

Trumpeter (1996)

ISSN: 0832-6193

Response to Bron Taylor's criticisms of my review of Ecological Resistance Movements

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It is not unusual for an author to respond to a book review, but is unusual for an author to crusade against the character and scholarship of a book reviewer. However, such tactics are not unheard of. For the past two decades some social ecologists and others have attacked the deep, long-range ecology movement using rhetoric, accusations, personal attacks and various red herrings. Bron Taylor and his co-author Jerry Stark make similar mistakes. They simultaneously misrepresent and then attack the deep, long-range ecology movement. Jerry Stark ("Postmodern Environmentalism: A Critique of Deep Ecology") cites Bookchin, Bradford and other social ecologists as authoritative commentators on deep ecology, instead of the main scholars writing on the deep ecology movement.

My intent in this reply is to comment on Bron Taylor's essay that appeared in the last issue of *The Trumpeter* [Spring 1996], "Ecological Resistance Movements; Not Always Deep but if Deep, Religious: Reply to Devall". In that essay Taylor went beyond statements he made in *Ecological Resistance Movements* and made his position clearer than he did in his book.

I stand by the statement I made in my review of his book that neither Bron Taylor or his co-author Jerry Stark provide a systematic nor sympathetic review of the literature of the deep, long-range ecology movement in developing their characterization of the movement as "nature mysticism." I still recommend the two anthologies published last year to readers who want to evaluate for themselves the intent, philosophy, and practice of the deep, long-range ecology movement, George Sessions, ed. *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century*, and Alan Drengson & Yuichi Inoue, eds. *The Deep Ecology Movement*. I also recommend the Summer, 1995 issue of *The Trumpeter* that contains summary articles on the deep ecology movement by Harold Glasser, Alan Drengson, George Sessions, and Arne Naess.

I will take this opportunity to extend my remarks on three questions raised in Taylor's book and expanded in his response to my book review - are most ecological resistance movements worldwide based on anthropocentrism; how can the Earth First! movement be interpreted; and is the deep ecology movement a religious movement?

Ecological Resistance Movements

Taylor says that the central theme of his book is that "not every radical environmental group in the world can be considered a kindred branch of the international deep ecology movement" (p 99). I got that point when I read the book.

I generally agree with that generalization. Taylor and his co-authors present strong evidence that movements which he calls "radical ecological movements" in many countries are movements of people motivated by concerns that frequently have little to do with the intrinsic value of nature. These movements involve conflicts between various ethnic groups over allocation and development of natural resources and conflicts between regional groups and central governments over control of natural resources. Many of these movements involve issues of "not in my backyard" type. Many are attempts to defend local customs and cultures from attack by forces of the global economy - national government agencies, international corporations, the World Bank, and other "modernizing" market forces. Many are focused on explicit anthropocentric philosophies, on issues of human rights and use of land, forests, and fisheries.

The point I tried to make in my book review had to do with the relationship between ecology movements in North America and Europe with these so-called "radical ecological resistance movements" in other nations.

Even though many of these resistance movements are not *radical* in the deep ecology sense of radical-that is, getting back to the ground of our awareness, supporters of deep, long-range ecology can support and encourage them because they oppose the excesses of industrial civilization and because, as Alan Drengson succinctly states,

...all human cultures have a mutual interest in seeing Earth and its diversity continue for its own sake and because we love it. Most want to flourish and realize themselves in harmony with other beings and cultures. Is it possible to develop common understandings which enable us to work with civility toward harmony with other creatures and beings? The deep ecology platform principles are a step in this direction. Respect for diversity leads us to recognize the forms of ecological wisdom which grow specific to place and context. Thus, supporters of the deep ecology movement emphasize place-specific, ecological wisdom, and vernacular technology practices. No one philosophy and technology is applicable to the whole planet. (*The Trumpeter*, Summer, 1995 p. 145).

I hold to the position that ecology organizations such Rainforest Action Network, Greenpeace and other North American and European based organizations can show solidarity with these movements in other nations and support their efforts because much of the negative human impacts on ecosystems in so-called Third World nations is generated by agencies, corporations and policies of governments in North America, Japan and Europe. Market based strategies by ecology groups in industrial nations recognize the rapid development of globalization. These environmental organizations attempt to pressure corporations

and government agencies in Canada, USA, and Europe to reduce their investments in culture and nature destroying projects in other regions of the earth.

I don't think Taylor and Stark devote enough analysis to these emerging international ecology networks and the importance of such networks in empowering local resistance movements in Africa, Asia and South America. Such tactical and strategic alliances are very much a part of the deep, long-range ecology movement.

