

## VIEWS OF NATURE

### Prior Reading

Winner, Langdon (1986). *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*. University of Chicago Press. Chapter 7 "The State of Nature Revisited."

### Introduction

By nature I mean everything on earth that has not yet been brought under control by man's artifice and thus become part of the technosphere or built world. We cannot speak of pristine nature; even the light that falls on the remotest tree is filtered through an atmosphere that humans have chemically altered through technology. But what we call nature moves at a pace and with a rhythm that we have not imposed upon it. When contemplating the realm of nature we have to use a different time-scale than the one appropriate to humankind or to any other specific species within nature. From the standpoint of humans, that seems like "eternity".

### Changing Views of Nature

#### **The recent past**

Our perception of the way in which the technosphere presents a challenge to nature has changed radically during the last hundred years. Our views of nature always reflect current social and political structures? As Theodor Adorno observed, "In every perception of nature there is actually present the whole of society". From a romantic interest and concern with the **desacralization** of nature in the 19thC. (i.e. taking over areas we formerly could not control and thus considered sacred) we moved to a period of acute concern about **pollution** in the 1960s in response to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and finally, in the 1980s, to an awareness of a global threat to the **sustainability** of the ecological system. What we have to realize is that the realm of nature Darwin described, serenely evolving by natural selection no longer exists. Human intellect is now the driving force in evolution.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Ancient times**

The roots of what we call western culture lie in Athens and Jerusalem, in classical philosophy and Judaeo-Christian faith. So let us go back to those roots for a moment - although, over the coming years, this story will also have to accommodate not only the culture of the aboriginal people but those of Islam and the Orient as these begin to make themselves heard in the corridors of Canadian power.

Two images existed side by side in the classical world, and still persist today,-- the idea of dominion over the earth and the idea of the nurturing earth. We may associate them obviously with a male and female element respectively, generally expressed as a god or goddess.

Over many centuries, early Mediterranean and Greek civilization had mined and quarried the mountainsides and overgrazed the hills. Ovid, Seneca, Pliny and the Stoic philosophers openly deplored mining as an abuse of their mother the earth. To people viewing the earth as mother, mining has always seemed a particular desecration.

Caroline Merchant<sup>4</sup> quotes Smohalla of the Columbia Basin Indians in the mid 1800s

"You ask me to plough the gound! Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's breast? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest. You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again...." This view, even when severed from active worship of the Earth Goddess, managed to restrain commercial and technological exploitation for a long time. Edmund Spenser in the *Faerie Queen* (1595) portrays the earth as passive and docile and attacked by lustful men. "Then gan a cursed hand the quiet wombe/ of his great grandmother the steele to wound/ and the hid treasures in her sacred tombe to dig.....". But with the Scientific Revolution of the 17thC., and the development of industry, such concepts and their associated values were no longer compatible with the spirit of capitalist enterprise: they had to go. Locke taught that nature gives us the raw materials for our use. The ancient values did not, of course, entirely disappear. The poets kept them alive, in Locke's time Pope replied that nature was not made for man. From time to time the values of reverence for nature surfaced in waves of romanticism and nature worship, but always as a philosophy marginal to the mainstream. I include, of course, J-J. Rousseau who provided the classic exposition of what has been called the naturalistic myth, praising the simple needs of man in the state of nature contrasted with the dissatisfaction and perpetual agitation of modern social man. In the 19th C. in particular the nature moralists are part of this sidestream: I'm thinking of Emerson and Thoreau, for example. In England we find Wordsworth protesting against the building of a railroad through the Lake Country<sup>5</sup> "Is then no nook of English ground secure/ from rash assault...?" As in Spenser, a sexual imagery is implicit. And when the tide turned against the goddess, masculine symbols began to predominate. Bacon advised the studious " forsaking Minerva and the Muses as barren virgins, to rely upon Vulcan." Vulcan symbolized the refiner's furnace and thus technology. Carolyn Merchant claims that we continue this imagery to this day when we praise hard facts, the scientist's penetrating mind and the thrust of his argument.

