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Why Followers of Deep Ecology Should be Animal Rights
Proponents and Vice Versa:

John Davis
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John Davis, can be contacted by writing the periodical he edits, Wild Earth, POB 492, Canton, NY 13617.

Introduction

At the outset, I will state my biases. I'm a proponent of both "animal rights" and a supporter of the "deep ecology movement," and I use these terms in a non-doctrinaire fashion. The animal rights literature first attracted me, many years ago, but the magazine I edit, Wild Earth, focuses on concerns (wilderness and wildlife, chiefly) more commonly associated with the deep ecology movement. I believe both animal rights and supporters of ecology have great strengths and some weaknesses. Some deep ecology proponents sometimes needlessly belittle the significance of individual suffering, and overlook issues such as factory farming and laboratory animal experimentation that involve both animal suffering and ecosystem destruction. Animal rights proponents sometimes err in the other direction—underrating the importance of wilderness and biodiversity issues and seeing the individual as the sole locus of value, which leaves species, communities, ecosystems, and other greater wholes out of the picture. In hopes of encouraging more cooperation between the two camps, I'll suggest here briefly a few reasons why followers of the deep ecology movement should be animal rights advocates and vice versa.

1. Animal rights proponents espouse a large part of the deep ecology platform, and do so very effectively. It might even be said that the base for the two camps is the same: a respect for life. Animals rights activists have generally been bolder in their actions than environmentalists have been, and this boldness has had good results. Animal rights activists have been largely responsible for reducing or stopping the hunting of mountain lions in California and of grizzly bears in Montana, for instance, and are leading efforts to stop the slaughter of dolphins by the tuna industry. If animal rights advocates would just include the other four kingdoms (plants, bacteria, fungi, and protists) and greater entities (rivers, ecosystems, landscapes, and such) in their efforts, they'd be followers of the deep ecology movement!

2. Deep ecology supporters and animal rights activists could come closer to achieving their common aims by working together. Again, where the lives at stake are wild animals, deep ecology supporters and animal rights people usually share goals. A good example is with the US Department of Agriculture's nefarious Animal Damage Control program, which serves the ranching and agribusiness interests by killing wild animals that might reduce business profits. The lives of hundreds of thousands of birds (crows and ravens especially) and mammals (coyotes, prairie dogs, wolves, cougars, bears, ground squirrels, and others) a year could be spared if deep ecology supporters and animal rights proponents would unite to quash the ADC program.

3. Deep ecology followers have a lot to teach animal rights advocates, and a lot to learn from them. Many animal rights advocates are ecologically naive. They need to be disabused of the notion that sentience and value start somewhere “above” the level of clams and that “lower” organisms need not concern us. In turn, some supporters of deep ecology need to learn that factory farming and lab animal experimentation, and indeed the domestication of animals, are integral to the industrial system they oppose.

4. A deep ecology message such as “Equal Rights for All Species” could gain a new and powerful constituency if publicized in animal rights literature. Animal rights groups include hundreds of thousands of members who have not yet been exposed to deep ecology thought.

5. Animal rights efforts often yield good, tangible results quickly (stopping a series of head injury experiments on chimpanzees, say), whereas deep ecology political efforts (trying to pass state wilderness legislation, for instance) tend to take many years and yield less tangible results. Transforming modern society into one that respects all life will require both short and long term efforts and victories.

Conclusion

There is probably no need for the supporters of deep ecology and animal rights advocates to completely conflate their efforts; different approaches, strategies, and emphases are fine—essential, even. However, the untold suffering experienced by billions of animals every year, and the extinction of thousands of species a year, might be sharply reduced if deep ecology followers and animal rights proponents united in opposition to the forces destroying the natural world and violating the rights of most animals. (These forces might loosely be called overconsumption, overpopulation, militarism, and industrialism; see David Johns’ “The Practical Relevance of Deep Ecology” in summer 1992 *Wild Earth*). Deep ecology supporters would do well to walk over to the animal rights camp and spend some time talking, listening, helping. And vice versa.

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