

The New Earth First!

An Exchange on Deep Ecology and Radical Environmentalism

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Dear Fifth Estate:

As an Earth First! sympathizer and subscriber to many deep ecology principles, I read David Watson's *How Deep Is Deep Ecology?* with great interest. I learned a tremendous amount from it. His criticisms were penetrating and well taken. I also appreciated the tone of sympathy despite profound differences.

Before I read it, I believed the world was overpopulated, in the sense that our species had already reached, or was close to reaching, the biological carrying capacity of the earth. I thought that the main cause of environmental destruction was population pressure. Of course, I never advocated Malthusian or other coercive/fascistic means of population control, but I did think it was the crucial long term issue environmentalists needed to address through increased education efforts, increased access to contraceptives and women's health services, and the reduction of social injustice and economic and gender inequality.

After reading the essay, I still believe the world is overpopulated, but not in the sense that we are at or anywhere near the world's carrying capacity. (I now understand that problems usually attributed to overpopulation, like famines and deforestation in the Third World, have their roots in social and political situations, not biological.) Rather, I think it is overpopulated in the sense that I think this world would be a lot nicer-for everyone, rich and poor, humans and non-humans, if there were fewer people in it. As Betsy Hartman writes, and Watson quotes, "No one wants a world of standing room only, where every bit of land, drop of water, and unit of energy is pressed into producing sustenance for an endlessly expanding human mass."

In accord with this new view of overpopulation," I no longer see population control by non-Malthusian means as the crucial issue environmentalists need to take up, but rather as a secondary issue to the real issues: social injustice and economic and gender inequality. First, we should get rid of the coffee plantations, the cattle industry, the disposable chopstick industry (and the massive personal bank accounts that go with their corporate owners), then we can take on population control as a major issue.

I do, however, have a few objections to the piece. First, I think it underplays the long run value of population control efforts by non-Malthusian-means. Granted, any short run, alarmist, coercive methods, such as forced sterilization or letting people starve, are totally unacceptable, both ethically and because there are so many social and political factors to take on before we get to the biological. However, within the context of working for just land distribution and gender and economic equality, I don't see the harm in also advocating working for population reduction, through non-coercive methods.

The book makes' it sound as though this world would be perfectly fine with twelve or fourteen billion people as long as resources were distributed fairly. Yes, with fair resource distribution and a few other changes in the direction of equity, we could live in a world with that many people, and possibly many more, but would we really want to? Certainly, it would-be a lot easier to implement the kind of decentralized, bioregional Communities that

many left-eco-anarchists, including myself (and, I presume, you), advocate and avoid the massive empires that currently exist (although current, or even higher population levels by no means preclude anarchical communities, or necessitate empire). I think this is a point “How Deep Is Deep Ecology?” fails to address adequately.

My main objection to the essay is that while Fifth Estate criticisms of deep ecology and Earth First! were well warranted at the time (and should have been acknowledged by their targets), they are now outdated. The reader may come away from the essay thinking that most deep ecologists and EF!ers are—neo-Malthusians who make no distinctions within the human species, are misanthropes who have only a weak critique of corporate domination and little or no social-political analysis. Granted, the neo-Malthusian, misanthropic, racist and fascistic statements of Dave Foreman and Christopher Manes, key people in deep ecology and EF!, does tend to support this view. However, while it may have been fair to associate deep ecology and EF! with them in 1987, I think the association now outdated. Very few EF!ers now agree with or wish to be associated with their statements, and an increasing number of EF!ers don't want to be associated with them at all, especially Foreman.

For example, see Judy Bari's “Why I Am Not a Misanthrope” (a direct response to Manes) and “Breaking Up Is Hard To Do” (About Foreman's divorce from EF!) in her recent book *Timber Wars* (Common Courage Press). I think Bari's views are much more representative of the EF! of the '90s than the views of Manes and Foreman. I think you would find little to disagree with in Bari's book. (She does believe overpopulation to be the main cause of environmental destruction, but she certainly doesn't advocate Malthusian means of population reduction, just education, voluntary birth control, and social justice.)

