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Deep Ecology Revisited (1998)

I.

RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISM and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique” was written at the end of an extended period of residence in the United States, which followed directly upon several years of research on the origins of Indian environmentalism. That background might explain the puzzlement and anger which, in hindsight, appear to mark the essay. To my surprise, the article evoked a variety of responses, both pro and con. The veteran Vermont radical, Murray Bookchin, himself engaged in a polemic with American deep ecologists, offered a short (three-line) letter of congratulation. A longer (thirty-page) response came from the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, the originator of the term “deep ecology.” Naess felt bound to assume responsibility for the ideas I had challenged, even though I had distinguished between his emphases and those of his American interpreters. Other correspondents, lesser known but no less engaged, wrote in to praise and to condemn.¹ Over the years, the essay has appeared in some half-a-dozen anthologies, as a voice of the “Third World,” the token and disloyal opposition to the reigning orthodoxies of environmental ethics.²

The essay has acquired a life of its own. This postscript allows me to look at the issues anew, to expand and strengthen my case with the aid of a few freshly arrived examples.

II.

Woodrow Wilson once remarked that the United States was the only idealistic nation in the world. It is indeed this idealism which explains the zest, the zeal, the almost unstoppable force with which Americans have sought to impose their vision of the good life on the rest of the world. American economists urge on other nations their brand of energy-intensive, capital-intensive, market-oriented development. American spiritualists, saving souls, guide pagans to one or another of their eccentrically fanatical cults, from Southern Baptism to Moral Rearmament. American advertisers export the ethic of disposable containers—of all sizes, from coffee cups to automobiles—and Santa Barbara.

Of course, other people have had to pay for the fruits of this idealism. The consequences of the forward march of American missionaries include the undermining of political independence, the erosion of cultures, and the growth of an ethic of sheer greed. In a dozen parts of the world, those fighting for political, economic, or cultural autonomy have collectively raised the question whether the American way of life is not, in fact, the Indian (or Brazilian, or Somalian) way of death.

One kind of U.S. missionary, however, has attracted virtually no critical attention. This is the man who is worried that the rest of the world thinks his country has a dollar sign for a heart. The dress he wears is also colored green, but it is the green of the virgin forest. A deeply committed lover of the wild, in his country he has helped put in place a magnificent system of national parks. But he also has money, and will travel. He now wishes to convert other cultures to his gospel, to export the American invention of national parks worldwide.

The essay to which these paragraphs are a coda was one of the first attacks on an imperialism previously reckoned to be largely benign. After all, we are not talking here of the Marines, with their awesome firepower, or even of the World Bank, with its money power and the ability to manipulate developing country governments. These are men (and more

Deep Ecology Revisited

rarely, women) who come preaching the equality of all species, who worship all that is good and beautiful in Nature. What could be wrong with them?

I had suggested in my essay that the noble, apparently disinterested motives of conservation biologists and deep ecologists fueled a territorial ambition—the physical control of wilderness in parts of the world other than their own—that led inevitably to the displacement and harsh treatment of the human communities who dwelt in these forests. Consider in this context a recent assessment of global conservation by Michael Soulé, which complains that the language of policy documents has “become more humanistic in values and more economic in substance, and correspondingly less naturalistic and ecocentric.” Soulé seems worried that in theory (though certainly not in practice!) some national governments and international conservation organizations (or ICOs) now pay more attention to the rights of human communities. Proof of this shift is the fact that “the top and middle management of most ICOs are economists, lawyers, and development specialists, not biologists.” This is a sectarian *plaint*, a trade union approach to the problem spurred by an alleged takeover of the international conservation movement by social scientists, particularly economists.³

