

Deeper Organic Agriculture: Arne Naess

Contributed by David Orton
05 August 2009

The Norwegian eco-philosopher Arne Naess was the leader of the deep ecology movement. He died recently, at the age of 96. His influence was enormous on the environmental and green movements and in other sections of society which see the necessity of humans coming into a different relationship with the natural world. As Naess said, "The earth does not belong to humans."

The ideas of Naess are seen by many as having expressed in broad strokes what should be our relationship to the natural world in the 21st Century. He saw and wrote about the necessity to move away from human-centeredness and towards an Earth-centeredness which is respectful of all species and not just humans. Naess said if we are to hope to avert ecological and social disaster, individuals need to define their "selves" as being part of the natural world.

One can perhaps illustrate the influence of Arne Naess by looking at two better known Canadian thinkers who were intellectually indebted to him. They are Stan Rowe (1918-2004) and John Livingston (1923-2006). Rowe was employed as a professor of plant ecology at the University of Saskatchewan from 1968 until 1985, and earlier in his career by the Canadian Forestry Service. As a Forest Service employee Rowe wrote the much cited book *The Forest Regions of Canada*. There are also two books of essays by him, *Home Place: Essays on Ecology* (1990), and *Earth Alive: Essays On Ecology*, published posthumously.

Rowe upheld the deep ecology viewpoint that "We are Earthlings first, humans second." For him, we humans need a new view of the Earth, a new value system which is being born in the current ecological crisis. This value system challenges in a fundamental way our past, culturally acquired, human-centered view of Nature as just "resources" for humankind to exploit. For Rowe the Earth-centered biologist, it was quite false to make absolute distinctions between the organic and the inorganic or between the animate and inanimate. "What would qualify as animate, living, organic and biotic without sunlight, water, soil, air?"

Like Naess, Rowe also opposed the taken for granted 'truths' of the dominant ideas in our society, that we need population growth along with economic growth, city growth, consumption growth, etc. As many others have shown (for example Richard Heinberg in *The Party's Over*), it was an expanding agricultural production fed by fossil fuels which enabled the astonishing growth of the world's population. But this cheap energy is coming to an end. Naess, Rowe and Heinberg all saw the necessity to vastly scale back human populations, if we are to have any long term sustainable relationship with the Earth.

John Livingston, a mentor for David Suzuki, was a naturalist, broadcaster, and university teacher and influenced by the ideas of Arne Naess. He wrote a number of books with perhaps the two most influential being *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* and *Rogue Primate*. Livingston took the basic deep ecology idea that nonhuman life has value in itself and is not dependent upon humans for justification, countering this to the widely accepted belief that Nature and wildlife are commodities or resources solely for human exploitation. For Livingston and for deep ecology supporters, wild nature is not here to serve humans but must be defended and valued for its own sake.

For deep ecology supporters, food production goes hand in hand with the defense of wild nature. (Many deep ecology supporters are vegetarians.) Regardless, they advocate wildlife-friendly farming, not raising "sheep" while coyotes are being trapped or poisoned. For Naess, "animal factories interfere with the dignity of pigs." He supported agriculture, not agribusiness, and believed that "in future green societies food calculated as a percentage of income will cost us substantially more than it does today."

Deep ecologists also support local food rather than food which is shipped thousand of miles and produced by fossil-fuel based industrial agriculture.

I believe there is quite a "fit" between the ideas of Naess and that part of the organic farming and gardening movement which sees the production of wholesome, regionally-based, non-chemically nourished food, as going hand in hand with the protection of wildlife and wild nature.

* * * * *

This essay is from the online summer 2009 edition of the Environment, Technology and Society Newsletter of the American Sociological Association, at envirosoc.org

Also by David Orton:
A tribute to Naess called "Remembering Arne Naess (1912-2009)" can be found in the Winter '08 edition of this newsletter and on the internet at home.ca.inter.net and culturechange.org