

Taylor, Bron, "Evoking the Ecological Self," in *Peace Review: The International Quarterly of World Peace*, 5 (2), 225-230: June 1993.

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Evoking the Ecological Self

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*Let me take you for a moment
from that frantic video you call "reality,"
a contemporary hit co-authored by fear*

*Let me take you for a moment
to the shadow-lined corridors
between Tamarack and Aspen,
down those thorny, berry covered tunnels
that lead to your naked wild soul . . .*

*Shaggy hair hangs over your eyes here,
as even your tracks are transformed—
larger now, deeper,
with a hint of claws.
It is the job of my poetry
to take you there.*

—Lone Wolf Circles

"Deep ecology" is a term coined in 1973 by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. It has become the central label for an increasingly militant branch of the international environmental movement. Deep ecology rejects mechanistic assumptions about the natural world, supplanting them with the premise that at a metaphysical level, the natural world is a sacred, interrelated whole, characterized by a dynamic, ongoing process of evolutionary change. All creatures are similarly interrelated; indeed they are related as kin. Since all creatures are sacred and related, none are superior; all have intrinsic worth. Humans, therefore, ought to defend each life form and the integrity of the ecosystems they inhabit so that all creatures can fulfill their evolutionary destinies.

The international deep ecology movement resists what movement activists label the human "war against nature." Increasingly, however, deep ecologists recognize that this war is also a war against indigenous peoples and peasants whose survival is threatened directly by the destruction of particular ecosystems.

Deep ecologists view the enclosure of lands previously managed as a commons—a process accompanying colonialism and the transition from feudal to industrial societies—as a huge ecological mistake. They think that peasant and indigenous lifeways are, in most cases, ecologically sustainable. There tends to be, therefore, a natural affinity between the land use proposals of deep ecologists and the interests of peasants and indigenous peoples. This has led to international efforts by deep ecologists, especially within Earth First!, to stand in solidarity with peasants and tribals as they defend their forests. As they resist cultural and ecosystem destruction, deep ecologists find themselves increasingly repressed, not only in their countries of origin but also in the native regions where they campaign.

The heart and soul of the deep ecology movement is the perception that the natural world is a sacred, interrelated whole. Deep ecologists trace environmental decline to a spiritual crisis, reflected in the way that Western religious assumptions have divided humans from other creatures and divided the natural world from the divine realm. Thus, it is worth asking: How do deep ecologists come to their apparently antimodern perceptions about the natural world? How do they propose to place us on the proper path to nature-harmonious lifeways? The answers reveal the important role played by the arts in the emergence of this new, international, religious movement.

Most deep ecologists think that time spent in undefiled wilderness is the central prerequisite for people developing deep “ecological consciousness” or an “ecological self” that understands the sacredness and value of all life. But how is this possible in the modern world, when in the words of one activist, “the Earth’s sacred voices [and thus, authentic human consciousness] are paved over.” Deep ecologists believe that there is no substitute for a direct experience of the wild. Nevertheless, some believe that the arts can promote an ecological consciousness by breaking through the pernicious socializing power of industrial consumer culture, countering its instrumental, profit-maximizing rationality, which separates us from our authentic, ecological selves.

Deep ecologists believe that, if only in their own bodies, humans have sufficient evidence of their wild, ecological selves. How can civilized humans break through to it and become “authentic”? A typical answer is that music and drama, poetry and prose, and visual art can reach people on an emotional basis when rational argument cannot, tugging at the affective, intuitively available knowledge of the true self that is deeply rooted in the sacred natural world in all its diverse forms.

This moral anthropology undergirds the evangelical strategy of much deep ecological activism. For example, soon after its founding, Earth First! activists toured the country performing in "road shows" that typically juxtaposed photographic slides of undefiled wilderness with desecrated, clear-cut, and overgrazed landscapes. These shows assume that the land itself can speak to us and that even through a land-proxy photograph, we can intuitively recognize destroyed wildlands as desecrated places.

One Earth First! balladeer, Walkin Jim Stoltz, distributes "Listen to the Land" bumper stickers at his concerts, and in a song inspired by Aldo Leopold's epiphany about the intrinsic value of a wolf—recorded in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949)—he sings a song encouraging people to "think like a mountain," i.e., ecocentrically. Revealing the epistemological premise, he declares, "Now I'm going to shut up and let the photos speak for themselves." The land can speak to us, even in slides. He continues with more songs lauding the healing power of wilderness places, reminding us that these sacred places are there for us in our need, asking us if we are there when they need us, and urging us to join in their defense.

Another North American road show veteran, Alice DiMicelle, describes her designated role in a 1992 Earth First! tour of England. She was asked to use slides and her music to bring the audience experientially into the forest, to evoke in them the mystical experience of the wild. Of course, another key part of the evangelical road show strategy is to impart the central cognitive claims of the movement about the ecological crisis and the political and economic obstacles preventing an effective response. But the abiding premise is that road shows will fail unless they effectively tap our connection to and our embeddedness in the natural world.

At road shows, participants are often urged to attend demonstrations protesting ecological destruction or to join future gatherings. Sometimes these gatherings focus on strategy, other times on deepening ecological consciousness. Whatever the purpose, the gatherings promote ecological consciousness and group solidarity, both of which are enhanced by various forms of artistic expression—especially music, dramatic performance, poetry, and dance—often woven into ritual performance.

