Remembering Deep Ecologist Arne Naess

Contributed by David Orton
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“The supporters of shallow ecology think that reforming human relations toward nature can be done within the existing structure of society.” — Arne Naess (1912-2009)

“By and large, it is painful to think.” — Arne Naess

"The movement is not mainly one of professional philosophers and other academic specialists, but of a large public in many countries and cultures." — Arne Naess

“The earth does not belong to humans.” — Arne Naess

I never met personally Arne Naess, the Norwegian eco-philosopher, who, according to an Associated Press story, died on Monday January 12th. He was 96. I knew from a fairly recent contact from his wife, that he was in a nursing home and not very well. Naess — like a few others now dead, such as Aldo Leopold, Richard Sylvan, John Livingston, and Rudolf Bahro — profoundly influenced me with his ideas. His deep ecology writings helped orient my life as a green and environmental activist. His Earth-centered ideas and overall philosophy also influenced so many others. His life’s work and his death, will be thought about by those who have been inspired by him and now learn that he has returned to the Earth.

Social relativism, i.e. not taking a stand, was unacceptable to Naess in this age of post modernism and ecological destruction. He himself had seen the impact of fascism on Norway during the Second World War. He saw the deep ecology philosophy, with which his name has become associated, as completely anti-fascist in orientation. Speaking of “intrinsic value”, a basic component of this world view, Naess said: “This is squarely an antifascist position. It is incompatible with fascist racism and fascist nationalism, and also with the special ethical status accorded the (supreme) Leader.” (Selected Works, Volume Ten, p. 95.) Naess was an advocate of non violence but made it clear in his writings, that if a choice had to be made, he preferred violence over cowardice. He also saw that self-respect for an individual was important, before a principled non violent stand could be taken and the consequences accepted.

I had received a few personal letters and communications from him, about some essays which I had written and on various theoretical points/disputes which I had raised. These letters I have kept and treasure. Arne had an ability to bring out the positive in any clash of what could seem to be contending views. His unifying personal interactive style was very different from that of the late social ecologist Murray Bookchin, whose intellectual life was marked by many rancorous arguments, as Bookchin policed the interpretations of his works.

Naess came through in his writings not only as a deep thinker — and sometimes as an obscure writer – but also as someone who was gentle, humble, and yet mischievous and playful. He told us “that the front is long”, meaning, as I interpreted this, that there are many paths to a deep ecological consciousness; many battles for participants to engage in; and that we should be tolerant and supportive of all those on the path to a new Earth consciousness — no matter the particular field of engagement. He also stressed, that for environmental activists, the views of opponents should be presented honestly and not distorted. We knew through many stories, that Arne, as well as a philosopher, was also an environmental activist, a boxer, and climbed mountains in Norway and around the world. He did much of his thinking and writing in isolation, at a self-built work hut high on a Norwegian mountain, where life’s necessities: water, food, shelter, warmth, clean air and perhaps solitude — what he called in his philosophy human “vital needs” — came into much sharper focus. (Naess advocated decreasing the material standards of living in wealthy countries.) There was quite a mystique around him. On top of all this, he was part of a privileged Norwegian shipping family and thus born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Yet, for Naess, one had to walk the talk: “Ordinary people show a great deal of skepticism toward verbally declared values that are not expressed in the lifestyle of the propagandist.” (Selected Works Volume Ten, p.110.)

Naess had a way of expressing deep insights which would remain with one long after reading them. He concluded one letter to me in December 1996, about an apparent dispute I had with him on what I saw as his inconsistent views on so-called sustainable development. He wrote: “Industrial societies cannot be reformed, green societies will not be industrial, but they may of course have industries. We probably have some real disagreements, but let us get rid of ‘pseudo-disagreements.’” An e-mail in 2000 commented positively about something I had written against wildlife biologists, who in the name of research, routinely subjected wildlife to various technological/electronic tracking devices, thus violating their species being and dignity: “Personally I believe that mysteries will not gradually disappear with increase of research efforts. If you throw light on an area, the boundary of darkness increases.”