Soulé's essay, with its talk of conspiracies and takeover bids, manifests the paranoia of a community of scientists which has a *huge* influence on conservation policy but yet wants to be the sole dictator of it. A scholar acclaimed by his peers as the “dean of tropical ecologists” has expressed this ambition more nakedly than most. Daniel Janzen, in a paper in the *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics*, urges upon his fellow biologists the cultivation of the ability to raise cash so as to buy space and species to study. Let me now quote from a report he wrote on a new national park in Costa Rica, whose tone and thrust perfectly complement the other, ostensibly “scientific” essay. “We have the seed and the biological expertise: we lack control of the terrain,” wrote Janzen in 1986. This situation he was able to remedy for himself by raising enough money to purchase the forest area needed to create Guanacaste National Park. One can *only* marvel at Janzen's conviction that he and his fellow biologists know all, and that the inhabitants of the forest know nothing. He justifies the taking over of the forest and the dispossession of the forest farmer by claim-

ing that “today virtually all of the present-day occupants of the western Mesoamerican pastures, fields and degraded forests are deaf, blind, and mute to the fragments of the rich biological and cultural heritage that still occupies the shelves of the unused and unappreciated library in which they reside.”⁴

This is an ecologically updated version of the White Man’s Burden, where the biologist (rather than the civil servant or military official) knows that it is in the native’s true interest to abandon his home and hearth and leave the field and forest clear for the new rulers of his domain. In Costa Rica we only have Janzen’s word for it, but elsewhere we are better placed to challenge the conservationist’s point of view. A remarkable recent book on African conservation has laid bare the imperialism, unconscious and explicit, of Western wilderness lovers and biologists working on that luckless continent. I cannot here summarize the massive documentation of Raymond Bonner’s *At the Hand of Man*, so let me simply quote some of his conclusions:

Above all, Africans [have been] ignored, overwhelmed, manipulated and outmaneuvered by a conservation crusade led, orchestrated and dominated by white Westerners.

Livingstone, Stanley and other explorers and missionaries had come to Africa in the nineteenth century to promote the three C’s—Christianity, commerce and civilization. Now a fourth was added: conservation. These modern secular missionaries were convinced that without the white man’s guidance, the Africans would go astray.

[The criticisms] of egocentricity and neocolonialism . . . could be leveled fairly at most conservation organizations working in the Third World.

As many Africans see it, white people are making rules to protect animals that white people want to see in parks that white people visit. Why should Africans support these programs? . . . The World Wildlife Fund professed to care about what the Africans wanted, but then tried to manipulate them into doing what the Westerners wanted: and those Africans who couldn’t be brought into line were ignored.

Africans do not use the parks and they do not receive any significant benefits from them. Yet they are paying the costs. There are indirect economic costs—government revenues that go to parks instead of schools. And there are direct personal costs [i.e., of the ban on hunting and fuel collecting, or of displacement].⁵

Bonner’s book focuses on the elephant, one of the half-a-dozen or so animals that have come to acquire “totemic” status among Western wilderness lovers. Animal totems existed in most pre-modern societies, but as the Norwegian scholar Arne Kalland points out, in the past the injunction not to kill the totemic species applied only to members of the group. Hindus do not ask others to worship the cow, but those who love and cherish the elephant, seal, whale, or tiger try and impose a worldwide prohibition on its killing. No one, they say, anywhere, anytime, shall be allowed to touch the animal they hold sacred even if (as with the elephant and several species of whale) scientific evidence has established that small-scale hunting will not endanger its viable populations and will, in fact, save human lives put at risk by the expansion, after total protection, of the *lebensraum* of the totemic animal. The new totemists also insist that their species is the “true, rightful inhabitant” of the ocean or forest, and ask that human beings who have lived in the same terrain (and with the animals) for millennia be taken out and sent elsewhere.⁶

I turn, last of all, to an ongoing controversy in my own bailiwick. The Nagarhole National Park in southern Karnataka has an estimated forty tigers, the species toward whose protection enormous amounts of Indian and foreign money and attention have been directed. Now Nagarhole is also home to about 6,000 tribals, who have been in the area longer than anyone can remember, perhaps as long as the tigers themselves. The state Forest Department wants the tribals out, claiming they destroy the forest and kill wild game. The tribals answer that their demands are modest, consisting in the main of fuel wood, fruit, honey, and the odd quail or partridge. They do not own guns, although coffee planters living on the edge of the forest do. Maybe it is the planters who poach big game? In any case, they ask the officials, if the forest is only for tigers, why have you invited India’s biggest hotel chain to build a hotel inside it while you plan to throw us out?