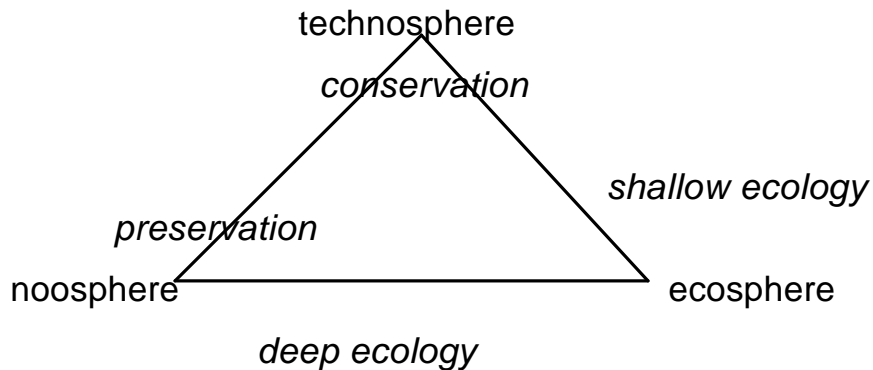
The modern masculine approach to nature as a resource to be exploited for the benefit of mankind is clearly traceable to the writings of Francis Bacon (1561-1626). He described matter as a common harlot. He said we should take nature by the throat and force her secrets from her. He thought that the intensive transformation of the environment by man could absorb and neutralize human passions. It was generally the Baconian view that accompanied the Calvinist protestants to these shores and it has been the dominant view of nature on this continent ever since, in spite of the very important romantic side streams to which I have referred. The same views are held to-day. I quote from a letter to the Calagary Herald by one John Gray "We do not only have a right, but we have a duty to use the natural resources to the benefit of all of us. These people [the environmentalists] would do much more for the world if they would use their brain power to rid the world of its overpopulation of humans. Then perhaps we wouldn't use so much of its resources."<sup>6</sup>

This "dominionist" point of view is quoted by most writers as if it were the only one held by Christians., -- a famous paper by Lynn White "The historical roots of our ecological crisis" is typical. This is unfair and fails to recognise the growing movement based on the concept of **stewardship**. There are over twenty references to stewardship in the Bible from which one can derive the principles of participation and responsibility.

In the doctrine of stewardship, the views of Christians converge with those of the Ecological Humanists such as Henryk Skolimowski.

### **Contemporary Points of View**

The three main views of nature described by Winner may be mapped onto a triangle whose end terms are the technosphere, the ecosphere and what we may call the noosphere or spirit. But there are, in addition, those who interpret all ecological problems as social problems and a growing minority who deny the existence of any ecological problem. I shall discuss each of these stances in the next five sections.



### **I. Resource Conservationists.**

#### **A CONSERVATION STRATEGY FOR ALBERTA (Fig. 66)**

**SUSTAINABILITY** "The management of our resources in such a way that we can fulfil our economic, social, cultural and aesthetic needs without permanent impairment to the resource base and the life support systems on which we all depend."

1. Natural resources are the foundation of economic activity
2. The quality of life and economic development are inextricably connected
3. Real wealth is not defined exclusively by money and material resources but without economic development we lose freedom to pursue our goals.
4. All economic value stems from knowledge applied to resources through work.

This class adopts the stance Winner describes as "Nature as a stock of economic goods." Resource conservation is in the mainline tradition of the Calvinists. These are the environmental economists and they represent the official view nearly everywhere including the command economies when such existed<sup>8</sup>. They have, since the publication of the Brundtland Commission report<sup>9</sup>, adopted the slogan "Sustainable Development", which rapidly slides over

into the oxymoron<sup>10</sup> "sustainable growth." Nature is a resource, a store of economic goods, placed there for the benefit of man. The principles in the box (Fig. 66) were formulated by the Environment Council of Alberta as part of an attempt to devise a Conservation Strategy for the province and are typical!<sup>1</sup>

## Assumptions

It appears that the following assumptions are built into this statement

1. The doctrine of "progress" is accepted as a "given" although it is a nineteenth century dogma born with the dawn of the fossil fuel era, a tiny blip in the history of humankind. Progress is tacitly equated with consumption. Waste is equated with sin. And waste is not only the misuse of resources but also the non-use! In the field of Resource Conservation the bluest of conservatives lies in bed with the reddest of Marxists: it was communist dogma too.
2. The key words of the conservationist strategy are "use" and "mitigation": use of the resource and mitigation of the negative effects. Is this enough? Are there not circumstances when non-use is the right answer?
3. The conservationist strategy does not make nature or natural diversity an intrinsic good. Of course Wilderness may be preserved within the scheme of resource conservation because it is considered a recreational resource; resources include amenities as well as commodities. But the temptation to turn amenities into commodities by privatization and user fees is seldom resisted for long.
4. No attention is paid to the social implications of the policy. The dominant social paradigm<sup>2</sup> of possessive individualism<sup>3</sup> is accepted without question. Driven by profit motive, we must have freedom to pursue our goals.
5. There is never any stated or implied limit to growth although this is inescapable. It follows inexorably from the Second Law of Thermodynamics.
6. The Resource Conservationists are characteristically unencumbered by any sense of the sacred. They operate in the technic frame of mind. In North America Resource Conservation is simply one aspect of resource development. Many government agencies are called "Department of conservation and development" this is what I would call an oxymoron. In recent years the euphemism "Wise Use" has been introduced to provide a cosmetic cover-up to the wide scale exploitation of nature.

