

# Review of *Deep Ecology For The 21st Century*

ed. George Sessions (Shambhala, 1995)

There is a widespread and deep suspicion of 'theory' amongst some political activists, who often dismiss it as an irrelevant intellectual self-indulgence. Given the myriad of interlocking social, economic and environmental problems facing society, it is not surprising that many people want action to get things sorted out. Yet even the most sustained activity can achieve little without a guiding analysis which, in turn, must rest upon a coherent and robust set of values and goals. Otherwise, victories in specific battles like the road-building programme will achieve no lasting good.

The crisis of modern society is widely seen as the product of a random set of bad decisions, correctable by more research, better management and more powerful technology. This is the viewpoint of what Arne Naess, back in the early 1970s, called 'shallow environmentalism', a current of thought now dominant in the Sustainable Development lobby. It seeks the impossible: the marriage of expanding human entitlements with increased environmental protection. In corporate and government circles, it means little more than business-as-usual with a lick of green gloss on the edges. That little word 'limits' is conspicuously absent from both radical and more conservative versions of the dogma of Development.

Today's problems, however, are but surface symptoms of a much deeper malaise, at the core of which is an unworthy and unsustainable worldview. It is anthropocentric, viewing humankind as rightful lord and master of all nature, utilitarian, measuring the value of things by the practical uses they can serve, individualistic and materialistic, equating progress with ever higher levels of personal consumption. This perspective is shared by ideologies across the old political spectrum.

The cure for society's ailments depends upon the development of a quite different way of thinking about, valuing and doing things, one founded upon a deep rapprochement between people and planet. The elements of this ecological worldview have been around for a very long time. The Taoist tradition from ancient China provides an early example, whilst many tribal groups down the ages developed belief systems in which they saw themselves as but part of a natural order. The famous and widely cited speech by Chief Seattle, for example, may have been a forgery but there is plenty of evidence that the words put in his mouth do reflect the ways in which many 'first peoples' in North America and elsewhere have looked at life. There have been also minority traditions of ecological thought within otherwise environmentally unfriendly ideologies such as Christianity. (See Peter Marshall's *Nature's Web: An Exploration of Ecological Thinking*, Simon & Shuster, 1992, for a good historical overview)

This century has seen some eloquent and forceful contributions to ecological thinking, perhaps most notably the writings of Aldo Leopold. More recent additions include David Ehrenfeld's *The Arrogance of Humanism* and Teddy Goldsmith's *The Way*. However, a comprehensive digest and overview of this truly radical alternative to destruction-as-usual has been lacking. There was *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* edited by the American scholars and campaigners Bill Devall and George Sessions, articles from both of whom *Real WORLD* has been pleased to publish on this side of the Atlantic. This book was assembled in haste under pressure from the publishers and, as a result, its excellent contents were let down by a somewhat incoherent structure.

Fortunately, George Sessions has returned to the task and assembled what is a first-class anthology. Despite the presence of contributors like Arne Naess (Norway), Wolfgang Sachs (Germany) and Warwick Fox (Australia), the volume is heavily biased towards North American experiences and traditions but this should not limit its value. All those groups and parties who waste time reinventing the wheel and endlessly reformulating their 'philosophical basis' should save themselves the bother. They will find virtually all that they need in this single collection.

Particularly valuable are the introductions written by Sessions himself for each section of the book. They wear their erudition lightly and constantly illuminate the major themes. They take us on a tour of the essential elements of Deep Ecology, its historical roots, the seminal contribution from Naess, relationships with currents such as Ecofeminism and Social Ecology, the central importance of wilderness protection, and, last but not least, the critique of the 'gospel of global efficiency' (preached, for instance, by the Brundtland Commission and Agenda 21 supporters).

There are, inevitably, some gaps. There are few references to the attacks on deep ecology by conventional philosophers and political scientists. Many argue, for example, that deep ecology is but

another instance of the 'naturalistic fallacy' in which moral imperatives are being deduced falsely from physical actualities. Inadequate attention is paid to other issues, not least the problem of reconciling and prioritising the greatly increased number of competing claims to the Earth's finite resources, consequent upon an acceptance of the intrinsic value of all species. One piece by Naess does refer to the issue but, for a more rounded discussion, one has to look elsewhere (for example, to the work of American philosopher Paul Taylor and especially his book *Respect for Nature*).