Into this controversy jumps a green missionary, passing through Karnataka. Dr. John G. Robinson works for the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York, for whom he oversees 160 projects in 44 countries. He conducts a whistle-stop tour of Nagarhole, and before he flies off to the next project on his list, hurriedly calls a press conference in the state capital, Bangalore. Throwing the tribals out of the park, he says, is the only means to save the wilderness. This is not a one-off case but a sacred principle, for in Rob-

inson's opinion "relocating tribal or traditional people who live in these protected areas is the single most important step towards conservation." Tribals, he explains, "compulsively hunt for food," and compete with tigers for prey. Deprived of food, tigers cannot survive, and "their extinction means that the balance of the ecosystem is upset and this has a snowballing effect."⁷

One does not know how many tribals Robinson met (none, is the likely answer). Yet the Nagarhole case is hardly atypical. All over India, the management of parks has sharply pitted the interests of poor tribals who have traditionally lived in them against those of wilderness lovers and urban pleasure seekers who wish to keep parks "free of human interference"—that is, free of other humans. These conflicts are being played out in the Rajaji sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh, in Simlipal in Orissa, in Kanha in Madhya Pradesh, and in Melghat in Maharashtra.⁸ Everywhere, Indian wildlifers have ganged up behind the Forest Department to evict the tribals and relocate them far outside the forests. In this they have drawn sustenance from American biologists and conservation organizations, who have thrown the prestige of science and the power of the dollar behind the crusade to kick the original owners of the forest out of their home.

Specious nonsense about the equal rights of all species cannot hide the plain fact that green imperialists are possibly as dangerous and certainly more hypocritical than their economic or religious counterparts. For the American advertiser and banker hopes for a world in which everyone, regardless of color, will be in an economic sense an American—driving a car, drinking Pepsi, owning a fridge and a washing machine. The missionary, having discovered Jesus Christ, wants pagans also to share in the discovery. The conservationist wants to "protect the tiger (or whale) for posterity," yet expects *other* people to make the sacrifice.

Moreover, the processes unleashed by green imperialism are well-nigh irreversible. For the consumer titillated into eating Kentucky Fried Chicken can always say, "once is enough." The Hindu converted to Christianity can decide later on to revert to his original faith. But the poor tribal, thrown out of his home by the propaganda of the conservationist, is condemned to the life of an ecological refugee in a slum, a fate, for these forest people, which is next only to death.

III.

The illustrations offered above throw serious doubt on Arne Naess's claim that the deep ecology movement is "from the point of view of many people all over the world, the most precious gift from the North American continent in our time."⁹ For deep ecology's signal contribution has been to privilege, above all other varieties and concerns of environmentalism, the protection of wild species and wild habitats, and to provide high-sounding, self-congratulatory but nonetheless dubious moral claims for doing so. Treating "biocentric equality" as a moral absolute, tigers, elephants, whales, and so on will need more space to grow, flourish and reproduce, while humans—poor humans—will be expected to make way for them.

