

A Pot-Pourri of Nature Essays from ECOS 1983-2006

by

James Fenton

With cartoons by

Jim Gammie and Neil Bennett

Contents

Page

3	The Search for the Countryside (1983)
5	Even More About the Purpose of Nature Conservation (1984)
11	Letter (1982)
13	Alien Or Native (1986)
20	Beyond the Faustian Bargain (1987)
27	Animal Rights (1987) <i>by Ian S Coghill</i>
30	Animal (and Other) Rights (1987)
33	The Ecology of Environmentalism: Some Ideas for Discussion (1987)
44	Democracy and Habitat Protection (1989)
49	Wildlife Valuation (1992)
56	25 Years of Change in Wester Ross (1994)
64	Out of Site, Out of Mind? (1996)
69	Wild Land or Wilderness – Is There a Difference? (1996)
82	Political Correctness Strikes Ecology (1996)
85	Scotland: Reviving the Wild (1999)
89	A New Paradigm for the Uplands (2004)
95	Wild Thoughts Followed Up (2004)
99	What is Natural? (2006)
102	What is Natural? A Reply (2006) <i>by Mike Townsend</i>
107	Epilogue: Nature and Religion (2007) [<i>previously unpublished</i>]

Apart from the Epilogue, these essays have all been published in *ECOS*, the journal of BANC – the British Association of Nature Conservationists. See <http://www.banc.org.uk/>

© 2007 The British Association of Nature Conservationists
Copyright resides with BANC, although the essays can be stored, downloaded and printed for personal use or for research purposes; they must not be used in any way for commercial gain without the express permission of BANC.

Only available as a .pdf file download from <http://www.james-hc-fenton.eu/>

Published by

James HC Fenton, Wester Lairgs, Farr, By Inverness, IV2 6XH

The Ecology of Environmentalism: Some Ideas for Discussion

Any human society needs to have an ethical system giving the rules that govern:

- our relationships with other humans (Rule 1: *intraspecific relations*); this determines how we treat each other, e.g. do or do not kill, use violence, look after young, etc...
- our relationships with other species (Rule 2: *interspecific relations*); rule 2 determines how we treat other species, e.g. dominate/exploit them, treat as equals, etc...

The rules are generally determined by the religious culture in which we live (e.g. Islam, Christianity, Western Materialism, etc.), and most of the emphasis, not surprisingly, tends to be on Rule 1.

There are two approaches to Rule 2:

- an *anthropocentric* (man-centred) ethic;
- a *biocentric* (nature-centred) ethic.

Western society has tended to be biased towards the anthropocentric approach – man is the ‘central being’ above all other creation; this has resulted in an exploitative/destructive approach to nature. However, the science of ecology is (re-)teaching us our dependence on nature, and has created (coincided with) the rise of ‘western environmentalism’. At heart, the environmental debate is all about the conflict between the anthropocentric approach and the biocentric approach – the idea that nature has ‘inherent worth’.

Ecology

Ecology as a science looks at the interrelationships between life and the environment – the links between plants, animals, soils, and

climate. It helps us unravel what are only now being seen as the incredibly complex links within ecosystems. For example it can show how, by turning on an electric heater in any home or driving my car, I help cause avalanches in Switzerland and also contribute to climatic change.

If all the impacts of our lifestyle are put together (acid rain, nuclear waste, rainforest destruction, water and soil pollution, loss of habitat and species, soil erosion, and so on), it can be seen what a major impact our lifestyle is having on the planet. As the revolutionary would say ‘we are all guilty’.

Aware, therefore, that things cannot go on indefinitely the way they do now, many people are beginning to question the whole basis of our attitudes and lifestyles and our effect on the planet: people are realizing that in order to stop acid rain, or the carbon dioxide ‘greenhouse effect’, tinkering with details will only be a stop-gap measure – ultimately, to solve these and the many other problems, lifestyles and world views will have to change. Deeper and deeper questions are being asked about nature and our relationship to it.

Deep Ecology

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess is one of the many people who have been asking such questions; and in so doing, in 1973, coined the term ‘deep ecology’:

The essence of deep ecology is to keep asking more searching questions about human life, society and Nature as in the Western philosophical tradition of Socrates.¹

All questionings have to end somewhere, have to end with fundamental tenets which are *a priori*, i.e. which have to be taken on trust as true. What is the minimum number of these tenets needed, in which rational, scientific, western man can believe (i.e. which ‘ring true’), and which encompass all the modern liberal ideals – individual freedom, equality of opportunity, a caring society (Rule 1) but also respect for nature (Rule 2)? Arne Naess has come up

with two basic tenets, or 'intuitions' as he calls them:

- *self-realization* – the real work of becoming a whole person,²

but within a context of

- *biocentric* equality – the basic intuition that all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as part of the inter-related whole, are equal in intrinsic worth.²

These two basic 'intuitions', also called 'ultimate norms', can be used on their own, or within the framework of a person's own 'religion' – deep ecology is eclectic, not dogmatic. They are the minimum necessary beliefs from which an ethical system, world view, and way of life can be built up (in the same way that Christians could argue that all of Christianity can be based on Christ's two commandments).