## II Ecologists

The group whose main concern is the ecosphere includes those who see "Nature as an endangered ecosystem" (Winner p.127]. They are part of the environmentalist coalition whose members may be found anywhere in the bottom half of the triangle (Fig. 66). The Christian and the Humanist **stewards** belong here. The **ecocatastrophists** and their counterparts the ecosurvivalists are part of this coalition too; but, as Winner says, *their* driving force is fear.

### **Eco-technologists**

A transitional group called the eco-technologists place their major emphasis on reducing man's impact on the environment through efficiency and the use of knowledge-intensive technology -- not excluding high technology. They do at least recognize that continuous growth is impossible. They call their vision post-industrialist, but nothing in it differs from industrialist society except the technology; the only question is, are the technological changes simply quantitative - more efficient - or are they of a different kind?

### **III. Deus sive natura (nature equated with god)**

Groups in the noosphere corner of the triangle (Fig. 66) adopt the stance Winner describes as "Nature as a source of intrinsic good." The preservationists clearly belong here and Winner also includes the Deep Ecologists.

#### **Preservationists**

This group confines its concerns to selected areas or sacred places. No program based on economic rationality would be able to justify any great degree of preservationism. Sacred is a word like infinite that signals a peremptory end to discussion. As Garrett Hardin<sup>4</sup> puts it "To accept the authority of the sacred is to step outside the bounds of rationality." He suggests that this is one way to escape the limitations imposed by the economic theory of discounting in which the present value of a good whose enjoyment is deferred is substantially less than its value for immediate enjoyment. Assuming that all values can be expressed in dollars, we discount the future value at the average rate of interest presumed to prevail over the period of deferment, in order to obtain Net Present Value (NPV). This calculation produces an exponential decline in value over the duration of the deferral time with the result that goods whose enjoyment is deferred for long periods have essentially no NPV.

Hardin suggests that the economic theory of "discounting the future" is perhaps just part of the ideology of individualism that has dominated Western Society for several centuries. If we identified with posterity we would never countenance it.

John Muir, of Muir Woods, the Redwood park near San Francisco, was a prototype Preservationist. His underlying philosophy was that urban man can be recreated by contact with non-human otherness. In Jungian terms the Wilderness represents the unconscious and, by renewing contact with it, the process of individuation is advanced.

In this theory, the experience of the sacred is aesthetically mediated. We experience it as beauty. It is the natural environment of the peak experience. Freud saw to the heart of the matter when he said, "The creation of the mental domain of fantasy has a complete counterpart in the establishment of reservations and nature parks ... the reservation is to maintain the old condition of things which has been regretfully sacrificed to necessity everywhere else ... the mental realm of fantasy is also such a reservation reclaimed from the encroaches of the reality principle"<sup>15</sup>

The Preservationist is essentially a sight-seer. In its debased form Preservationism is simply a variety of consumerism. Jean Baudrillard comments, "...Nature has been rediscovered in the guise of a rustic sample, framed by the immense urban tissue, gridded and honeycombed in the form of open spaces, nature preserves, or as backdrops to weekend cottages. This rediscovery is actually a recycling of nature. That is to say, nature is no longer an original specific presence, in symbolic opposition to the culture, but a model of simulation, a digest of signs of nature put back into circulation."<sup>16</sup> The ultimate simulacrum, I suppose, was Biosphere II. The enjoyment of nature becomes a form of what Ellul calls reparative or redemptive technology.

#### **Deep Ecologists**

The Deep Ecologists, whose central figure is Arne Naess, reject the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational total-field image. They are for biospherical egalitarianism in principle (in principle because any realistic praxis

necessitates some killing, exploitation and suppression). In other words man is part of nature, not just in nature.

Phil Elder<sup>17</sup> has analyzed the biocentrist claim and found it wanting. In a light-hearted way he asks, if all species are equal, how do you decide which ones you can eat: carrots, cows or Canadians -- there must be a hierarchy. We can hardly make a decision on utilitarian grounds because we would have to ask, utility for whom? For that matter, does each species have equal right to manipulate the environment for its own benefit? If so, why not us? The fact is that Deep Ecologists have never come to terms with evolution and therefore they do not have a rational ground from which to think through their conclusions.