Earth First!

Bron Taylor's essay on Earth First! is primarily based on interviews he conducted after 1990 with some Earth First! supporters. He says that he never met an Earth First!er who did not express spiritual connection with the Earth. That may be. My points concerning his analysis of Earth First! involve the time frame of his fieldwork, his generalizations, and his interpretation.

I had continuous contact with hundreds of Earth First!ers during the 1980s and attended numerous rallies, Round River Rendezvous and other Earth First! events. During the 1980s a small minority of Earth First! activists expressed some interest in spiritual/ecocentric approaches to deep, long-range ecology. However, I also know that throughout the 1980s expressions of spiritual connections with nature were constantly ridiculed as "woo woo" at Earth First! gatherings. Taylor tries to explain away this behavior by saying that in his "interviews" even Earth First!ers who publicly disdained ceremony and any religious language at Earth First! gatherings expressed their religious feelings towards nature. However, we don't know what questions Taylor asked, how he asked them, if he asked leading questions, or his interpretations of the respondents answers. Any social researcher knows that these are crucial methodological issues in field research. Taylor is a professor of religious studies. We simply don't have an independent evaluation of his data nor do we know his qualifications as a social researcher particularly in "grounded field theory".

I do know that Tim Engelsbee is a qualified social researcher. His PhD dissertation on the Earth First! movement, accepted by the Department of Sociology at the University of Oregon (1996), provides the most thorough investigation to date of the Earth First! movement. *Earth First!: Consciousness in Action in the Unfolding of a New-Social-Movement*, addresses the gap between abstract concepts of new-social-movement theory and data through an ethnographic analysis of Earth First! activists from the 1980s to the present.

The research findings indicate that Earth First! activists express an 'ecological postmodern' consciousness in their environmental philosophy and social-psychology. Activists' identity motives exhibit

holist, organicist, and biocentrist paradigms, which frame an ecological worldview that counters the dominant paradigms of the industrial worldview. Earth First! activists also express an 'eco-anarchist' consciousness in their organizational forms and processes. Their autonomy motives exhibit ecological, anarchist, and feminist principles that counter the dominant technocratic, industrial, and patriarchal discourses. Finally, Earth First! activists express an 'ecotopian' consciousness in their postindustrial cultural practices and bioregional political projects. Activists' solidarity motives are evident in their intentional communities, alternative lifestyles, and political alliances that prefigure a postindustrial, ecological utopian society. (dissertation abstract)

It is a fact that the Earth First! movement changed greatly after 1990 when many of the first generation leaders left the movement for a variety of reasons, including the drift of supporters of the movement toward urban anarchism, humanism, and social justice issues rather wilderness preservation.

I am saying that it is difficult to make generalizations about the Earth First! movement. Taylor admits as much in his essay on Earth First! (p. 27, footnote 4) but continues to propound such generalizations.

I also assert that Earth First! may *not* be representative of either the deep, long-range ecology movement or of conventional reform environmental movements. Again Taylor admits as much (p. 29, footnote 17) when he cites the infiltration of the Earth First! movement by social ecologists and feminists and urban anarchists. These influences moved Earth First! much more in the direction of the "social justice", humanistic camp that George Sessions has criticized ("Postmodernism and Environmental Justice" *The Trumpeter* Summer, 1995). Furthermore, after 1990 the Earth First! movement ceased to be of interest as a vanguard ecology movement.

Other writers besides Taylor have characterized Earth First! as a religious movement. Martha Lee interprets Earth First! as a millenarian movement, along with the Nation of Islam (*Earth First! Environmental Apocalypse*. Syracuse University Press. 1995). She argues that in all its forms environmentalism is apocalyptic because environmentalists confront pollution and extinction and the source and limits of human power.

For her, Earth First! supporters

..grappled with issues such as the nature of political community, the definition of justice, and the degree to which human life is meaningful. For these reasons, the movement's development illustrates in

compact form the tensions inherent in all political communities that anticipate the end of civilization. In this way, it tells us much about our own lives and politics. (preface)

She also recognizes, much more clearly than Taylor, that Earth First!, as created by the first generation of Earth First!ers ceased to exist in 1990. She concludes it was destroyed by the tension between apocalyptic and millenarian factions. While I disagree with that interpretation, this is not the forum to discuss alternative explanations. My point is that the informants who Taylor interviewed after 1990 were people in a different movement who were using the name Earth First!, a name that had been abandoned by Dave Foreman and others who founded Earth First! and who believed in the intrinsic value and meaning of wilderness.