At week-long Earth First! wilderness "rendezvous," "warrior poets" sponsor deep ecology recitations and discuss how poetry can break through human alienation from nature. Evenings are filled with revelry and song, sometimes followed by primal drumming with semi-clad, mud-caked dancers wildly cavorting in symbolic identification

with Sacred Earth, in rites inspired by indigenous cultures. One evening is usually set aside explicitly for a "tribal unity dance." Another evening consists of elaborate ritual performances weaving drama, music, and dance into apocalyptic pictures of human environmental destruction, tribal resistance, and a future eco-utopian victory, climaxing in the reharmonization of human lifeways with the natural world.

During the rendezvous, a day is usually made available for an abbreviated Council of All Beings. The council was developed by deep ecology activists from North America, Australia, and England. The council is a ritual process in which people mourn the loss of wild places and creatures and participate in a variety of exercises designed to blur the boundaries between the self and the other. The council culminates in dramatic performances in which participants are either shamanistically or imaginatively possessed by the spirits of nonhuman entities, cry out in anguish over how they have been treated by humans, appeal for human repentance, and finally empower the assembled humans for ecological militancy.

Today the council is most often conducted as a three-day workshop following a deep ecology road show. New ritual processes are developed to evoke and deepen ecological consciousness. "Re-earthing" or "ecobreath" workshops, for example, use meditative deep breathing and evocative music to produce altered states of consciousness that precipitate mystical experiences of oneness with the earth, similar to those sometimes obtained by hallucinogens, or through shamanic practices. Various forms of nature writing, including novels such as Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, are also assumed capable of evoking ecological consciousness.

If the first two functions of the arts in the deep ecology movement are to evoke and deepen ecological consciousness, thus calling forth and empowering movement activists, the third major use of art is as a tool for ecological resistance. Art can be used, for example, to mitigate opposition anger and violence through humor. Protest demonstrations and blockades resisting logging can provoke violence by those whose economic interests are threatened. Many incidents of violence against deep ecology activists have occurred, including the attempted assassination and permanent disabling of Judy Bari, an Earth First! activist bombed for her efforts to preserve northern California forests. Bari and others report, however, that through silly songs and childlike dancing they have often been able to deter violence. Humor makes obvious the humanity of resistance participants, making it difficult for their opponents to demonize and attack them.

Music is also used to ridicule adversary attitudes and expose its hypocrisy. In one extreme example, Earth First!ers in northern

California, locked in a battle with Christian fundamentalists over both forest policies and abortion rights (the connection is the role of human overpopulation in deforestation), self-consciously used a nasty song entitled "May the Fetus Be Aborted" as a weapon. The purpose was to convince the Christians blockading a community abortion clinic that the clinic supporters could not be intimidated. The songwriters hoped to offend the Christian blockaders and drive them away. They claim the tactic was successful; the blockaders left and never returned. It may be, however, that the incident produced another, unintended result, enraging the mentally disturbed abortion opponent who then tried to kill Judy Bari. (A letter claiming that God had ordered the bombing was received afterward, but its authenticity is in doubt.)

Guerrilla theater (often involving music as well) is also used to attack opponents and their purposes. Such theater often takes the form of mock trials of opponents accused of actions considered criminal by movement activists. Nonhuman creatures usually are represented in such theater, sometimes serving as judge and jury. Other times, such creatures are featured in "die-ins" to dramatically illustrate the expected consequences of the protested activities. Drama plays an important role within ecological resistance movements beyond its part in private ritual performances.

Songs at demonstrations are often based on hymn-tunes. Dakota Sid Clifford, another deep ecology balladeer, told me he was inspired by Woody Guthrie, who reported that he often wrote lyrics to hymn-tunes because the tunes were pretty and well known, making it easy for people to sing along. But Clifford wryly added that Guthrie also said he changed the words "so they would make some sense." Transmogrified hymn-tunes have become particularly important tools for ecological resistance—empowering activists, challenging authorities, and implicitly ridiculing the ideas represented in the hymn's original lyrics, subverting and supplanting the original Christian message with deep ecological themes.

Walkin Jim Stoltz's "power song," for example, borrows the tune from "There Is Power in the Blood of the Lamb." He explains that this song was inspired by Joe Hill, an old union organizer with the Wobblies (the Industrial Workers of the World), who first borrowed the tune for a union song still widely sung in the United States. Walkin Jim's ecological version fosters courage by reminding activists of the power of the earth (rather than the power of Christ) and how, as part of earth, they can participate in Her [sic] power. The song has become a regular feature at deep ecological demonstrations.

Another Walkin Jim song, "Forever Wild," which expresses a prayerful hope for a vast, restored wilderness, has now been sung at several sentencing hearings of movement activists convicted of civil

disobedience or "ecotage" (sabotage in the effort to preserve ecosystems). In such contexts, the song serves as a witness to the authorities responsible for the destruction of earth. Walkin Jim claims that music is a much more effective way to promote deviant ideas to people in mainstream culture than lecturing to them. He cites his "food chain" song, reminding people that they can be eaten by bears or earthworms, to illustrate that humor can best communicate the deep ecological idea that humans are not the most important or powerful entity in the universe.

Many more examples of the three functions of the arts in the deep ecology movement could be added. Diverse art forms play critical roles in evoking, deepening, sustaining, and empowering deep ecology activists in their efforts to defend the natural world and its creatures. In the years to come we can expect to see experiments with new artistic and ritual expressions that promote ecological consciousness and militant activism. We can also expect to see deep ecological activism grow internationally.

Bron Taylor teaches religion and social ethics at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, and is currently writing *Once and Future Primitive: The Spiritual Politics of the Deep Ecology Movement* (Beacon Press). The epigraph that opens this article is reprinted with permission from "The Job of Poetry" in *Full Circle: A Song of Ecology and Earthen Spirituality*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn, 1991.