

Letters on Deep Ecology

Various Authors

1988

Dear Fifth Estate:

I was heartened to read your issue concerning Earth First! [FE #327, Fall, 1987]. I've had a gut feeling about that group for a while, felt uncomfortable with the male-dominated norm of most all environmental groups, even the so-called radical, anarchist ones. Then I heard about the AIDS comment by Foreman and got upset even further. But I thought, maybe that's west coast innocence; I just came from New York City where AIDS is the #1 killer of women between the ages of 25 and 29. Still, it bugged me, and I began debating with people about Earth First!, about the nature of an anarchist ecology group which refuses to recognize human social relationships and problems as the cause of environmental disaster. To make a long story short, thank you. I thought I was alone in an uncomfortable feeling about Earth First!. Now I'm not alone.

Laurel Owen
Eugene, OR

Howdy y'all,

Here's my two bits on the Deep Ecology critique. There -are of course many problems with Deep Ecology (and let's not forget its parochial manifestation: bioregionalism), including its adherence *to a misanthropy that reeks of a separateness (of humans) from the natural world. Despite their critique of "humanism," those who adhere to Deep Ecology take an ambiguous stance toward the role of humans in Nature. For all their supposed wishes to become re-integrated parts of the environment, they seem to think that it's impossible or undesirable or both. On the one hand, they think that the world would be a wonderful place if there were no humans around to fuck things up (which is probably true), but at the same time they recommend a change in the stance of political representatives towards governing natural "resources" (sic).

The EF! critique of "humanism" includes a critique of leftism and anarchism (although from reading the last issue of EF!, these critiques are rather shallow), and by inference, all ideologies. But as Bradford correctly points out, this position has its own ideological basis; my addition to this observation would be to name this ideology: populism. The macho beer-swilling redneck image, the "anti-ideology," the anti-immigration stance of Abbey and Foreman, the gang mentality (evidenced in the "expose" by Alien-Nation); these are the signs of populism. Plus there are these two observations made by others about American populism in general: "[Is] not populism the forerunner of 'grass roots' democracy? [Does] it not seek to subject the government to the people's will...to turn legislators into registrants of the people's will? [Is] it not suspicious of the upper classes...?" and "The essential point about populism...is that despite an anti-business emphasis, such as we normally associate with the political left, it has a profoundly conservative thrust. It seeks to restore, not change." (Quoted from *The Politics of Unreason; Lipset and Raab*, University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp 220 and 542 respectively).

It's difficult to say what the future holds for the wilderness wardens of EF!. With the Yule 1987 issue, Foreman seems to be leading an ideological entrenchment, so it doesn't appear that he is going to try to take any of the latest criticisms to heart.

There's more to say, of course, but I'll leave it either to someone else or a later day. Bye for now.

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To The Fifth Estate:

I felt that your essay, "How Deep Is Deep Ecology?" was a good if somewhat dull critique of the "extreme greens" (the latest yuppie salad). George Bradford had some gems hidden in the acres of print, not the least of which was the "living within nature, rather than under it."

Fredy Perlman, I think, made it abundantly clear in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan*, that in most cases it is not the activity (e.g., agriculture) which is evil, but its organization (e.g., agribusiness, cash crops, etc.). George Bradford's work would have been more illuminating had he stripped the EF! critique of its over/under duality and false dichotomy and pursued the meaning of "within."

To ecological militarists there is only the "dialectic" (as there was only the "dialectic" to the social militarists and only good/evil to the religious militarists) of nature-dominating/nature-submissive, producing the ecological jihad of Abbey, et al. It is no surprise that the "leading lights" of EF! are racist, chauvinist, and militarist; it is the simplest reduction of reality guaranteed to restore ego-harmony in the troubled soul. A gospel, a chosen few, and a god leads to righteousness within the bearer.

My reaction to the pure and the righteous is always to tell them, stop using cars, toenail clippers and good whiskey. There is little room in life for the righteous because the problem is within and without. George touched a universe which needs observation (I hesitate to use the word explore for its unhealthy connotations). What do activities look like when they appear within nature rather than "above" or dominating her?

We humans are not her "first born" nor her "black sheep," but we are the most dangerous of her children. One obfuscating aspect of the critique of "domination" is that it assumes that we actually do dominate nature rather than operate "as if" we do and can. The truth is that the planet will "balance" the activities of humans even if it results in their destruction. The time frame of balancing may seem enormous to us, but it is but a blink in the eye of the cosmos. The impact of "civilization" has occurred within the last 1% of human-time which is but an infinitesimal fraction of the life of the biosphere.

