

Trumpeter (1993)
ISSN: 0832-6193
Applied Deep Ecology

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Enthusiastic faculty and over eighty participants gathered at Shinoa retreat center on the Navarro River of northern California, the first two weeks of August for a series of lectures, discussions, rituals and experiential lessons on applied deep ecology.

Elias Amidon and Elizabeth Roberts, co-directors of the Institute for Deep Ecology Education, created the summer school as a forum in which teachers who normally work alone or in academia could collaborate and learn from each other's approaches. "We asked our instructors to work at their edge, to give us their most creative, and forward reaching thoughts about deep ecology. We wanted to create a safe learning situation for both instructors and participants, where instructors could stretch themselves and could learn from participants as well as participants learning from instructors."

At the end of the two weeks, many participants felt their lives were transformed, and they found clear direction for their work in the deep, long-range ecology movement. Kim To, for example, a Japanese student completing five years of study in the United States, said, at the end of the summer session, "I understand now that deep ecology work is my life. I am returning to Japan to work with Japanese people to empower themselves to work for social change. Many people in a Japan are just beginning to understand deep ecology. Many people in Japan are very afraid to try to change the politics. Working with Joanna Macy and other instructors during the summer session, I learned how to help people overcome denial and apathy and to participate joyfully in the task of speaking up for the intrinsic worth of nature."

Kevin Browning, a homeless person living along the San Lorenzo River in Santa Cruz, California, said, "I am committed to going back to Santa Cruz and forming a Deep Ecology Resource Center. In Santa Cruz we have many people who are politically active, but they haven't taken the opportunity to explore their ecological self. I want to help college students, homeless people, and political activists to understand that we all have common ground in protecting nature as part of our broader self."

Participants came from a wide diversity of religious traditions, ethnic groups, ages and educational backgrounds to participate in the summer session. They were united in seeking ways to change their own lives and to engage in social change.

Supporters of deep ecology, as participants in a philosophical and historical movement, recognize that cultural harmony with Nature is a global imperative. The deep ecology movement is inclusive, that is, drawing support from a wide diversity of cultural traditions. The deep ecology platform emphasizes that Nature has intrinsic value, that is value for itself rather than only aesthetic, commodity, or recreational value for humans; that humans have the capacity for broader identification with Nature as part of our ecological self; and that compassionate understanding is the basis for communication with Nature as well as with other human beings.

One elective track offered during the summer session was called “becoming a naturalist”. Participants focused on perception of the land, ecological processes, and human impacts on the land at Shinoa. Skilled teachers, including David Abram, Ed Grumbine and Stephanie Kaza, led participants in daily exercises to become attentive to Nature.

Stephanie Kaza, a professor of environmental studies at the University of Vermont and author of the recently released book *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees*, led students in “listening” to trees. Based on an ancient Buddhist practice of sitting meditation, and informed by contemporary theories of conservation biology, Kaza’s approach helps students bring awareness to the “total view” of trees as expressions of the soil, the place, and of historical events in that place.

Ed Brumbine, author of *Ghost Bears* and director of the Sierra Institute at University of California Extension, Santa Cruz, drew on his years of experience teaching conservation biology to help participants understand the complexities of the watershed and the complexities of restoration ecology and ecological relationships.

“As naturalists,” Grumbine said, “we wanted to draw participants into the processes rather than just throw facts at them. Eating blackberries along the trail in late summer reminds us what we share with bears. And thinking of bears we think of the ‘not there’. Bears used to travel along the Navarro River eating blackberries and salmon that also use to swim up the river to spawn in the gravel beds. Humans have exterminated bears in the Navarro River Valley and human activities have severely impacted the ability of the river to support a healthy salmon run. Unless we commit ourselves to working in the longrun on specific places, such as the Navarro River or wherever we are living, then species will continue to become extinct due to human impacts and degradation of habitat of native species due to careless human activities.”

“I felt teaching during the summer session was rewarding for me as teacher because I could integrate compassionate and mindful exercises with my scientific understanding of Nature,” Grumbine said after the summer session.

Grumbine, an active leader in conservation biology, also presented *The Wild-*

lands Project during the summer session. The Wildlands Project is a visionary prospective on protecting and restoring wildness throughout the continent. The Wildlands Project is setting a new agenda for the ecology movement. This is a project based on the needs of all life, rather than just human life. The failure of existing parks and designated wilderness areas in preventing extinction of plant and animal species and the conflicting goals of some federal agencies is widely recognized. The Wildlands Project states objectives and frames a process by which citizens can make choices on settlement patterns, types of human activities allowed in wildlands and scientific criteria for protection of habitat for threatened species.

Freeman House, a bioregionalist from the Mattole River Valley of northern California, presented his own dramatic story taking the last wild salmon as a totem for the health of the valley in which he lives. House asked the question that many participants were pondering as they travelled homeward after the summer session, "How can we begin building reinhabitory culture wherever we are living?"

"Becoming a naturalist" included practicing with new philosophies of forestry and social organization. Alan Drengson, professor at the University of Victoria, led a workshop on ecoforestry and another on the Ecostery. "An ecostery," Drengson said, "is a place where ecological wisdom and harmony is learned, practiced and taught. The ecostery idea derives its origin from land-based communities. It offers models for decentralized, self-sustaining communities committed to work on biological restoration over long periods of time, without demands for profits or centralized power."

Recognizing that many participants live and work in urban areas, several workshops were offered on becoming a naturalist in urban settlements and on the design of the built environment. "Like it or not," Elias Amidon said, "we spend much of our lives within the built environment. The design of our buildings, neighbourhoods, towns and cities deeply effect who we are, what we do, and how we relate with the rest of the natural world."

Ecopsychology was the other emphasis offered during the summer session. Joanna Macy, author of *World as Lover, World as Self*, lectured on systems theory and deep ecology and led workshops on overcoming resistance and denial. In her workshops, Macy emphasized ways to connect with "deep time", longer time frames than we usually focus on. We are all part of the ongoing stream of life. Macy, along with John Seed, developed a ritual called the "Council of All Beings" to help people understand our broader identification with Nature and to experience ourselves as part of the evolutionary journey of many species.

Besides guided exercises, formal presentations, and practical work on the grounds of the Shinoa retreat center, participants were encouraged to get to know the Navarro River, to play, and to hike to Hendy Woods State Park where ancient redwoods helped participants to heal themselves while appreciating the great-

ness of ancient redwoods as an expression of life.

The summer session on applied deep ecology was the first organized by the Institute for Deep Ecology Education. Another such school is planned for the summer, 1994.

The Institute for Deep Ecology Education, along with sister institutions such as Schumacher College in England, the Elmwood Institute, the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado and newly formed groups in Russia, Japan, and Germany, are collectively working for the maturing and building of the deep, long-range ecology movement.

Citation Format

Devall, Bill (1993) Applied Deep Ecology *Trumpeter*: 10, 4.
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