

DEEP ECOLOGY, ELITISM AND

by Reed Noss

Often in this journal, I read people lambasting the production of new *Homo sapiens*. This is understandable, for the excess population of our species is surely the single most important factor in the ruination of the earth. It follows that negative population growth is essential if we are to protect what is left of the natural earth, and restore what we can to that condition. I also agree that a healthy dose of misanthropy is crucial to conservation. But not an *overdose!* I will not go so far as some in Earth First! who claim that the earth is everything *outside* of humanity, everything that is *not* human or produced by humans. This is schizophrenia! Where does that leave us? Where do we belong if not here with Mother Earth?

I do find it odd that people writing in *EF!* find it necessary to continually remind *EF!* readers to curtail their reproduction. This is a waste of newsprint in a valuable journal. We are not the people who need reminding. What do you suppose is the natality for the average *EF!* household, compared to that of the average American? Or to be more extreme, compare our baby production to that of the average Catholic, the uneducated black or Appalachian, the poor Latin American, the African, the Indian? Who the hell needs educating about birth con-

trol?

I will now step onto dangerous ground and assert that some of us deep ecologists have a duty to reproduce. A recent *EF!* letter referred specifically to this attitude, and called it "elitism." Well, god damn it, I'm called an elitist all the time (usually for trying to keep some natural areas inaccessible to the public, who usually screw them up) and think that maybe it is time to recognize a "deep ecology elite," an ideological population of people who understand their kinship with the earth, their interdependence with other ecological entities, and their duty to fight for what they love and *are*. This is a true and ethical elitism, and has nothing to do with material wealth or political power. Remember, most people do not feel this way about the earth. Most people stupidly fear and reject any association with nature. Most people are "*Me First!*," not "*Earth First!*."

Look around, and you will see that the people who do most of the reproducing are generally the people with the worst environmental attitudes, and/or the deepest ignorance about the need or methodology for contraception. Assuming that both nature and nurture (genes and learning) influence environmental awareness (although the genetic influence would certainly

be very indirect), this suggests that the ratio of Earth-despoilers to Earth-protectors is increasing at a geometric rate. I am *not* so foolish to suggest that we attempt to beat the despoilers in the reproductive game, or that we eugenically breed a population more receptive to environmental values. Both would be impossible, not to mention totalitarian. However, I would suggest that we attempt, through education and communication, to share our awareness of deep ecology with those who really need it, but at the same time not "unbreed" ourselves out of existence.

There is a correlation between intelligence and environmental awareness, although the scatter is obviously large. We all know people who, by conventional definition, are "intelligent" (good old Jim Watt?), but are dumb as shit when it comes to understanding our relationship with nature. Yet it takes an ability to understand relationships, i.e., intelligence, to be a deep ecologist. Intelligence being largely genetic (identical twin studies show this well), there is thus a genetic component to deep ecology. But learning, of course, is more important.

Inherited intelligence only sets the stage for what can be absorbed. A lot of us come from parents who had negative environmental attitudes, and had to somehow get our

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understanding of nature "on our own." But it wasn't completely on our own. We all had mentors, teachers in person and in literature, who influenced us. And a *parent* can be an effective environmental educator. Kids I know who come from parents with decent environmental perspectives almost always share that perspective, and retain it as they grow. We need more kids like this, not fewer.

Having a kid is as natural a thing as you could possibly do. Ecologist Dan Kozlovsky, whose book I reviewed in the last Yule issue of *EF!*, wrote: "We instinctively recognize that for our psychological wholeness, male and female, we must have the experience of generating new human beings. It is a central aspect, perhaps the overriding concern of our animality." Kozlovsky realizes, of course, that "we will need a long period of negative population," and therefore that no one should have more than two children.

None of us needs to feel guilty for not having kids, but neither for having kids, as long as we do not over-produce. There are enough people who cannot or will not reproduce that the population will stabilize and then decline to a reasonable level if no one has more than two children. And the people

who possess and can share the awareness of deep ecology are the best equipped to bring a child into this wounded world.

I am not defensive about my own reproduction. My wife and I have one child, and she is the beautiful result of a deliberate and conscientious decision. We may have a second child, though probably not. I will admit that I get angry, in fact *damned* pissed, at those who have more than two children these days. I see little excuse for anyone in the world (except in the *most* primitive cultures) not understanding the problems of overpopulation.

I also know that I, and everyone who reproduces, have a responsibility to nourish my child with an understanding of the kinship and interdependence of all life. A person with such understanding can make a positive contribution to conservation, more than compensating for the resources he/she consumes (for example, the people active in *EF!*). There have to be people to keep up the fight, which will probably continue until the extinction of our species, when the present generation of activists is gone. Call me an elitist if you like, but I say that all people are *not* equal in comprehending or defending the Earth!

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