

George Sessions (1938 – 2016)

Harold Glasser

Last winter, we lost a hero and passionate champion of ecocentrism. George Sessions, accomplished Yosemite climber, lover and tireless defender of free nature, and leading figure in the deep ecology movement, died of stomach cancer on February 29, 2016.

For nearly 50 years, George was a philosophy professor and department chair at Sierra College in Rocklin, California. Next to Arne Naess, George was arguably the most significant figure in the deep ecology movement. He was certainly at the center of its emergence in North America. George was a subtle thinker with a beautiful mind and a superb attention to detail. His expansive, historically-rich understanding of the philosophical roots of ecocentrism was unparalleled. He saw both the forest through the trees and the fungi barely peeking through duff on the forest floor. His approach to ecophilosophy, based on a sweeping critique of the dominant growth-focused, anthropocentric orientation of Western civilization, was rooted in the ecological revolution of the 1960s (much of this work is chronicled in his landmark 1995 edited collection, *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*). This critique is, perhaps, even more relevant today in our world with 1.8 billion additional consumers (7.4 billion people total).

Exhausted by the expanding ecological crisis and its countless manifestations, but by no means defeated, George recognized that our ability to live in the present, with meaning and purpose, hinges on both our understanding of the past and our awareness of what brought our species to this sorry state. His focus, like Dr. Seuss' *Lorax*, was to be a tenacious, unyielding voice for the ecological integrity of the Earth and the well-being of other species. George set his cross hairs on the flourishing of life on Earth, not simply its survival, recognizing that in its flourishing lies the key to our own.

I first met George in 1991, after sharing a draft article on deep ecology and environmental policy. He graciously offered a thoughtful critique and kindly introduced me to the deep ecology community, which was no small undertaking because George was a gifted connector who knew everyone. We soon became fast friends and intellectual sparring partners. George was a warm, and at times demanding, mentor. He had a charming, puckish smile that could turn into a piercing, quizzical grin when he thought you said something outlandish or needed to be pulled back to Earth. We spent a lot of time together in the mid-1990s in Yosemite, Tuolumne Meadows, Santa Cruz, and sometimes in the deserts of California and Arizona with Arne Naess—although George never seemed to savour the desert like Arne. I think he felt most at home above the tree line in his beloved Sierra.

One of George's greatest contributions was publishing the *Ecophilosophy Newsletter*, which helped jump-start and nurture the academic ecophilosophy movement, which had a slow start in the wake of Earth Day 1 (1970). Starting in 1976 and continuing to 1984 (in six issues: 76, 79, 81, 82, 83, 84), the *Newsletter* was distributed for free to 50-60 folks around the globe.¹ In the beginning it contained postscripts to papers, book reviews, annotated bibliographies, and general musings about the state of the radical environmental movement. In its later incarnations it also included excerpts and short pieces from the works of others. The *Newsletter* predated and created the foundation for journals such as *Environmental Ethics* (initiated in 1979) and *The Trumpeter* (initiated in 1983).

Volume 6 (1984) contains the first description of the "deep ecology platform," which had been crafted by Naess and Sessions on a trip to Death Valley. The platform, which builds on some work that Arne Naess initiated in his 1977 "Notes on the Methodology of Normative Systems," makes a case for the non-axiological intrinsic value of nonhumans, suggests key policy and lifestyle implications that flow from embracing this principle (reduction of human impacts, decreasing human population, emphasizing quality of life over standard of living, etc.), and puts forward an argument that embracing the prior seven platform elements commits its supporters to take action to effect the necessary changes.

In a 2011 *Inquiry* article,² I wrote that Naess offered a utopian, life-affirming meta-narrative, a new *Weltanschauung* that shifted the focus of inquiry to coupling values, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom to behaviour. The core of Naess's approach is that sustainability hinges on developing more thoroughly reasoned and consistent views, policies, and actions, which are tied back to wide-identifying ultimate norms and a rich, well-informed understanding of the state of the planet. While George deeply admired Naess and viewed him as a father figure, I don't think this was his primary concern. It was almost inconceivable to him that people did not see the pernicious wave of destruction of free nature that was happening right before their eyes and stop cold in their tracks.