Deep ecology, as conceived by Naess, made room theoretically for others to participate. A quotation which expresses this is in the 1993 book by David Rothenberg, Conversations With Arne Naess: Is It Painful To Think? (p. 98):
“To be a great philosopher seems to imply that you think precisely, but do not explain all the consequences of your ideas. That’s what others will do if they have been inspired.”

In my own case I was inspired like so many others and came to critically adopt, and try to apply and propagate the deep ecology philosophy, starting in 1985. My involvement in forestry and wildlife struggles in the late 1970s and the early 1980s in British Columbia and Nova Scotia had brought me to a position which made me open to Naess and ready to critically embrace his ideas. This was quite some time after 1973, when Naess published his initial deep ecology synthesis, the now widely reprinted article The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary. This article was based on a talk he had given a year earlier. It eventually was to transform itself into the eight-point Deep Ecology Platform, but how to change this Platform so it can evolve and yet keep its movement legitimacy remains unresolved. Giving support to this Platform, which calls for significant human population reductions, has come to identify the typical follower of deep ecology. Naess, “to provoke”, had called for a world population of 100 million people. (Selected Works, Volume Ten, p. 270.)

The distinction between “shallow” and “deep” ecology made by Naess, although perhaps an invidious comparison which some have called self-serving, nevertheless became a signature and part of the language of ecophilosophy and radical environmentalism. In fairness to Naess, he saw these two terms as “argumentation patterns” and not applied to people. (Philosophical Dialogues: Arne Naess and the Progress of Ecophilosophy, p. 444.) What is being called for in this age of ecology is that individuals need to define their “selves” as being part of the natural world. Naess defined the shallow ecology movement, which he says is more influential than the deep ecology movement, as “Fight against pollution and resource depletion. Central objective: the health and affluence of people in the developed countries.” The shallow approach takes for granted beliefs in technological optimism, economic growth, and scientific management and the continuation of existing industrial societies. Naess expressed it this way: “The supporters of shallow ecology think that reforming human relations toward nature can be done within the existing structure of society.” (Selected Works, Volume Ten, p. 16.)

Naess defined the “deep movement”, which seeks the transformation of industrial capitalist societies who have brought about the existing environmental crisis, by putting forward seven main points. The article is only a few pages long, but profound and showing the complexity of Naess. He pointed out that biological complexity required a corresponding social and cultural complexity. Outlined is an “anti-class posture” and how anti_pollution devices can, because of increasing the “prices of life necessities” increase class differences. He stressed local autonomy and decentralization.

Fred Bender’s 2003 book The Culture Of Extinction: Toward A Philosophy Of Deep Ecology said that Naess, in his initial 1972 formulation of shallow and deep ecology, put forward a very progressive non_dualistic approach, which is the one most compatible with ecology, where every aspect of Nature is interrelated – “all my relations” as traditionalist aboriginals say. Naess also presented in the original essay a sophisticated understanding of cultural diversity and a class and political consciousness. If this had been retained by Naess and other deep ecology academic writers in published writings, it would have blunted all that criticism of deep ecology, much of it emanating from social ecology – that deep ecology was just focused on Nature and had no view of society.

Some supporters of deep ecology (I am among them), believe that this philosophy has “stalled”. One example of this is perhaps the elimination of the section on deep ecology in the fourth edition (2004) of the undergraduate reader, Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology, senior editor Michael E. Zimmerman. This edition has totally dropped the section on Deep Ecology, edited by George Sessions, which was part of all previous editions. Naess, a European, had a positive yet critical attitude towards socialism in his writings. “It is still clear that some of the most valuable workers for ecological goals come from the socialist camps.” (Ecology, community and lifestyle, p.157.) Naess tried to combine revolution and reform: “The direction is revolutionary, the steps are reformatory.” (Volume Ten, Selected Works, p. 216.) Most of the academics in the universities who aligned themselves with deep ecology, however, came to terms with industrial capitalism. They did not see themselves as revolutionaries with a mandate to help usher in a NEW social formation as an alternative to industrial capitalism. The academy has tended to politically neutralize deep ecology.