Even Dave Foreman doesn't hold his old views any more. See his essay, “Second Thoughts of an Eco-Warrior” in *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman* (South End Press, 1991), “Where he states: “I have often left unstated, and sometimes unexamined, the social components of problems like overpopulation, poverty, and famine, while trying to discuss their biological nature. I have also not always made clear that I abhor the human misery involved in such problems. I have been insensitive, albeit unintentionally, and for that, I humbly apologize.”

In the same essay he writes of his two most infamous quotes, about letting Ethiopians starve, and about the U.S. being a safety valve for Latin America (cited in your essay), that “in the first case, I did not clearly say what I really meant, and in the second, I now reject some of what I did say at the time.” He goes on to reformulate his opinion on both these subjects in an admirable manner.

Of course, he still believes that famine and overpopulation have a “biological nature” and describes William Catton's *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis for Revolutionary Change* (critiqued in your book) as “one of the most important books I have read in my lifetime.” But at least he has gone back on his advocacy-of neo-Malthusian, fascistic and racist means of enforcing his beliefs.

For the last two summers, I've been involved with an Earth First! campaign in central Idaho to stop the logging of the Cove/ Mallard roadless area (a crucial biological corridor in the largest complex of roadless areas remaining in the lower 48, the Greater Salmon Selway Ecosystem). The EF! of my (admittedly limited) experience is nothing like the EF! described in your essay; primarily it is moving in the direction you advocate, shedding most of its Malthusian rhetoric and talk of overpopulation and biological fatalism, and adopting a more serious economic/political analysis ... Moreover, almost everyone at our EF! base camp made a clear distinction between the timber corporations and the loggers themselves, and were aware of or would be open to the fact that the same corporations that exploit and abuse the earth also exploit and abuse women, minorities, indigenous cultures, and the working class. Thus, most people recognize that any act against corporate domination is inherently environmental.

A look at *The Earth First! Journal* confirms my perceptions. A recent issue contains not one mention of overpopulation as a major cause of environmental destruction or population control as a major solution. They don't even sell the “Malthus Was Right” bumpersticker anymore (though they do sell bumperstickers like “Love Your Mother, Don't Become One,” “Love Your Mother, Don't Become a Father,” and “Copulate, Don't Populate” but these only advocate voluntary population reduction, which is a benign, positive position).

Deep ecology rejects anthropocentrism and in its place advocates biocentrism, the idea that we should live as partners with the rest of nature, not as its master. It is a recognition that nature has value in itself, independent of what value it has to us as humans, and that large chunks of it should-be set aside to exist on its own terms, not on the narrowly defined terms of human “stewards.” One can be a deep ecologist without being a misanthrope. One

can even be a deep ecologist and a left anarchist, as I am. Nothing in deep ecology principles is inconsistent with the idea that human society should be organized in decentralized, bioregional, anarchical communities, not the massive, coercive states and empires of the present.

Deep ecology and Earth First! are heading in the right direction. I hope to continue to rid the movement of dangerous tendencies and 'promote its positive aspects which, I believe, have much to teach the rest of the ecology movement and radical movements in general.

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Watson responds: Thanks for your interest and your thoughtful comments. Judging from the evolution of your own perspective, I'm gratified to know the book is continuing to—have the intended effect.

Despite your perception of strong differences, there is little that divides you from us other than an emphasis in the book on certain tendencies, in the radical environmental movement of the late 1980s. Your deep concern about population growth and support for voluntary population reduction, as well as your desire for a greener, less peopled planet were and are ours. Furthermore *How Deep Is Deep Ecology?* was an attempt to defend deep ecology's best intuitions—which were not exclusive to the deep ecology idea—from the failure of a number of its self-appointed representatives to ask deep enough questions about the sources and social origins of the ecological crisis. In fact, by privileging the question of population growth, Foreman and others ignored and tended to conceal the very social relations and forces that most needed to be examined by a movement calling itself radical.

