The “deep” movement involves deep questioning, right down to fundamentals. The shallow stops before THIS ultimate level.[5]

Deep Ecologists seek to affect environmental change by changing the assumptions humans have made about their relationship with the natural world in which they live, and of which they are an intrinsic part. This is the critique of “man-in-environment” of which Naess speaks. Whereas in the shallow ecological approach, humans still separate themselves apart from the environment in order to be able to exploit its resources, in the Deep Ecological approach it becomes impossible to speak of resources as being things extrinsic to humans, or in fact to speak of humans as being extrinsic from the environment they seek to exploit and use. Deep Ecology endeavors to adopt an ecological point of view and way of seeing that sees things in their network of interrelationships and interdependencies. In a manner reminiscent of John Donne, Deep Ecologists remind humans that humankind is not a specie “intire unto itself.” We are all “a part of the Maine,” and when others species become extinct or areas of the earth are irreversibly damaged, polluted or degraded in any way, we “send not for whom the bell tolls,” it tolls for us.

Arne Naess articulated his distinction between the Shallow and Deep, Long-Range Ecology movements in 1972 in the essay cited earlier. This essay was picked up and given wider circulation in the United States by Bill Devall and George Sessions. In that article, Naess was describing a grassroots movement. In further conversations in the early 1980s with George Sessions and others, a set of eight platform principles was

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developed to characterize a deep, long-range ecology movement. These are as follows:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman Life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realizations of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
5. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation to directly or indirectly try to implement the necessary changes.[6]

Alan Drengson is careful to point out, in his commentary upon this platform, that these are meant to be guidelines whereby any person can formulate their own ecological philosophy, or ecosophy, as it is often called,[7] out of which their environmental action can emerge.

These principles can be endorsed by people from a diversity of backgrounds who share common concerns for the planet, its many beings and ecological communities. In many Western nations, supporters of the platform principles stated below come from different religious and philosophical backgrounds, their political affiliations differ considerably. What unites them is a long-range

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vision of what is necessary to protect the integrity of the Earth's ecological communities and ecocentric values. Supporters of the principles have a diversity of ultimate beliefs. "Ultimate beliefs" here refers to their own basic metaphysical and religious grounds for their values, actions and support for the deep ecology movement. Different people and cultures have different mythologies and stories. Nonetheless, they can support the platform and work for solutions to the environmental crisis. A diversity of practices is emerging, but the overlapping is considerable as can be seen in hundreds of environmental conflicts all over the world.[8]

Naess and others recognize that a global environmental movement will develop from a wide variety of ultimate commitments, including a variety of religions and spiritualities. The elaboration of a set of platform principles allows people to begin at their own set of initial religious or ultimate-value commitments and to move towards collective and collaborative environmental work. Naess himself developed the "apron diagram" on the following page to illustrate how one can proceed from ultimate values to concrete political action:

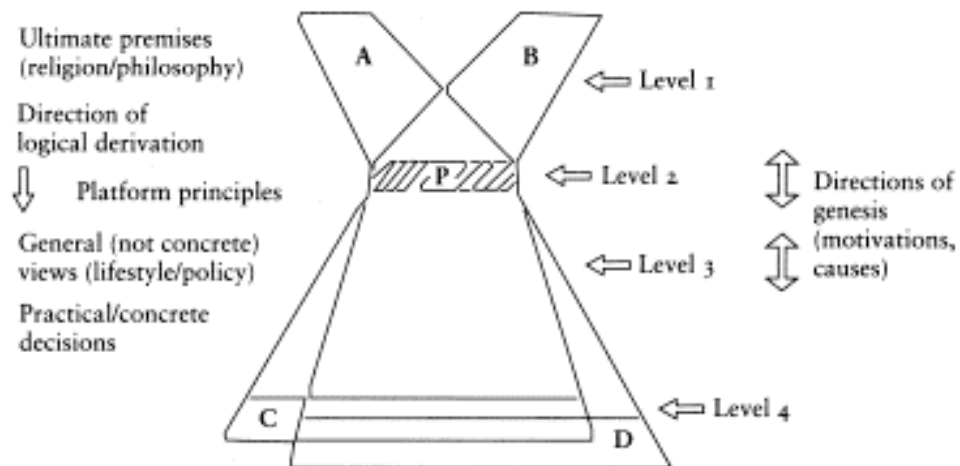


Diagram: The Apron[9]

The diagram, formulated by Naess himself, is unfortunate in one way: Naess is trying to depict a grass-roots movement in which action arises from the ground-up, rather than a top-down fashion. So, if one inverts

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the imagery so that Level 1 is at the bottom, it conforms more closely to Naess' intent. Indeed, Alan Drengson offers this commentary on the diagram:

The aim of ecophilosophy is a total or comprehensive view of our human and individual situation. Comprehensiveness includes the whole global context with us in it, sharing a world with diverse cultures and beings. We move toward a total view via deep questioning to ultimate norms and premises, and via articulation (or application) to policies and practices. Much cross-cultural work is done at the level of PLATFORM PRINCIPLES, and we can have a high level of agreement at this level that Naess calls Level II. From Level II we can engage in deep questioning and pursue articulating our own ecosophy, which might be grounded in some major worldview or religion, such as Pantheism or Christianity. This level of ultimate philosophies is called Level I. There is considerable diversity at this level. From Level II principles, we can develop specific policy recommendations and formulations, or Level III. Level III application leads us to practical actions, Level IV. There is considerable diversity at the level of policies, but even more at the level of practical actions.[10]

Deep Ecology as a Search for Place

In all of this discussion, it is possible to refer to Deep Ecology as a worldview. This term is particularly apt when describing any sort of environmental consciousness. The power of a worldview is to provide a cognitive landscape in which a community of people or a whole society can live. The terminology of landscape is deliberately chosen, because the Deep Ecology movement itself can be described as a search for place. This place exists at the level of the imagination as well as at the level of physical situatedness.

The Deep Ecological critique of the prevailing worldview of post-industrial, technologically-based, consumerist cultures[11] is that the cognitive landscapes they set up are in conflict with the natural landscape itself. What Deep Ecology seeks to do is to articulate a worldview which is in concert with the natural world itself and whose principles, terms, boundaries, definitions, and modes of operation are derived from the natural world (always keeping in mind that humans and human diversity are a part of the natural world as well). Such a worldview is often articulated in terms of the particularities of place, or more to the point, of places. That is to say, a worldview derived from the natural world needs to recognize that the natural world itself consists of vast collections and

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systems of terrains, animal and plant populations, climates and human communities.

Deep Ecologists endeavor to remain grounded (a term I use deliberately) in the constituencies and conditions of particular places. That is, when thinking and speaking deep-ecologically, it does not do to speak of the environment in general, removed from specific places, with particular species of plants and animals, a unique topography, specific climate, a particular human inhabitation, certain smells, sights, sounds, etc. While certain Deep Ecological ideas and principles are framed in the abstract, which is the function of theory, there is a strong impulse among many who espouse Deep Ecology to apply those principles directly to specific places and particular environments.

Endnotes

[1] Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movements," in *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100. Quoted in Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, trans. David Rothenberg (Cambridge, UK: The Cambridge University Press, 1989), 28.

[2] For example, see Garrett Hardin's "lifeboat ethic" wherein he argues that the wealthier, more resourceful nations (i.e. "First World" countries) should work for their own survival in the midst of environmental catastrophe with no consideration for poorer or less technologically advanced nations and peoples. Garrett Hardin, "Living on a Lifeboat," *Bioscience* 24 (1974): 561–68.

[3] Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology* (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith Books, Utah, 1985), 2.

[4] Peter Berg, editorial, *Raise the Stakes* (Fall 1983). Quoted in Devall and Sessions, *ibid.*, p. 3.

[5] Alan Drengson, "Introduction and Background to The Trumpeter: Journal Of Ecosophy," in *The Trumpeter* (1999), found online at <http://trumpeter.athabasca.ca/hist.html>.

[6] Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1995), 49–50.

[7] Here is Arne Naess's definition of ecosophy: "By an ECOSOPHY I mean a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of SOFIA (or) wisdom, is openly normative, it contains BOTH norms, rules, postulates, value priority announcements AND hypotheses concerning the state of affairs in our universe. Wisdom is policy wisdom, prescription, not only scientific description and prediction. The details of an ecosophy will show many variations due to significant differences concerning not only the 'facts' of pollution, resources, population, etc. but also value priorities." Cited in Alan Drengson and Yuichi Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement*, p.8.

[8] Alan Drengson, "Introduction and Background to *The Trumpeter*," *op. cit.*

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[9] Diagram taken from Drengron and Inoue, *The Deep Ecology Movement*, 10.

[10] Drengron, "Introduction and Background. . . ."

[11] The following examples of the critique of technological and post-industrial culture do not always bear the name "Deep Ecology," but are often cited by Deep Ecology writers, and can be considered to be within the circle of Deep Ecology thought: Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981); C.A. Bowers, *Critical Essays on Education, Modernity, and the Recovery of the Ecological Imperative* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993); Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Bill Devall, *Living Richly in an Age of Limits* (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1988); Alan Drengron, *Shifting Paradigms: From Technocrat to Planetary Person* (Victoria, BC, Canada: Lightstar, 1983); Alan Drengron, *The Practice of Technology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995); Leopold Kohr, *The Overdeveloped Nations: the Diseconomies of Scale* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978); Jerry Mander, *In the Absence of the Sacred: the Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club books, 1991); Andre McLaughlin, *Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993); Donella H. Meadows, et al, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (New York: Universe Books, 1972); Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (New York: Penguin books, 1991); Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993); Theodore Roszak, *Person/Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1978); Vandana Shiva, *Monocultures of the Mind* (Penang, Malaysia: Third World Network, 1993); Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Michael Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 1990).