The first intuition, *self-realization*, is one that most people would subscribe to – the 'right' of every individual to grow and develop according to his or her own true self; hence the need for a caring society, a society where this is possible. But this first intuition has to be considered in the light of the second, *biocentric equality*; the right of every species – not just our own – to self-realization. This, in fact, is only taking to its logical conclusion what the nature conservation movement has been saying for some time; other animals and plants have a 'right' to exist and so have to be conserved. But this argument, that species merely 'have a right to exist' does not go far enough, otherwise, where possible, why not keep all species in zoos? Compromises will be the rule and nature will be restricted to packaged reserves, with their boundaries always being eaten into.

Deep ecology is, however, uncompromising – nature is *not* a resource to be managed and exploited by humans, but has a right to exist on its own without interference from man. Hence, one of the strongest points of deep ecology is the *absolute necessity* of preserving all the remaining natural areas of wilderness.

The proposers of deep ecology, Arne Naess and George Sessions, have articulated eight basic principles which can be logically derived from the two ultimate norms and which should govern our lifestyles and worldviews.³ Basically deep ecology is saying that we have lost contact with nature; but there are many philosophies, traditions, and cultures, both past and present, eastern, western and 'primitive', that we can draw upon to help us find our way back. Working from the two ultimate norms of self-realization and biocentric equality, deep ecology challenges everyone to look at the world from a new perspective, and to analyze their own attitudes and lifestyles in relation to this perspective. In providing a firm foundation for belief, a house built upon rock and not sand, it gives one hope that the world can be changed, that both the environmental and social problems can be solved.

Communication

Deep ecologists would argue that most nature conservationists are arguing their case from a philosophical base different from that of their opponents – their opponents are arguing from an anthropocentric viewpoint, while conservationists (often unconsciously) argue from a more biocentric standpoint. It would appear, unfortunately, that conflict is inevitable.

A conservationist, deep down, may want to conserve a species because he or she believes that that species has inherent value (a biocentric viewpoint); in practice, however, he will tend to justify its conservation to others in anthropocentric terms – giving scientific and utilitarian arguments for its conservation. Although this may be necessary at times, every conservationist should be able to answer for him or herself the following questions:

- Do I use anthropocentric arguments for conservation because I honestly believe in them?
- Or is it because I am afraid to use what will be seen as non-scientific arguments?

- Or do I consciously use the same language as my opponents in order to communicate my message – a pragmatic approach?

The anthropocentric *versus* biocentric worldviews of land-use managers and environmentalists generally mean that they share little common ground and, as a result, they talk past each other. The basic philosophical differences tend to be obscured or deflected into discussions of technical issues; e.g. those who oppose aerial spraying of herbicides are trapped into arguing over research data of very technical studies of dispersion rates.⁴

Levels of Communication

In the conservation debate individuals are often arguing on different levels of communication. To communicate effectively, both sides must be on the same level. Figure 1 shows a model illustrating the content and quality of communication between individuals. As openness, trust, and objectivity increase between individuals as you get to know someone better, so also does the level of communication increase – people find it easiest talking to someone on the same level as themselves; the further apart you are the more difficult it is to communicate. Figure 1 also illustrates how people talking about nature conservation can be on different levels.

Levels of Concern for Nature

In the same way that communication can be at different levels, the ‘level of concern for nature’ of an individual can be at different levels. Figure 2 illustrates the different levels of concern that are possible, starting from an anthropocentric viewpoint at the bottom to a more universal concern at the top.

As well as reflecting the increasing ‘awareness of nature’ of an individual, the movement from top to bottom also reflects the history of the conservation movement.

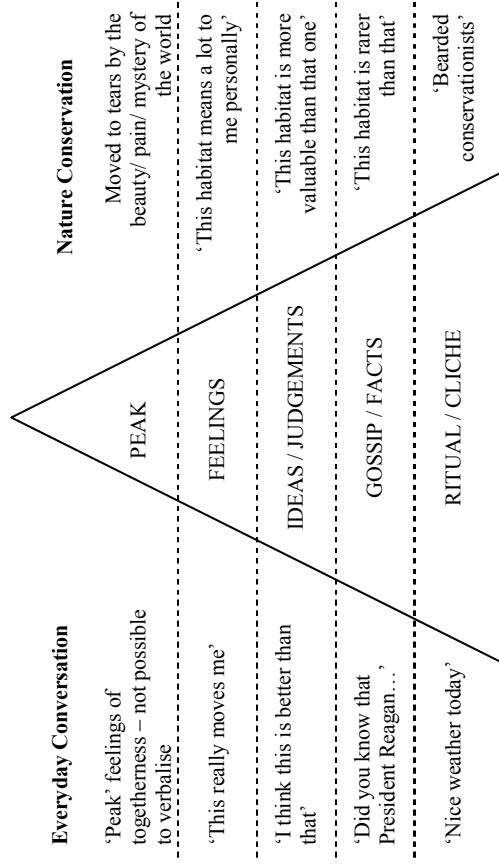


Figure 1. Levels of communication in conservation between individuals; each level represents acceptance of greater inter-personal risk taking.

