

On Depth Ecology

David Abram

Deep Ecology, as a movement and a way of thinking, has generally been contrasted to conventional environmentalism, and especially to approaches that focus only on alleviating the most obvious symptoms of ecological disarray without reflecting upon, and seeking to transform, the more deep-seated cultural assumptions and practices that have given rise to those problems. Rather than applying various band-aid solutions to environmental problems, adherents of deep ecology ostensibly ask “deeper” questions, and aim at deeper, more long-range solutions. Yet some stalwart environmental activists have taken offense at the implication that their own strenuous efforts merely amount to a kind of “shallow” ecology. In fact, the implicit contrast between “deep” and “shallow” approaches to ecological problems has led various folks to suspect a kind of arrogance in the very idea of a “deep” ecology; and such suspicions have served to somewhat weaken, and marginalize, the deep ecology movement in recent years.

Yet the tremendous potential of the deep ecology movement, and the real eloquence of deep ecology as a powerful, if largely inchoate, set of intuitions, never really had anything to do, I believe, with the facile contrast between “deep” and “shallow” approaches. Worthy and visionary activists from many different fields – scientists and farmers, professors and poets, artists and anarchists, all with a intense love for wild nature and a sense of outrage at the ugly insults that civilization was inflicting on the animate Earth – were drawn to deep ecology because they could sense a new kind of heartfelt humility in this movement, a gathering of brilliant spirits who were not afraid to acknowledge their own existence as earthly animals. All were happy to affirm that the human was but one of the Earth's many creatures – a remarkable creature, to be sure, but ultimately no more astonishing than the grizzly bears, or the cormorants, or the spiders riding the grasses as they bend in the wind. Far from being arrogant, deep ecology was marked by a new kind of humility – a new assumption that we two-leggeds were entirely a part of the intricate web of life – and by a new wish to reflect and to act without violating our responsibility as plain citizens of the biotic community. The other side of this humility was a steady wonder in the face of a world that exceeds all our designs, the delicious and sometimes terrifying awareness of being human in a much more-than-human world.

The name deep ecology resonated well with this new impulse, mostly because of the richness of meaning in this curious word “deep.” It is a meaning that very few of us recognized consciously, yet I suspect that our animal bodies sensed it right from the start. For the adjective deep speaks of a particular dimension of the experienced world: often termed the third

dimension, it is that which photographers refer to when they speak of “depth of field.” It is that dimension that stretches from the near to the far, from the place where we stand all the way to the horizon, and beyond. The curious nature of this dimension is such that, unlike height or width, which seem entirely objective aspects of the perceived world, the dimension of depth is wholly dependent upon the position of the viewer within that world. The height of a boulder, for instance, seems to stay constant as I move around that rock. Yet the depth of the rock, the relation between the near and the far aspects of the boulder, steadily changes as I move around it. Unlike the height of a mountain range, or the width or span of a valley, the depth of a landscape depends entirely on where we are standing within that landscape. And as we move, bodily, within that terrain, the depth of the landscape shifts around us.

In truth, a space has depth only if one is situated somewhere within that space. A cluster of boulders, or a grove of trees, may be said to have a particular depth only if you are situated, bodily, in the same world as those rocks or those trees.

If, for example, I am watching some nature program on television, observing a female lion, perhaps, as she lolls with her cubs under the shade of a leafy tree, and I happen to stand up and walk across the room, my movement does not alter anything on the screen. The depth of the room will shift around me as I move – the bookcase looms up in front of me and then recedes as I move past it, the music stand comes between me and the television screen for a moment as I walk by – yet the spatial positions of those cubs do not shift in relation to one another or in relation to the tree behind them. For the lions and I do not inhabit the same space; there is no depth between us, for I look at their world from a position entirely outside of that world, an utterly detached spectator looking at a flat spectacle. My real, bodily encounter is not at all with those lions, but with the flat screen of the television.

Modern, conventional science has long presumed to observe the natural world from a detached position utterly outside that world. The science of ecology inherited this presumption from the older sciences that preceded it – the assumption that we could objectively analyze the interactions of various organisms and their earthly environment as though we ourselves were not participant in that same environment, as though our rational minds could somehow spring themselves free from our coevolved, carnal embedment in the thick of this ecology in order to observe it from a wholly detached and impartial perspective.