More space could have been devoted to critics from within the broad green movement. Foolish though most of these polemics might be (for a vulgar example, see *How Deep is Deep Ecology?* from the American anarchist George Bradford), they command considerable influence and merit a deeper refutation than they receive in these pages (Kirk Sale's 'Deep Ecology and Its Critics', *The Nation*, 14/5/88: 670-675, & David Johns' 'The Practical Relevance of Deep Ecology', *Wild Earth*, Summer, 1992: 62-68, provide examples of the robust response that might be made).

Of course, the core function of the collection is the bringing together of key texts in one convenient place. Yet it would have been an even more useful tool if it had also included material that takes the debate further forward. There is a very slight air of superiority and smug complacency in these pages. Only on the odd occasion, for instance, do the assembled papers refer to the simple fact that the overwhelming majority of society remains completely untouched by the vision of Deep Ecology.

The biggest failure in the collection is the virtual absence of a strong scientific dimension. Many people are rightly critical of the failings of conventional science. Yet there is danger that the choice to build an Earth-centred society can be treated as purely a matter of personal feelings and preferences, isolated from any scientific underpinning. The writings of American lawyer and philosopher Mark Sagoff illustrate the problems that arise. His otherwise excellent critiques of conventional economics and other blots on the landscape almost seem to concede to the 'cornucopians' that there are no ecological or thermodynamic limits to physical growth, such is his desire to pose purely moral alternatives.

In the volume *Global Ecology*, excerpts from which are included here, some contributors even treat the notion of ecological scarcity as a capitalist con-trick and a figment of Malthusian imaginations (a bit like those bores frequently encountered at parties who insist that things like walls are all in the mind - though they always seem unwilling to prove the point by banging their heads against the nearest one!). The distinction made by steady-state economist Herman Daly between (limited) biophysical 'means' and ethical 'ends' would seem to be a viable way of blending science and morality.

The major weaknesses of *Deep Ecology*, however, could be tackled by a second, companion work which would focus more on practical decision-making and policy matters, both at an institutional and individual level. The conservation of biodiversity and wilderness can only come about if many other issues - human population growth, land ownership, economic policy, health care, social welfare, communications, transport, energy and food supply, governance, defence and international relationships etc. - are addressed.

Even the one practical matter that is explored in some depth, wildlife conservation, needs much more amplification, not least regarding the problems of applying rehabilitation and restoration strategies to areas such as the British Isles whose environments have been remade many times over by humankind. One contributor in particular, Ed Grumbine, offers some important insights here but the problems are manifold and require much more extensive discussion. Greater attention also needs to be given to the practicalities of conserving endangered species such as rhino and elephant, not least in the light of the debates over CITES.

A second volume also could tackle directly more mainstream ideologies such as liberalism, right-wing libertarianism and socialism, including those variants which now prefix the word 'eco-' in front of their names. There is also a current which sometimes calls itself 'Liberation Ecology' which has a romantic view of The People while another, perhaps best named 'Romantic Primitivism' takes the same view of traditional societies. Both need a deep critique for their rose-tinted perceptions. Like so many pseudo-green currents, they also are characterised by evasion and denial about overpopulation.

Another tendency, the cult of localism, also needs a more critical assessment. It can be as dangerous as its opposite, the worship of globalism. The international agreements struck over Antarctica and CFC phase-out are worthwhile, whatever their limitations. Nor can we simply wash our hands of little local difficulties like Pol Pot in Kampuchea or Bosnian-style disasters. Deep Ecology must have something to say about such matters. Wendell Berry's strictures about the impossibility of 'thinking globally', cited by Sessions, make a valid point but they throw the baby out with the bath water. A follow-up volume could also apply the insights of deep ecology to current battlegrounds such as GATT and biotechnology.

In no way should such observations detract from the tribute which Sessions deserves for putting together such a wealth of theoretical and useful, reflective and inspirational thinking as found in this collection. Further development work is needed within Deep Ecology. As a foundation from which we can engage with such matters, the collected wisdom found in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* is now top of the list.

**Sandy Irvine**