I didn't even necessarily object to the misanthropy of deep ecologists, by the way; like them, I well, understand John Muir's temptation to side with the bears in a war between species if that were possible. It was the smug, elitist, selective misanthropy of privileged North Americans, indifferent to human suffering (present company always excluded, of course), and claiming to identify only with non-human nature, while nevertheless proposing to close borders, for example, to protect "the resources we have in the USA" (Foreman's touching phrase) that outraged me. Misanthropy that sides with the powerful against the oppressed—be they human or non-human—is not a movement for the earth first but instead for one's own coterie.

I must confess that I didn't take Foreman's apology very seriously, either. In fact, I can't take the *Defending the Earth* dialogue between Foreman and Bookchin in New York City as much more than damage control on both their parts, with both consolidating their roles as stars in the social ecology/deep ecology fiasco. While Bookchin softened his uninformed ranting against deep ecology, he maintained his bipolar model of ecology politics. Foreman meanwhile tailored his presentation to his progressive left audience, but as any careful reading of the text reveals, he did not much change his views. He continues to tout (and to sell) William Catton's deeply flawed and conservative book *Overshoot* without having responded to any of our critical challenges to its shallow conception of carrying capacity.

In any event, those of us in the ecology movement who rejected Foreman's Yankee doodle version of biocentrism weren't seeking apologies, but rather to sharpen the political understanding of the movement and to push it in a more comprehensive, more if you will, level of radical engagement. As soon as we did so, we began to discover Earth First!ers like Judi Bari and others who shared our concerns and who were involved in changing the group from the inside. The EF! you know, which I consider to be one of the most important influences in the radicalization of young people in the U.S. today, is largely a result of all those efforts.

A reactionary malthusian politics has indeed receded among radical ecological activists, a process to which I believe the FE contributed. Even Paul and Anne Ehrlich, famous for *The Population Bomb*, have recently rethought their population control politics, arguing for such responses to rising population as land reform, women's liberation and improvements in the health and well being of poor rural people in the Third World—recommendations which we, following hunger activists, ecofeminists and others, made against Foreman's elitist starvationism. (See their *The Stork and the Plow: The Equity Answer to the Human Dilemma* 1996[.]) Certainly, the well-known ascending J-curve of human numbers, occurring at a time when myriad other species are being obliterated by human activity, is grievous, and worthy of our impassioned concern. Nor is the belief that these human numbers are a (or the) main cause of the crisis dishonorable. But it can lead to potentially harmful errors in our thinking and our practice.

I think of an article I saw not too long ago in *The Earth Island Journal* (which has generally been good at seeing the connections between different issues); in what is mostly a sober and reasonable discussion about the ecological

impact of babies born in the industrialized U.S., we find the downright silly suggestion that, “The most effective way an individual can protect the well being of all people is to abstain from creating another human.” This kind of numbers crunching misses the point entirely; it is not the passive choices of individuals but the active engagement of people working collectively that will effect change. Indeed, sheer numbers are not our greatest problem, but rather the global chaos brought about by capitalism that is destroying organic societies, turning hundreds of millions of people into refugees, destabilizing and re-tribalizing whole populations into numerous contending empires, and establishing a planetary megatechnic mass society. Absolute numbers are an increasingly aggravating factor in this process, but they are not the underlying pathology itself.

As the current immigration hysteria in this country makes clear, when an abstraction like carrying capacity can be employed to justify the abandonment of hungry populations the empire itself has rendered superfluous, and to divert people from making useful alliances into defending their bunkers (often from those they have collaborated in dispossessing), the misuses of ecology and subsequent dangers to authentic radical transformation can be terrifying. An eco-fascism is not only possible, eco-fascist ideology has emerged in Europe and the U.S. “Too many people” can only serve reactionary impulses if this obvious insight is not grounded in a loyalty to the ethical principles of human solidarity. We must avoid the tendency to hierarchicalize the problem, moving from so-called social issues to biological or in the contrary direction, rather than seeing them as interrelated and interdependent. We have to think creatively about the interrelationships between all the interlocking crises, within a constellation of ethical, social and ecological commitments. Everything depends on our success, and so far neither our theory nor our practice has proved adequate to the task. But we are learning.

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