The year 1973 not only marked the publication of the above seminal article by Naess, but it was a time which marked the opening of a deep crack in the paradigm of ruling ideas justifying the despoliation of the planet, and the start of a movement towards an Earth-centered ethics. Other essays and books which were published around that time included Richard Sylvan’s (then Routley’s) essay Is There a Need for a New, an Environmental Ethic?, Peter Singers Animal Liberation essay, and two important books: Christopher Stone’s Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights For Natural Objects and Donella Meadows et al The Limits to Growth.

Naess was pre-eminently a teacher. At 24 he had his Ph.D. in philosophy and by the age of 27 he was given the Norwegian University of Oslo’s chair of philosophy. There he remained until resigning at age 57 in 1969 to become the brains and soul of the emerging world-wide radical environmental movement influenced by the philosophy of deep ecology. Naess said that “The main driving force of the Deep Ecology movement, as compared with the rest of the ecological movement, is that of identification and solidarity with all life.” The primacy of the natural world is considered an “intuition” by Naess and is not logically or philosophically derived. Naess would say that “Every living being has an equal right to live and flourish, in principle.” This is not to deny that our existence as humans involves killing living beings. Living beings for Naess included individual organisms, ecosystems, mountains, rivers, and the Earth itself. The most comprehensive published overview of the philosophical work of Naess (there are said to be over 700 published and unpublished papers), can be seen in the ten-volume Selected Works Of Arne Naess which was published in 2005. (See my “Critical Appreciation” at http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/Naess_Appreciation.html)

Naess had a social harmony view of social change which seemed to stem from a position “that ultimately all life is one - so that the injury of one’s opponent becomes also an injury to oneself.” (Selected Works, Volume Five, p. 26.) I think he was wrong on this social harmony perspective. The conflict model of social change, which has its roots in Marx and has been developed, among others, by fellow Norwegian Sigmund Kvaløy is far more appropriate for combating ecocide and social injustice. From a basic social harmony position, Naess derived rules of movement conduct for activists, of literally turning the other cheek for environmental campaigns which can seem bizarre, but also dangerous, for someone like myself: “It is a central norm of the Gandhian approach to ‘maximize contact with your opponent!’”; or “Do not exploit a weakness in the position of your opponent.”

The significance of Arne Naess, whatever the real or apparent contradictions, is that his non-human centered philosophy offers us a way forward out of the ecological and social mess that threatens to overwhelm all of humanity and wipe out many of the plants and animals which share the planet with us. It is unfortunate that environmental “stars” – for example, here in Canada David Suzuki, Elizabeth May and Alberta environmental writer Andrew Nikiforuk, or in the United States, Al Gore – have nothing to say publicly about the importance of deep ecology, and why it is crucial that activists should study Arne Naess and apply his thinking to their work for ecological and social change.

A true defining star is not undermined by acknowledging those who have gone before and from whom we need to learn. Thus Naess acknowledged the importance of those who have gone before and influenced him, like Rachel Carson, Gandhi and Spinoza. (Carson’s Silent Spring (1962) was, for Naess, the beginning of the international deep ecology movement, although he invented the name as well as provided the philosophical framework.)

Ultimately the significance of the life of Arne Naess is that his philosophy has presented a needed pathway for coming into a new, yet pre-industrial old, animistic and spiritual relationship to the Earth, which is respectful for all species and not just humans. This is the needed message for our time, that the Earth is not just a “resource” for humankind and corporations to exploit.

I would like to close by expressing my personal condolences to Arne’s wife Kit-Fai Naess, as well as to the family and close friends. Arne Naess has impacted many lives and shown the necessary direction to significantly change societal consciousness away from human-centeredness and towards Earth-centeredness. Deep Ecology expresses what should be our relationship to the natural world in the 21st century. This is a wonderful and lasting achievement for a person’s life.

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Editor's note: David Orton is a deep ecologist based in Canada. He had corresponded with and learned from Arne Naess.

Visit David Orton's Website

The Selected Works of Arne Naess