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WILDERNESS: BACK TO BASICS

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An Interview with George Sessions

Interviewer: JoAnn McAllister

JM: How do you, as an ecophilosopher, use the word "wilderness" and what ideas and feelings does it suggest to you?

Sessions: An ecological perspective forces us to get away from thinking of wilderness as designated areas that have been set aside and protected primarily for reasons of esthetics or human recreation. Wilderness must now be seen essentially as areas that humans have not domesticated or dominated, as wild ecosystems where the natural evolutionary processes follow their course, as basically unmanaged habitat for wild species. In the Deep Ecology Platform worked out in 1984, Arne Naess and I claim that the fight to preserve and increase areas of designated wilderness and near-wilderness should continue in order to protect the abundance and diversity of the Earth's life forms - the ecological functions of protected wilderness areas should be emphasized. Conservation biologists hold that one of the most crucial aspects of the environmental crisis is to devise ways to protect the diversity of species and wildness on the Earth. As the twentieth century comes to a close, we are now beginning to realize that Thoreau uttered the most profound statement of the last 150 years when he claimed that "In wildness is the preservation of the world." The Ecological Revolution is all about unpacking the full implications of that cryptic phrase.

JM: In this description of wilderness, it sounds like people don't have a place.

Sessions: From the standpoint of the global environmental crisis, the primary function of wilderness/protection areas would be that of protecting wild ecosystem integrity and species diversity which is essential for healthy planetary functioning. Pre-Columbian North America with its primal people was wilderness (or wildness). Up until the last hundred years or so, there have always been large expanses of the Earth where wild animals interacted in intact ecosystems and human disruption was minimal. At present, the Kalahari desert with its Bushmen, large hunks of aboriginal Australia, and the Amazon rainforest, wherever tribal/indigenous people are living in traditional ways and not dis-

rupting ecosystems, should be protected as wild areas, or as what Naess calls "free nature."

One of the most serious problems with current wilderness areas and wildlife sanctuaries is that they are not large enough. Most, including Yellowstone and the African wildlife preserves, don't comprise complete ecosystems. In most reserves, the large animal populations have been reduced to such small numbers (and are genetically isolated in these disconnected island preserves) that biologists claim that there is not enough genetic diversity to prevent extinction, and to keep the evolutionary processes going. To remedy this situation, leading conservation biologists such as Paul Ehrlich, E.O. Wilson and Michael Soulé have endorsed Dave Foreman's Wildlands Project which calls for greatly expanded nature preserves throughout the world, together with interconnecting corridors between preserves to allow for genetic transmission between animal and plant populations. Zoos and sperm banks will not preserve species diversity and wildness. Wild animals are not just their genetics. They are what they are as a result of their genetics interacting socially with their own kind, and with their wild environments. It is somewhat misleading for zoos to claim they are preventing extinction by removing the last of certain endangered species from the wild and breeding them in captivity. It is highly questionable whether these genetically and behaviorally impoverished zoo-bred species could reestablish viable populations in restored wild environments at some far-future time. It is absolutely crucial to protect wild species in their wild habitats now.

JM: Don't we have to change the way people think about wilderness or undeveloped natural areas then?

Sessions: The ecocentric Deep Ecology position is that all Life on Earth has the same right to exist and flourish on the planet: humans should inhabit, in an intensive way, only a certain portion of the planet, certainly much less than now.

In the 1960s, when the science of ecology came to the fore with the work of Aldo Leopold and Rachael Carson, something dramatic happened which has been referred to as the Ecological Revolution. It was the realization that the anthropocentric "resource" approach to the environment is unecological and ultimately unworkable. Some who have recently joined the ecology or Green political movements have yet to take the ecocentric perspective. When we realize that humans must limit themselves and don't have a right to destroy crucial wildlife habitat and to dominate the whole planet, the issue of human population stabilization and reduction necessarily arises. Many ecologists claim that 1 to 2 billion people living lightly on the Earth would be maximum for ecological sustainability. At present we are headed in the wrong direction at exponential rates. The United Nations is now desperately claiming that, with luck, we might get the population stabilized at 10 billion and that this figure is sustainable. But this figure is not sustainable for maintaining the full diversity of Life on Earth, and, in all likelihood, it is not sustainable for humans either.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the future of the Earth is narrowing down to two main scenarios: a totally megatechnologized, overpopulated, and humanized planet (which is ultimately not viable), or one in which wildness and the biological integrity and processes of the Earth have been adequately protected. The pressures resulting from human overpopulation of the Earth (greatly magnified by industrialization and high consumption lifestyles) is now decimating the remaining species diversity and wildness on the planet.

It may take hundreds of years of steady low birth rates for the human population to drop to realistic levels consistent with protecting the Earth's species diversity and wildness. It will be necessary to attempt to restore many areas of the Earth to a natural (wild or semi-wild) state. We have to take a long-range perspective while, at the same time, attempting to deal effectively with immediate ecological problems.

Unfortunately, many Ecofeminists and Social Ecologists have yet to demonstrate an appreciation of, and commitment to, the crucial ecological importance of wilderness and biodiversity protection, and an understanding of the link between this and the imperative of stabilizing and reducing human population. This failure to take the ecocentric perspective often occurs because people are still attached to some anthropocentric pre-ecological ideology based, for example, upon orthodox Christianity or Marx, or some New Age technological utopian vision inspired by Teilhard de Chardin or Buckminster Fuller.