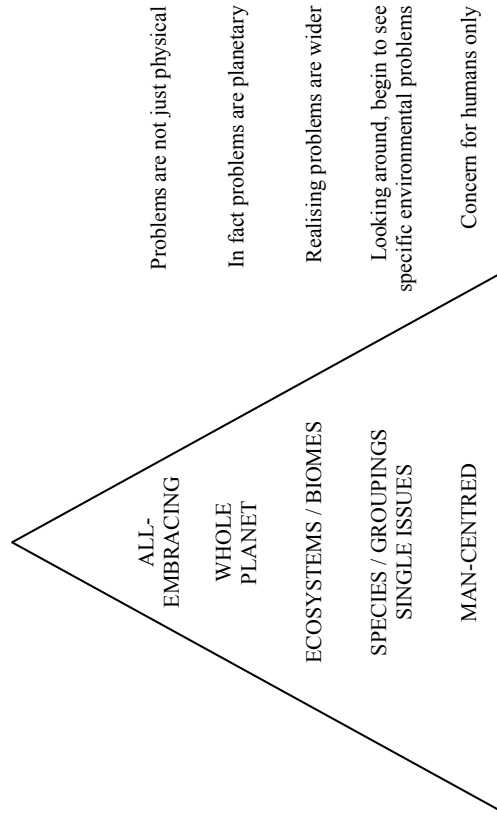


Figure 2. Levels of concern for nature.

The Ecology of Environmental Organizations

Many different organizations are concerned with our interaction with the natural environment. Taking the Highlands of Scotland as an example, Figure 3 identifies some of these. These organizations can be classified in various ways, for example by aim, structure or role. Figure 4 shows some of the classifications possible.

It is an interesting intellectual exercise to place these many environmental organizations (not necessarily the individuals within them) at the level they are working at, whether at the communications level (with respect to nature) (Figure 1) or 'concern for nature' level (Figure 2). In fact there is possibly some correspondence between the two (Figure 5).

It should be stressed that this classification is not judgemental – each level has its value, and specialists in each field are needed. However, as one moves upwards the all-importance, or relative value, of that particular level will diminish. Of course the boundaries are not sharp and there are problems: for example, forestry organizations – are they more interested in trees (2nd level) or the revenue from trees (bottom level)? Is the RSPB more interested in birds (2nd level) or is it moving towards a more general concern for habitat (3rd level)? Similarly the World Wildlife Fund: is it concerned with specific species, ecosystems, or the whole planet, or, after the Assisi conference, the more spiritual dimensions? And what about animal rights groups – strong emotional commitment, but to a single issue (or perhaps animal rights is not a single issue at all?).

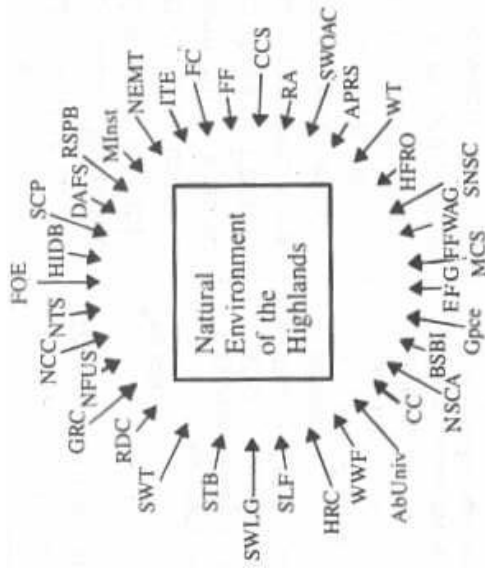


Figure 3. Many of the organisations that interact with the natural environment of the Highlands.