Abbey and the EF! crowd do not deserve the attention they are getting. They are the "civilized recuperation" of yet another eruption of repressed humanity. They are not a shock or a surprise, merely the latest return of Wiske or Coyote spirit.

The shimmering food chain is perhaps a fraud that cloaks our misunderstanding of what we are. We cannot really visualize the process as a chain of organisms preying on one another with our species at one end or the other, at the "top" or "bottom" of such a chain. We exist in a cycle of relation with all other species and elements of the planet/universe sharing all aspects of ourselves with those other species and elements constantly in renewal and constantly in "balancing" whether we choose it or not.

Alan
Dallas, TX

Dear George Bradford,

Thank you very much for sending me your special issue on deep ecology. I am glad that these issues are being subjected to critical thinking and examination. I am especially disturbed by Alien-Nation's account of being suppressed at the EF! Rendezvous, and I intend to ask around about what happened there. At one EF! action I took part in, I raised a question about how the media would be handled regarding a particular point, and was told "the EF! line on that is..."—an attitude I find completely contradictory to the decentralized, grassroots-based structure that EF! aspires to.

I am pleased that you took on Abbey's statements about Mexican immigration, which strike me as outrageous, indefensible, and anything but "deep." By and large, Mexicans don't come north because they want to, they come because of a series of overwhelming economic imperatives. A truly deep perspective must include the reason Mexicans are leaving their land and address those making it possible for them to stay put if they want to.

I understand what set you off on your trashing of deep ecology and Earth First!—they are saying their share of disturbing things. But let me suggest that most of what's wrong with deep ecology is that it is only part of the solution: it talks about obligations to the natural community but not the human one. A more constructive approach than trashing someone's outlook for being incomplete is to complete it for them. That is exactly what Frances Moore Lappe and J. Baird Callicott do in the enclosed essay, "Marx Meets Muir: Toward a Synthesis of the Progressive Political and Ecological Visions," *Tikkun*, Sept./Oct. 1987. Callicott is an environmental ethicist and as such nicely complements Lappe's *Food First* perspective; in the essay, they search together for greater truths than either of them has alone. One of the truths that deep ecology holds is that, as David Rains Wallace wrote recently, "We can't draw a line between living integrity and mere exploitable matter without sooner or later finding some part of ourselves on the wrong side of the line." This statement should be equally appealing to people who have focused on preventing the exploitation of other people as it is to people who have focused on preventing the exploitation of Nature.

As to your critique of deep ecology, it seemed to me that a number of crucial distinctions are blurred. Your scathing condemnation of Catton's *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* seems to me a "straw book" argument. I am not persuaded that it represents the main body of deep ecology thought; Catton's inclusion in the deep ecology anthologies may be a tribute to pluralism, not a canonization. Drawing parallels to field ecology is not in itself wrong; one can gain insight from the interactions of other species, as long as one decides thoughtfully what can properly be applied to social ecology.

Finally, there are a few points I'd like to raise in a sentence or two. Snowmobiles (p. 9) do not necessitate petroleum-based fuels. For 15 years, ecologists have talked about the need for renewable fuels (alcohol or methane based); as for the motors, they could be made in intermediate-technology machine shops. Russia may have been relatively empty of people (p.14), but bear in mind that any ecological model would show that carrying capacity depends on climate, so its potential may not have been much greater than more populated parts of more temperate Europe. I'd be very curious what your sources are for the fraction of agricultural lands sprayed with various pesticides (p.21). The figures you cite seem surprisingly low, but I am willing to have my preconceptions rearranged.

Seth Zuckerman
San-Francisco, CA

Bradford responds: My essay was not meant as a simple "trashing" of deep ecology, but like Lappe and Callicott's, attempted to synthesize an ecological and radical social-political vision to show the limitations of deep ecology. One need not be a deep ecologist to affirm both our community with and obligations to the natural world. But there is too much additional baggage in deep ecology. Deep ecologists appear to have ideologized the insight of biological symbiosis and civilization's crisis of culture and character by ignoring the specific social context of civilization in its advanced capitalist stage as the culmination of the culture crisis which has separated us from the natural world. At the same time they accept much of the scientistic-technological ideology of capitalism to justify their political ideology and program. For this criticism of deep ecology my essay was written off by EF! ideologues as "leftist-anarchist-marxist" rhetoric and "leftist humanism."