The point I tried to make in my review of Taylor's book is that his interpretation of Earth First!ers as "nature mystics" he failed to show the drama, tensions, contradictions and creativity of Earth First! when it was a vanguard arena for ecological philosophy and practice during the 1980s.

Is the deep ecology movement a new religion?

The answer to this question depends on one's definition of new religious movement. Certainly Taylor is not the first academic to search for religious motivations in the ecology movement. Stephan Fox, in his insightful history of the American conservation movement, concludes his book with a chapter on the religion of ecology.

Based on concepts used in the study of the sociology of religion, the deep, long-range ecology movement is not a cult, sect, new religious movement nor part of the new age spiritual movement (see George Sessions' essay "Deep Ecology and the New Age Movement" in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*). It does not seek the evolution of higher consciousness, nor do leading theorists in the movement suggest that humans are evolving as the "consciousness of the planet." Arne Naess and other philosophers in the deep, long-range ecology movement envision a much more humble role for humans on this planet than the role proposed by many contemporary mainstream Christian or Jewish theologians.

George Sessions is a philosopher who rejects mainstream religious interpretations of the deep, long-range ecology movement. He concludes that

[T]he crucial paradigm shift the Deep Ecology Movement envisions as necessary to protect the planet from ecological destruction involves the move from an anthropocentric to a spiritual/ecocentric value orientation. The wild ecosystems and species on the Earth

have intrinsic value and the right to exist and flourish, and are also necessary for the ecological health of the planet and the ultimate well-being of humans. Humanity must drastically scale down its industrial activities on Earth, change its consumption lifestyles, stabilize and then reduce the size of the human population by humane means, and protect and restore wild ecosystems and the remaining wildlife on the planet. This is a program that will last far into the twenty-first century. (Sessions, preface, *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-first Century*, p. xxi)

The deep, long-range ecology movement is a contemporary manifestation of the age-old pursuit for wisdom of the household, what Naess calls *ecosophy*, which is philosophical and practical.

Roger Gottlieb defines religion as

...those systems of belief, ritual, institutional life, spiritual aspiration, and ethical orientation which are premised on an understanding of human beings as *other* or *more than simply* their purely social or physical identities. Teachings can be marked as "religious" in the way they assert (as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) that people are essentially connected to a Supreme Being whose authority is distinct from worldly powers; or by the Buddhist belief that we can achieve a state of consciousness which transcends the attachments and passions of our ordinary social egos; or in the Wiccan celebration of human sexuality as an embodiment of the life-giving force of the Goddess rather than as the source of purely individual gratification. Religious attitudes thus turn on the sense of what theologian Paul Tillich called "ultimate significance." They seek to orient us to that which is of compelling importance beyond or within our day-to-day concerns. (*This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*. Routledge 1996 p.8)

Under this definition the deep, long-range ecology movement is only partially a religious movement. As Arne Naess has repeatedly asserted, supporters of the movement can come from many different "ultimate premises" (Taoist, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, etc.) Within these traditions and from our own deep ecology intuition we can articulate *ecosophy* in our own bioregion.

The applied practice of deep ecology movement platform is found in such statements as *The Ecoforester's Way* and in documents of *The Ecostry Foundation*.

In summary, the deep, long-range ecology movement is not intended as an institutionalized religious movement. It is not in competition with institutionalized religion. It is not a "new religious movement." If we have to characterize

the movement in these terms, it is a movement seeking a spiritual/ecocentric paradigm shift.

Should deep ecology supporters incorporate as a religious organization?

Taylor concludes his rejoinder to my review of his book by advocating forcefully that supporters of the deep, long-range ecology movement "come out of the closet", affirm publicly their religious intuition and even incorporate as religious organizations. He asserts "there is no reason, when deep ecology activists view environmental degradation as desecration, that Native Americans should be the only ones seeking standing in the courts and opposing such destruction as a threat to religious freedom." (p.102) That is an intriguing idea. The Evangelical Christian Environmental Network is doing just that in their defense of the Endangered Species Act using arguments based on biblical texts. Several mainstream Christian churches are making similar statements.

It seems to me, however, that Taylor lacks compassion for those supporters of the deep, long-range ecology movement, who face the dilemma of the closet. While claiming to be a supporter of the deep, long-range ecology movement and a helpful critic, he wants to place many supporters of the movement in harm's way.