George had a more circumscribed view of deep ecology than Naess or myself. He wasn't driven to turn deep ecology into a coherent philosophy in the academic sense or to grapple with finding practical ways out of our daunting, species-scale dilemma. Instead, I think he saw deep ecology more as an impassioned plea, a rational effort to help us connect with our biophilic roots. He focused on clarifying what deep ecology is, outlining what it stands for, deciphering and shoring up its foundations, and clearing up misinterpretations and misunderstandings. The essence of his

¹ The full collection is now available on the Environmental Ethics Case Studies website: <http://environmentalethics.info/ecophilosophy.html>; accessed 21 July 2016.

² Harold Glasser, "Naess's Deep Ecology: Implications for the Human Prospect and Challenges for the Future," *Inquiry* 54, no. 1 (February 2011): 52-77.

argument was that our survival and capacity to flourish as a species rests on scaling down production and consumption, stabilizing and reducing human population, protecting biodiversity, and restoring wild ecosystems. He thought we'd need to usher in a paradigm shift in perceptions, values, and lifestyles to bring on this monumental change. It should be noted that this approach presages some of the recent calls to action by the United Nations and UNESCO, which argue for transformative change and for improving quality of life for all.

When it came to defending nature from short-sighted materialism, overconsumption, greed, and especially what he saw as ill-directed or insincere academics, George could become an unrelenting bulldog. He was the most stalwart defender of deep ecology's core principles. If you have any doubts, check out some of his responses to perceived attacks from social ecology and ecological feminism. His efforts to enlist me as a co-conspirator in his intellectual pugilism, resulted in a few tussles and tribulations. I remember one with Warwick Fox that emerged from George's urging that I publish what I intended as a friendly critique of his *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (1990). I won't go into the details on that one, but for those who are interested, the argument appears in an *Environmental Ethics* article.³ He also set me up to take on the job of series editor for the ten-volume Arne Naess Selected Works project⁴—a formidable task, which nearly did me in, but for which I'm grateful, too!

George was exceptionally big-hearted and he loved to see people push themselves to strip back their relationship with nature, as increasingly mediated as it is by material culture these days. I remember one time after climbing Cathedral Peak (a bit too late in the day), we came across some folks who had come up the Mountaineers Route. They were unprepared and just short of the summit block. They desperately wanted to catch the sublime view and approaching sunset from the lovely triangular table, which tops the peak and sits four or five climbers packed like sardines. Ever the kind patriarch, George urged that I go back down and belay them up.

George was also a romantic. He named his son after Dave Brower, who took him under his wing as a young climber, and he named his giant and calm Shepard-Wolf mix, Arne. He never strove to be self-consistent in Naess's way of coupling our everyday decisions to our fundamental, bedrock assumptions. He liked to drink and smoke... and eat thick, juicy steaks, preferably cooked over an open fire. Speaking of fires, George loved big, roaring fires. Arne Naess loved tiny ones. Naess would experiment with making the smallest fire he could—a fire of just a few twigs—to boil water for tea. What a delight that our planet has been able to support such diversity!

On his way home from backpacking trips on the east side of the Sierra Nevada, George also loved to frequent the casinos of Carson City. He was a very good blackjack player. I remember a few

³ Harold Glasser, "On Warwick Fox's Assessment of Deep Ecology," *Environmental Ethics* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 69-85.

⁴ Harold Glasser and Alan Drengson, eds., *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, 10 vols. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005).

yarns about how he came to be banned from several casinos. I suspect that he counted cards, which is yet another example of his keen analytical mind. George recognized that we act in so many ways that run counter to our desire to sustain free nature, but these actions need not demean or diminish our commitment. Resolving this dilemma, this failure to couple action to concern, is however, the central challenge facing our species. It's one that George recognized all too well, but did not feel compelled to make his mission.

His work and being chronicled the complexity and contradiction of living a good life—with grit, integrity, joy, and respect for all—on this wonder-filled planet, at this unique and pivotal time in our species' history.

Thank you, George, for putting pen to paper and enriching us all so deeply.