By no means do I wish to see a world completely dominated by "human beings, their mutualists, commensals and parasites." I have time for the tiger and the rainforest, and wish also to try and protect those islands of nature not yet fully conquered by us. My plea rather is to put wilderness protection (and its radical edge, deep ecology) in its place, to recognize it as a distinctively North Atlantic brand of environmentalism, whose export and expansion must be done with caution, care, and above all, with humility. For in the poor and heavily populated countries of the South, protected areas cannot be managed with guns and guards but must, rather, be managed with full cognizance of the rights of the people who lived in (and oftentimes cared for) the forest before it became a national park or a world heritage site.¹⁰

Putting deep ecology in its place is to recognize that trends it derides as "shallow" ecology might in fact be varieties of environmentalism that are more apposite, more representative, and more popular in the countries of the South. When Arne Naess says that "conservation biology is the spearhead of scientifically based environmentalism"¹¹ one wonders why "agroecology," "pollution abatement technology" or "renewable energy studies" cannot become the "spearhead of scientifically based environmentalism." For to the Costa Rican peasant, the Ecuadorian fisherman, the Indonesian tribal, or the slum dweller in Bombay, wilderness preservation can hardly be more "deep" than pollution control, energy conservation, ecological urban planning, or sustainable agriculture.

NOTES

1. I speak here of private communications: published responses to my essay include David M. Johns, "The Relevance of Deep Ecology to the Third World: Some Preliminary Comments," *Environmental Ethics* 12 (Fall 1990), included in this volume; and J. Baird Callicott, "The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative," *The Environmental Professional* 13 (1991), also included herein.

2. These anthologies include Thomas Mappes and Jane Zembaty, eds., *Social Ethics: Morality and Public Policy*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992); Carolyn Merchant, ed., *Key Concepts in Critical Theory: Ecology* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1994); Louis Pojman, ed., *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application* (Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1994); Lori Gruen and Dale Jamieson, eds., *Reflecting on Nature: Readings in Environmental Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Larry May and Shari Collins Sharriat, eds., *Applied Ethics: A Multicultural Approach* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1994); Andrew Brennan, ed., *The Ethics of the Environment* (Brookfield, Vt.: Dartmouth Publishers, 1995).

3. Michael Soulé, *The Tigress and the Little Girl* (manuscript of forthcoming book), Chapter 6, "International Conservation Politics and Programs."

4. Daniel H. Janzen, *Guanacaste National Park: Tropical Ecological and Cultural Restoration* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Universidad Estatal a Distancia, 1986). Also David Rains Wallace, "Communing in Costa Rica," *Wilderness* 181 (Summer 1988), which quotes Janzen as wishing to plan "protected areas in a way that will permanently accommodate solitude seeking humans as well as jaguars, tapirs, and sea turtles." These solitude-seeking humans might include biologists, backpackers, deep ecologists, but not, one supposes, indigenous farmers, hunters, or fishermen.

5. Raymond Bonner, *At the Hand of Man: Peril and Hope for Africa's Wildlife* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 36, 65, 70, 85, 221.

6. Arne Kalland, "Seals, Whales and Elephants: Totem Animals and Anti-Use Campaigns," in *Proceedings of the Conference on Responsible Wildlife Management* (Brussels: European Bureau for Conservation and Development, 1994). Also, Arne Kalland, "Management by Totemization: Whale Symbolism and the Anti-Whaling Campaign," *Arctic* 46 (1993).

7. Quoted in *The Deccan Herald*, Bangalore, 5 November 1995.

8. A useful countrywide overview is provided in Ashish Kothari, Saloni Suri, and Neena Singh, "Conservation in India: A New Direction," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 October 1995.

9. Arne Naess, "Comments on the Article 'Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique' by Ramachandra Guha," typescript (1989), p. 23.

Deep Ecology Revisited

10. Recent writings by Indian scholars strongly dispute that conservation can succeed through the punitive guns-and-guards approach favored by most wildlife conservationists, domestic or foreign. For thoughtful suggestions as to how the interests of wild species and the interests of poor humans might be made more compatible, see Kothari et al., "Conservation in India"; M. Gadgil and P. R. S. Rao, "A System of Positive Incentives to Conserve Biodiversity," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 August 1994; and R. Sukumar, "Wildlife-Human Conflict in India: An Ecological and Social Perspective," in R. Guha, ed., *Social Ecology* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).

11. Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle*, translated by David Rothberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 45.