Langdon Winner (Whale p.129) draws our attention to the fact that many of the ecology-based arguments are strongly coercive in nature. He refers in particular to William Ophuls, Eugene Odum and Barry Commoner. Some people have referred to this as eco-facism.

#### **IV Social Ecology**

The final group discussed by Winner adopts the stance of "Nature as a Social Category." Winner does not specifically refer to the Social Ecologists<sup>18</sup> but I believe they should be included here. Where the Social Ecologists differ from the proponents of the other ideas is in their challenge to the existing social paradigm. This can be summed up in the expression "All ecological problems are social problems".

The position taken by Social Ecology is that if we are operating an economic system which is in fundamental conflict with our aims of sustainability, sooner or later the paradigm will become untenable. That means social revolution -- a paradigm shift. All other treatment is considered to be cosmetic. There is however no consensus on the precise way forward.

There is the **authoritarian** path of William Ophuls as described by Winner (p.130);

an **anarchist** path advocated by Murray Bookchin in a series of books; an **anti-industrialist** camp centred around the newspaper *Fifth Estate* and social critics George Bradford<sup>19</sup> and Ivan Illich<sup>20</sup> who seem to be looking backward toward a subsistence economy; and, finally, there are **socialist** groups associated with European Green parties: the "red green" Rudolf Bahro seems to be central to this movement.

#### **V. Contrarians**

As part of the neo-conservative revolution it is only natural that there should be a backlash against any form of environmentalism. The group known in the United States as "contrarians" whose leading voice is that of Julian Symon, economics professor at Maryland University, has been joined by British economist Wilfred Beckerman who argues that it is "far from obvious" that future generations should have any rights whatever! At the time of Winner's writing, these extremist views had not made it to centre stage, although he foreshadows their position in his remarks about economists (p.126), but now they must be taken seriously.

As John Vidal observes, "...ethical questions increasingly consume the contrarians. Kent Jeffreys of the Washington-based Competitive Enterprise Institute see capitalism as a pure, almost mystic reconciliation of God and Nature. It is, he says "a moral force flowing naturally from respect for human liberty ... there is a spiritual aspect in capitalism.

"The environmental debate has become a moral argument within the Family of Man. The birds

and the bees have yet to inform us .. of those sacrifices they are willing to make in return for human survival. No viral democracy has voted to adopt a non-aggression pact with humanity ... to put it more bluntly: should we save the whales or should we sell them?" Vidal says that the answer from all contrarians is sell them on the grounds that all life is there for man's use.

Even the precautionary principle - the notion of taking action to prevent something dangerous like global warming from happening is considered intellectual nonsense by Beskerman since it is very expensive "and may soon be found to be unnecessary." If the Deep Ecologists are prepared, as Winner suggests (p.130) "to dismantle freedom to protect nature from assassination", the contrarians are equally prepared to assassinate nature in order to protect freedom. Surely there is some middle way between these two poles?

### **Nature and technology**

Apart from the contrarians, most political movements today pay at least lip-service to the idea of intergenerational justice; that is, they recognize the claims of posterity. They do so either on moral grounds or on prudential grounds.

The resource conservationists have no problem with technology. Their entire focus is on the management of nature which they treat as inexhaustible. If any natural resource looks like "running out" they are confident that science and technology will find a way to extend its life or to find a replacement for it. The Resource Conservationists completely embrace the dogma of growth which is central to the capitalist system as we know it.

The preservationists accept the dogma of growth and the technological status quo but they are politically marginal. The eco-technologists think we can deal with ecological problems through an on-going technological fix.

The shallow ecologists see the source of much environmental destruction in the technological system. It is the technosphere that is taking over the biosphere. Their answer to the problem is personal, rather than social. They challenge the morality of the age but not its socio-economic system. The shallowness of their position is epitomized in the glossy magazine *Harrowsmith*, where advertisements for expensive cars are interleaved with descriptions of the simple life. Harrowsmith readers think they have gone back to nature because they won't use the metric system.

The deep ecologists are radical on every front: personal, economic, social and political. Their chief distinguishing characteristic is a refusal to recognize our species as privileged. Both shallow and deep ecologists would favour "alternative technologies" that reduce our footprint on the Earth.

