

Deep Ecology and the Potters in Our Planet

1992

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This paper was originally published in *Studio Potter*, June 1992, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 38–39.

Yes, I mean “in.” The atmosphere is over us and also part of the Earth. So we are inside, rather than on, the Earth. We are mobile, too mobile, fragments and units of life, busy using and misusing whatever we find at hand for our many, sometimes admittedly queer, purposes.

Potters, as so many others, contribute to the fight against the resulting degradation of life conditions on Earth. If an example is needed, you have North River Pottery, situated in one of the ecological deserts (practically no biodiversity) teeming with humans: Brooklyn, New York. The term “desert” is not quite appropriate, though. It is a centre of human activity that, in a not-too-distant future, may be an area with sustainably rich and diverse life forms. (Let us say, in the twenty-second century.) In a pottery, in one city, one may now listen to more sounds and music literally “in the Earth” than ever before.

Asked to tell something about deep ecology for the periodical *Studio Potter*, I can only say what I would say to a hundred other occupational groups in our—from the point of view of history, of humans—astronomically rich in the material and technological sense societies. (I am reminded of the saying of Mother Teresa: “We are poor in Calcutta? No, *you* are poor!”)

From the 1960s until today there are, roughly, two main kinds of reaction to the ecological crisis. First, there are some people who admit that a new set of global problems are at hand that requires a less polluting industry, recycling, a less steep population curve, preferably a stabilization, and more respect for nature. But in the main: business as usual. This group considers those who ask for deep changes in the rich countries to be alarmists who underestimate the chances and effects of

technological revolutions—if the crisis turns out to be more severe than scientific research today estimates it to be. They regard those who introduce philosophical or religious issues as soft-headed, and “ecosabotage” as a form of terrorism with no good effects in democracy.

A minority reacts very differently. The way of life in the rich countries is devastating the conditions of life on Earth if it continues in the present direction, they say. And that way of life is not conducive to the fulfillment of the basic goals and ideals of a good human life. So nothing essential is lost if societies change their main aspect: not only economically and technologically, but also the social texture. Nothing less is required in order to significantly change ecologically relevant policies and general political priorities.

In the long run, life quality will not decrease, but rather increase. Humans will use a little more wisdom and will be able to realize *a rich life with simple means*. The point of view of this minority is based on diverse philosophical or religious premises, even if these are articulated only rather fragmentarily or not at all. They may be said to have or manifest, however vaguely, a philosophy of life or even a view of the whole, a *total view*.

Within both groups there are many who use some of their energy to overcome the crisis, even if they clearly see that their personal contribution has to be small. The former I call *supporters* of the “shallow” or the “reform” ecology *movement*; the latter, the supporters of the “deep” ecology movement.

I italicize the two words because they are often neglected where they are important. Thus, there is a widely used term “deep ecologist,” in my view an *unfortunate* designation. It makes it natural to add a somewhat ridiculous term “shallow ecologist.” Most supporters of the shallow movement do necessary and excellent jobs. It is only a waste of time when they oppose the deep movement in general. Instead of the term “deep ecologist,” one may use “deep ecology theorists.” There are hundreds of articles and books by authors, philosophers and others, who discuss important questions of principles, and who sometimes add complicated, sometimes unclear discussions. The rank and file supporters, the backbone, need not bother to read the theorists. They need not know the terminology.

It is of importance that groups who otherwise have different opinions and belong to different cultures find each other and encourage each other. To help, however modestly, to reach this situation is the main function of the common terminology. It is important to feel that thousands and thousands are working for the same goals. It is also good to feel that it is not only people from the rich countries, but also people in materially poor areas who eagerly and under adverse circumstances work along the lines of the deep ecology movement. My presentation here is one adapted to people in the rich countries with high formal education relative to the global average.

One general way of explaining how deep ecology movement has come to being is to note the expansion of *care*. More than ever, it is seen that non-human living beings also need care, whether they are considered useful or not from a narrow human point of view. People who always have found it meaningful to do things *for their own sake*, whatever the beauty or ugliness of these beings, find that there is a frightful lack of care, locally, regionally, and globally. Therefore, most supporters tend to agree that every living being has intrinsic or inherent value or worth. And that there is a right, if rights exist at all, that belongs to every living being.

Considering the consequences of the population explosion in the last centuries, the opinion exists that it would be good for the fulfilment of human basic goals in life to be fewer, and very good for other living beings if there were fewer humans. The fulfilment is more likely if there are significantly different human cultures, but that requires space. Perhaps, in the twenty-second century, a slow decrease of the population will take place. But ethical consideration suggests that this is a process that requires many centuries of wise policy.

It is plain that respect for non-industrial cultures must prevail among the supporters as part of their concern for future richness and diversity of life forms on Earth. What is called ecological sustainability requires sustainability of human life forms, but the importance of the peace movement derives largely from the tendency within some cultures to coerce or even destroy others. A good sign of increasing awareness of past destruction is furnished by the mixed feelings about the “discovery” of America in 1492. The resulting destruction both of human cultures and life conditions in general have been of gigantic proportions. But we can only smile at the idea that it might have been postponed until the appearance of greater human maturity, say in the twenty-second century?

How would future societies look? How would the requirement of not violating deep ecology principles affect the structure of human societies? Interestingly enough, it seems that a wide variety of cultures, including their social aspects, may fully take care of those principles. But some should be disregarded because of inadequate satisfaction of two additional sets of requirements, those laid down by two mighty old movements: the peace movement and the social justice movement. The basic emphasis on increasing *care* within the deep ecology movement largely insures a broad co-operation with the two other movements. The unecological aspects of armaments and wars are too obvious to dwell on. But clearly some long range ecological goals must be ignored today in order to be of material help to very poor countries starting development toward economic progress, but this, of course, does not imply support for a development in the same direction as the so-called “developed” countries. That must be avoided at all costs, even if it will elicit serious hostility on the part of the power elites in so many poor countries.

My vision: a manifold of green, or better, colourful, societies, and few or no power pyramids like the USA or EEC. It cannot, of course, be part of the function of deep ecology theorists to work out blueprints of ecologically fully responsible societies, but to use both their creative imagination and full power in criticism. The green movement at its best learns from all the three movements requiring grassroots support and activism.

Ecological sustainability requires full richness and diversity of life forms on Earth. The term “richness” is meant to convey the idea of local, regional, and global abundance, not only absence of extinctions. The scary diminishing of biodiversity practically everywhere in the suburbs has only recently been investigated thoroughly. A change towards richness and diversity requires profound change of city and regional planning. It is difficult to see how this will happen if the “business as usual” attitude prevails. The supporters of the deep ecology movement have a formidable task to accomplish, and the frontier is long. Don’t press people active in one sector to move to a different one. Victory means an immense contribution to life quality of humans, and relief to countless other beings.

References

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