Explanation of Acronyms

AbUniv – Aberdeen University; APRS – Association for the Preservation of Rural Scotland; BSBI – Botanical Society of the British Isles; CC – Crofters Commission; CCS – Countryside Commission for Scotland; DAFS – Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for Scotland; EFG – Economic Forestry Group; FC – Forestry Commission; FF – Fountain Forestry; FFWAG – Farming Forestry and Wildlife Advisory Group; FOE – Friends of the Earth; Gpc – Greenpeace; GRC – Grampian Regional Council; HFRO – Hill Farming Research Organization; HIDE – Highlands and Islands Development Board; HRC – Highland Regional Council; ITE – Institute of Terrestrial Ecology; MCS – Mountaineering Council of Scotland; MInst – Macaulay Institute; NCC – Nature Conservancy Council; NEMT – North East Mountain Trust; NFUS – National Farmers Union of Scotland; NSCA – North of Scotland College of Agriculture; NTS – National Trust for Scotland; RA – Ramblers Association; RDC – Red Deer Commission; RSPB – Royal Society for the Protection of Birds; SCP – Scottish Conservation Projects; SLF – Scottish Landowners Federation; SNSC – Scottish National Ski Council; STB – Scottish Tourist Board; SWOA – Scottish Woodland Owners Association; SWLG – Scottish Wildland Group; SWT – Scottish Wildlife Trust; WT – Woodland Trust; WWF – World Wildlife Fund.

To illustrate better what Figure 5 is trying to get across let us take an organization from each level and consider its attitude towards the *natural environment*:

- At the bottom level, the National Farmers Union may come up with a clichéd statement such as “All farmers care for the land”.
- At the 2nd level, a factual statement “The Woodland Trust protects woods”.
- At the 3rd level, a judgement from the Nature Conservancy Council: “We judge that this piece of land is more valuable than that in nature conservation terms”.
- At level 4 there is movement to a more involved response: members of Friends of the Earth may actually put their arms round a tree to prevent it being felled.
- At level 5 organizations such as the Findhorn Foundation see nature conservation as part of a holistic, more spiritual relationship between life and the planet.

Conclusion

It has been stated earlier that people find it easiest to communicate with someone at the same level as themselves; this is because people tend to shy away from delving into and exposing their deeper thoughts. As a result, most communication tends to be confined to the lower levels. Most of the conservation debate, therefore, takes place at the ‘lower’ levels, and groups which try to operate at the ‘higher’ levels tend to be ridiculed or stereotyped: people who are afraid to delve too deeply tend to project their fears onto those who do. Attitudes change slowly, and, until such time as the general culture has accepted the general tenets of philosophies such as Deep Ecology, the conservation debate will be largely confined to non-threatening arguments of scientific fact.

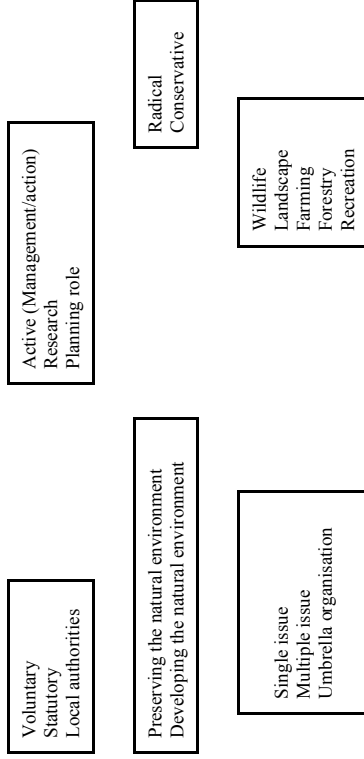


Figure 4. Examples of different ways of classifying environmental organisations.

Level of Communication	Level of Concern for Nature	Typical Concepts	Examples of Organisations concerned with the Highlands
Peak	All-embracing Spiritual	Gaia Deep Ecology	(Findhorn Foundation)
Feelings	Whole planet	Environmental Global resources	FOE, Greenpeace
Judgements	Ecosystems Biomes	Nature reserves	WWF, NCC, SWT
Facts	Species/Groupings Single issues	Preservation	RDC, FWAG, RSPB, BSBI, NTS, SWT
Gossip	Man-centred	Use of resources	NFUS, DAFS, SLF, NSCA, SNSC, HIDD, CC

Figure 5. Levels of concern for nature and levels of communication of different environmental organisations. Add other organisations where you think they fit best. This matrix should be seen as a model for discussion rather than a rigorous analysis – it is not possible to force complex entities into a rigid classification.

Notes

1. Quotes are from *Deep Ecology* by Bill Devall and George Sessions (1985), Gibbs M. Smith Inc., Utah. Essential reading. This quote p. 65.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 67-8. The basic principles are identified as follows:
 - a. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
 - b. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
 - c. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy *vital* needs.
 - d. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
 - e. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
 - f. 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.
 - g. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating *life qualities* (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.
 - h. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes.
3. *Ibid.*, These principles are listed on p.70.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

[Author's note 2007. The book *Deep Ecology* by Devall & Sessions was hugely influential on me at the time. Even though I say it myself, I have always thought this one of my more interesting essays!]