I cannot agree that Canon is not integral to standard deep ecologism, since his argument is a modernized Malthusianism that is employed by all deep ecologists I've seen so far, either explicitly or implicitly. On your short comments, I agree that field ecology has its insights if one practices extreme caution and a self-critical attitude about applying different forms of complexity to one another. You may be right about snowmobiles, and I am open to small-scale technical ideas, but I am as worried about the snowmobile's erosion of the symbolic world and community as I am about its impact on the environment. (See "Technological Invasion: 'The Snowmobile Revolution'", FE #306, July, 1981 special issue on technology, available from our book service.) The comment on Russia was made simply to emphasize the reductionism characteristic of Catton's book that links so-called carrying capacity directly to political culture.

As for the pesticides question, my figures came from *Food First*, which was extensively documented, but I am continuing to seek more information on the problem of pesticides and techno-industrial agriculture in general. Figures on pesticide use vary widely. Greg Kaza writes in a recent article ("The Poisoning of America," *Detroit Metro Times*, January 6-12, 1988), that according to Environmental Protection Agency figures, pesticide use has nearly doubled over the last 25 years, and pesticide residues are considered "the nation's third worst environmental cancer risk after toxic chemicals in the workplace and radon gas in the home."

Russell H. King and Dick Russell have written (in "Arms Race with Nature," *The Guardian*, December 23, 1987) that since 1962, "synthetic pesticide production and use in the U.S. rose 330%." They appear to include production for export of pesticides (including those banned in this country, such as DDT) in their figures. (One error in my essay reported that one third of pesticides produced here go to the Third World; actually the figure is one half.)

Lappe and Collins' estimate that only a total of 20% of crop and pasturelands are treated with all or any pesticides comes from sources such as *BioScience*, *Environment*, and other environmental journals. The figures seemed low to me as well, and I had thought that this area of my argument would generate some positive challenges from deep ecologists that would further the discussion and force us all to examine industrial agriculture more closely.

None have responded along those lines. Kaza writes that "farmers account for 77% of total pesticides annually." If Lappe and Collins' figures are accurate that half of all pesticides used in agriculture go on non-food crops, perhaps their low figures of pesticide use refer only to food croplands rather than total croplands. That would be more in line with the statistics cited by Russell and Kirk that 70% of all U.S. cropland receives pesticides. There do seem to be some discrepancies, and perhaps readers and the writers cited here can respond with more information.

Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence in *Food First* and elsewhere that even if one accepts some pesticide use, applications are wildly excessive and could be reduced by anywhere from 50 to 90% with a more "integrated" approach to "pest management." Furthermore, Russell and King confirm Lappe and Collins' figures that crop loss to pests has remained around 30% from before the use of pesticides to today. Lappe and Collins argue that if they were eliminated altogether, "crop loss due to all pests...would rise only about seven percentage points."

At any rate, I believe (and we have argued in the FE) that industrial-chemical agriculture must be halted, particularly pesticides, which are destructive ecologically on every level and ultimately suicidal. I believe that a sustainable, small-scale organic agriculture that in no way resembles current monoculture is not only fully possible but absolutely necessary. I also think that this is possible without having to make incursions into remaining wilderness areas. But I'd like to see more discussion of all these questions.

FE note: The Lappe/Collins essay mentioned by Zuckerman was sent to us by Frances Moore Lappe after she received our essay. While it has some very thoughtful contributions, the synthesis of ecology with so-called “progressive politics” is problematic. Progressivism makes up a political spectrum ranging from hard core stalinists (who made use of the term in the 1930’s and since to create opportunistic and manipulative popular fronts with sections of the ruling class) to Cold War Democrats (a redundant phrase made for emphasis). Progressive politics seeks globally to create alternative models of industrial development and national states and, except on its left fringe, perhaps, has little or no critique, in our view, of mass technology and communications, authoritarian politics, and development. It has served as the left wing of capital in countries where the historic bourgeoisie was too weak and subservient to foreign domination to develop capitalism, and has employed authoritarian-Jacobin political models to seize the state and develop a stratified capitalism to industrialize. This has led to the development of societies in many ways modeled after the capitalist world—intensive energy development, mass planning by elites, industrialism, chemical agriculture, a commodity culture, etc. A footnote in the Bradford essay containing a stronger critique of Food First along these lines was somehow left out, though the basic point was made that industrial development is capitalism and will lead to the kind of alienated, hierarchical and ecologically destructive society present wherever industrialization has occurred. Nevertheless, we are making reprints of the Lappe/Callicott essay available to readers for postage for the positive points it does make about the necessity for social and economic critique by ecologists.

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