In my high school biology class, we gazed at a complex diagram of the local ecosystem drawn on the flat blackboard, but of course we did not include our own gaze within the system. Later, some of us learned to model particular ecosystems on the flat screens of our computers. Although I learned a fair amount from such exercises, the primary lesson I learned was that earthly nature is an objective, determinate phenomenon that can best be studied from outside, not an enveloping mystery in which I am wholly participant.

Such is the view of nature that we perpetuate when we neglect, or overlook, the depth dimension of the world. It distorts the fact that, in truth, we only ever experience the actual world from our embodied, two-legged perspective down here in the thick of things. Since we are entirely in and of this earthly world, nature can disclose certain aspects of itself to us only by concealing other aspects; we never perceive the whole of any earthly phenomenon all at once. Because we are animals immersed in the world, each thing we directly encounter meets us with its own depth, its visible facets and its invisible facets, its closer aspects open to our gaze and its more distant aspects hidden from view. The belief in a purely objective comprehension of nature, in a clear and complete understanding of how the world works, is the belief in an entirely flat world seen from above, a world without depth, a nature that we are not a part of but that we look at from outside – like a God, or like a person staring at a computer screen.

Deep ecology calls this presumption into question; it suggests that such cool, disembodied detachment is itself an illusion, and a primary cause of our destructive relation to the land. It insists on the primacy of our bodily embedment in the encompassing ecology, on our thorough entanglement within the earthly web of life. It suggests that we are utterly immersed in, and dependent upon, the world that we mistakenly try to study, manipulate, and manage from outside.

Thus, the most relevant contrast provoked by the notion of deep ecology is not a facile contrast between “shallow” and “deep” approaches, but rather a contrast between the flat and the deep – between flat ecology and deep ecology-- between a detached way of seeing that looks at nature from outside, and an embedded way of seeing (and feeling) that gazes into the depths of a nature that encompasses and permeates us. Deep ecology, in other words, implies that we are situated in the depths of the earthly ecology.

It is this tacit implication of our thorough inherence in the biosphere, this intuition of depth, that unites all of us who were drawn, from various directions, to the phrase “deep ecology.” We all sensed the need for a way of speaking, thinking, and conducting research into particular aspects and processes of the more-than-human world that did not tear us out of our felt immersion in, and consanguinity with, the animate Earth. By acknowledging that we are a part of something so much vaster and more inscrutable than ourselves – by affirming that our own life is entirely continuous with the life of the rivers and the forests, that our intelligence is entangled with the wild intelligence of wolves and of wetlands, that our breathing bodies are simply our part of the exuberant flesh of the Earth — deep ecology, or rather, Depth Ecology opens a new (and perhaps also very old) sense of the sacred. It brings the sacred down to Earth, exposing the clearcuts and the dams and the spreading extinctions as a horrific sacrilege, making us pause in the face of biotechnology and other intensely manipulative initiatives that

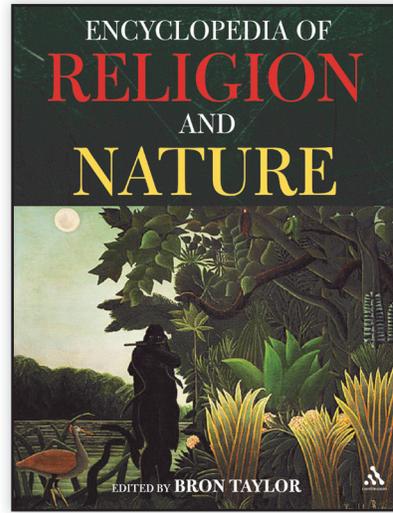
stem from a flat view of the world. Depth Ecology opens a profoundly immanent experience of the Holy precisely as the many-voiced land that carnally enfolds us – a mystery at once palpable, sensuous, and greatly in need of our attentive participation.¹

¹ This piece is a slightly revised version of © David Abram, “Depth Ecology” (2005), in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by Bron Taylor, published by Continuum Publishing, reprinted by permission of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

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