By analogy, a supporter of the deep, long-range ecology movement in contemporary culture is in a situation like gays in this culture. As Michael Foucault pointed out in his analysis of the invention of homosexuality, one comes out of the closet too early or too late in contemporary Western culture. That dilemma is inherent in the lives of every individual gay and in the collective life of the gay political movement. It is an inherent dilemma demonstrated by the "don't ask, don't tell" policy of the Clinton administration concerning gays in the military.

To come out of the closet too early means that you won't be admitted to "correct society", that is heterosexual society; to come out too late is to be accused of living a lie and thus untrustworthy to hold a position of influence or to have one's opinion accepted as reliable and authentic.

As Taylor correctly notes Gary Snyder, Arne Naess, George Sessions and myself have advocated that supporters of the deep ecology movement become moving targets rather than sitting ducks. Other supporters of the deep, long-range ecology movement advocate being sitting ducks.

There are advantages and disadvantages in both strategies. Taylor emphasizes some of the advantages of being a sitting duck but not the disadvantages.

The question is one of being totally public and open with one's lifestyle for

short-term political benefits vs. privacy. I, for example, have never hidden my personal religious practice. For nearly two decades I have practised with the Arcata Zen group. I have participated in many mountains and rivers sessions in my bioregion of the Klamath Siskiyou of northwestern California where we have meditated and reflected on two classic Buddhist texts, Dogen's *Mountains and Rivers Sutra* and *The Heart Sutra*.

I have publicly spoken about Buddhism and ecology and have led workshops with Joanna Macy on parallels between classic Buddhist teachings and modern ecological insights.

I feel no need, however, to label myself or be labelled by others as a "Buddhist deep ecologist." Indeed I eschew labels that limit my self-identity. That is why I have always tried to follow Arne Naess' advice not to be labelled a "deep ecologist" but to call myself a "supporter of the deep, long-range ecology movement."

As Taylor notes, identity politics is a hot topic in contemporary politics. What is gender identity for example? Do young people have to declare they are "gay" or "straight" or "bi" or "trans-gender" in order fit into the pigeonholes of society? Do people have to declare their ethnic identity in order to participate in group politics and acquire group rights in the 1990s? In some situations, yes. "Part-Hawaiian" for example is one of the fastest growing ethnic identifications on Census Bureau surveys in Hawaii because of the rise of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement and affirmative action programs. However, in sexual politics, why not be ambiguous, open, responsive to the phonemes of the situation? I am reminded of the first line of a Walt Whitman poem, "I was a child went forth and the first object I saw, that object I became..." Supporters of deep ecology seek possibilities for broader identification, not labels imposed by a declining civilization, in their search for ecosophy.

Again using myself as an example, sometimes I feel like a bear, sometimes a human. Sometimes I feel I am a bear trapped in the body of a human, sometimes I feel like a human becoming a bear.

As Arne Naess has emphasized, using somewhat vague "ultimate norms" such as Ecocentrism and Self-realization allows people to understand the gestalt without being limited by the labels. In this strategy people can fill in the narrative from their own cultural tradition rather than requiring them to label themselves or be labelled with a religious identity.

Taylor concludes that "perhaps deep ecology could emulate Roman Catholicism which, while not downplaying faith, has effectively entered into public debates on the basis of reason and common interests." (p 102) Again by ignoring that many supporters of deep ecology are doing just that, Taylor fails to address the dilemmas that supporters of the deep ecology movement face when they engage in social activism in this harsh cultural context.

In this difficult cultural context, many supporters of deep, long-range ecology in their appeals to government agencies, media, and the U.S. Congress use reason, scientific theory and research, and appeal to common interests in their efforts to protect the integrity of natural systems.

However, appeal to reason also presents dilemmas. Who's reason? The current criticism of ecology as only metaphysics and not science illustrates the political and paradigmatic conflicts over the uses of science (see my review of Alston Chase's *In a Dark Wood* in the previous issue of *The Trumpeter*). The arguments over what constitutes "forest health" and whether managers can "improve" forest health by massive salvage logging is another case in point. To accept the principles of ecology, many mainstream scientists must make a paradigm shift.

In conclusion, the deep, long-range ecology movement remains the most radical social movement in contemporary society. The development of policy statements and affirmations of intrinsic value of nature in public documents, laws, statements of religious organizations, and in public statements by politicians and teachers requires courage, persistence, and advocacy by all those who consider themselves supporters of this movement.

Citation Format

Devall, Bill (1996) Response to Bron Taylor's criticisms of my review of Ecological Resistance Movements *Trumpeter*: 13, 3. <http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.13.3.12>

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