The social ecologists have much in common with the deep ecologists but are human centered. They believe that the present socio-economic system based on continuous growth and competition at every level is incompatible with the sustainability of human life on earth. More realistic than the deep ecologists, they are not enemies of advanced technology. As Bookchin says "It is important to make the need for a technology that can remove modern fears of scarcity ... part of the revolutionary project."<sup>22</sup> Bookchin's vision includes not only recognition of the claims of posterity (intergenerational justice) but also some concept of intragenerational justice accompanied by new concepts of democracy and decentralization. He accepts technology as an essential ingredient in every aspect of the change. By leaving out the anarchist social ecologists Winner has omitted the one group that at least has a coherent answer to the question I posed earlier about a possible middle way.

The philosopher John Rodman<sup>23</sup> insists that these changes required at the global and local levels (*kosmos* and *polis*) must be reflected in changes at the level of the individual *psyche*. I have referred to this as *ametanoia*<sup>24</sup> (change of soul) away from the ideology of possessive individualism toward a better balance between the social and ego-centred aspects of our biological nature. Toward nature itself I incline to the personalist philosophy: going further than reverence for life to show respect for all Being.

## Review questions

1. What stance with respect to technology would you expect from: a resource conservationist; a deep ecologist and a social ecologist?
2. What does John Rodman mean when he talks about simultaneous changes at the level of the cosmos, the polis and the psyche?
3. What do you consider to be the positive and negative aspects of the contrarian position with respect to the environment: give your reasons.

<sup>1</sup>Anderson, Walter Truett (1987) *To govern evolution: further adventures of the political animal*. Boston: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

<sup>2</sup>Rifkin, J. *Algeny* Penguin 1984.

<sup>3</sup>Anderson, *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup>Merchant, C. (1983). Mining the earth's womb. In J. Rothschild (Ed.) *Machina ex dea: Feminist perspectives on technology* (pp.99-117). Pergamon. [this is a condensation of part of Merchant's book *The death of Nature: Women, ecology, and the scientific revolution*. ]

<sup>5</sup>Marx, L. (1964) *The machine in the garden: Technology and the pastoral ideal in America*. New York: [the literary response to the incursion of technology into the natural landscape], p.18.

<sup>6</sup>Calgary Herald Oct 8, 1987.

<sup>7</sup>Skolimowski, Henryk (1981). *Eco-Philosophy: Designing New Tactics for Living*. New York and London: Marion Boyars.

<sup>8</sup>Dryakhlov, N. (1984) *The Scientific and Technological Revolution: Its Role in Today's World*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. p.210 et seq.

<sup>9</sup>Brundtland, G.H. (Chairman) (1987) *Our common future*. World Commission on Environment and Development. Oxford: University.

<sup>10</sup>Oxymoron: a rhetorical figure by which contradictory terms are conjoined.

<sup>11</sup>Kelly, M.L. 1987: What in the world is a conservation strategy?; Canadian Society of Environmental Biologists Newsletter/Bulletin v.44, no.2, p.4

<sup>12</sup>Paradigm: generally agreed ways of seeing the world and expectations about people's behaviour.

<sup>13</sup>The term is from C.B. Macpherson *The political theory of possessive individualism*.

<sup>14</sup>Hardin, Garrett (1985) *Filters Against Folly*. New York: Penguin.

<sup>15</sup>McGregor, G. (1988) *The noble savage in the New World garden*.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted by Jacques Ellul in *The technological system*, p.74.

<sup>17</sup>Elder, P.S. (1988). Is Deep Ecology the way? *Alternatives*, 15 (2), 70-73.

<sup>18</sup>Bookchin, Murray (1990). *The philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on dialectical naturalism*.

Montreal: Black Rose Books.

<sup>19</sup>Bradford, George (1989) *How deep is deep ecology?* Ojai, CA: Times Change Press.

<sup>20</sup>Illich, Ivan (1973) *Tools for conviviality*. World Perspectives v. 47. New York: Harper and Row.

<sup>21</sup>Vidal, John (26 March 1995) "Apocalypse never" *in Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 26 March, 1995, p.36, reviewing inter alia Beskerman's *Small is stupid*. Duckworth

<sup>22</sup> *Remaking Society* p. 137.

<sup>23</sup>Rodman, J. R. (1982). Theory and Practice in the environmental movement: Notes towards an ecology of experience. In R. L. Rubenstein (Ed.) *Modernization: The humanist response to its promise and problems* (pp.45-57). Washington: Paragon House.

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<sup>24</sup>*metanoia* is the word in the New Testament that is translated as "repentance" in the Authorised Version. From a paper read to the United Church, March, 1990.