Also there tends to be a high level of ignorance of basic ecological principles, and a denial of current ecological realities, among even educated people. Many people who claim to be environmentalists are fixated mainly on pollution and toxic waste issues, and on how *urban humans* in industrial countries are negatively affected. They often show little understanding or concern for the plight of non-human species or the ecological integrity of the ecosphere. As Paul Ehrlich once said, "People have learned the word 'ecology'; now they're going to have to learn what it means!" An ecological or ecocentric perspective involves a total view and an integrated understanding of the ecological crisis, which helps in setting priorities at this time of extreme planetary crisis.

An interesting example is the animal rights movement. Their concerns about torturing animals in labs, on factory farms, etc., are perfectly legitimate for the most part but these are not essentially ecological issues. Until recently, they failed to distinguish between the very different situations of wild animals in ecosystems, and domestic dogs and rabbits being mistreated in the bioculture. Animal rights theorists have attempted to extend humanistic systems of ethics (utilitarianism and "rights" theory), which were designed for (and biased in favor of) humans, to cover the situations of wild species in natural ecosystems. But this just doesn't work. One animal rights philosopher went so far as to propose that predators in wild ecosystems be eliminated in order to reduce pain and suffering in the world. Not only would that be ecologically disastrous, it is a typical example of humans wanting to control, and meddle with, wild Nature.

Using domestic pets as their model, some people advocate a "stewardship" approach which often results in a condescending, and even patronizing, attitude toward wild animals, and even the Earth; treating them, and it, as inferior dependent beings that need to be "saved". This "Save the Earth and Animals" syndrome is basically saying "You poor defenseless Earth and cute cuddly animals! We humans are so technologically powerful that we have almost destroyed you, but now we will save you through our managerial technological skills, and because we care!" This approach perpetuates the dominant Western myth of human superiority and omnipotence, instead of respecting the autonomy and "otherness" of wild creatures and, for that matter, the wild in general.

The Western/European tradition has, over its history, developed a totally mistaken and destructive model of the human/Earth relationship, which has been relentlessly exported to the rest of the world's cultures. From an ecological standpoint, our vision is totally backwards. We thought we could leave little isolated islands of wilderness and wildlife habitat (or, in the case of most of Europe, no wilderness or large wild animals at all!) in an ever-expanding sea of humanity, resource extraction, industrialized urbanization, and never-ending economic growth, development and consumption, and all would be well. This was called "progress" and thought to be human destiny!

The trend now is toward turning the world (including our cities, wilderness areas, game preserves, and national parks) into sanitized, domesticated, heavily managed and regimented Disneyland "theme parks". Now the world is racing toward interlocking global economic markets, more and more high tech, global cultural homogenization, and the destruction of the wild through further domestication and humanization of the Earth. This is the "new world order" as dictated to us by economic/power elites in governments, corporations, and the scientific/technological establishment. "Biodiversity protection" is promoted by these elites (for example, at the Rio environmental conference) primarily for the purposes of genetic engineering and huge profits for First World pharmaceutical corporations while the Third World tries to protect itself from further First World exploitation. There is little concern for the protection of wild plants, animals, and ecosystems for their own sakes, and for the ecological health of the Earth. Instead of promoting "sustainable *societies*" in balance, with the wild world, these elites are pushing instead for what they call "sustainable *development*"; that is, not ecologically and socially appropriate development in the Third World, but the same old story of more and more economic growth, development and luxury consumerism (i.e., ecological destruction) in both the First and Third Worlds.

We have become what Neil Everndon calls "natural aliens" on the Earth. There's no room in this world for *real* wild and free environments, wild animals, and wild indigenous humans. Even during his time, Thoreau found that most of his countrymen, out of touch with the wild and preoccupied with economics, lived lives of "quiet desperation." He claimed that "all good things are wild and free"

and encouraged us to *simplify* our lives. And Emerson observed that "things are in the saddle and ride mankind."

Now the world's industrialized social systems have become thoroughly bureaucratized, regimented, regulated, and controlled. (Charles Reich did a good job of dissecting the bureaucratic managerial mind set -what he called Consciousness II - in *The Greening of America*). Under the industrial vision now spreading over the entire world, everything (including humans) has to be economized, commodified, managed and controlled!

In exchange for allowing ourselves to be turned into marketable commodities and, in the process, giving up our individuality, integrity, freedom, and a sense of real community and ecological rootedness, modern industrial humans are rewarded, and placated, by mass entertainment, endless conspicuous consumption, technological "toys", and lavish vacations to far-off exotic places. We are conditioned by the mass media into believing that human happiness and fulfillment can be achieved by emulating the ecologically wasteful and destructive "lifestyles of the rich and famous."

This Disneyland megatechnology vision of modern industrial society is what French philosopher Jean Baudrillard calls "hyper-reality": the shadows we have been socially manipulated to accept as reality as they flicker on the back wall of Plato's cave, and on our TV sets and movie screens. In the 1960's, Loren Eiseley remarked that "Men feel, in growing numbers, the drawing of a net of dependency against which something wild in their natures still struggles as desperately as trapped fish in a seine." But the 1960's are a long way off now, and it seems that large segments of humanity world-wide, including many of the young, no longer struggle. They have been mesmerized by these domesticated megatechnology/consumerist visions.

The Ecological Revolution calls for a total reversal of this vision. We need to scale down, "get real", and adopt more modest ecologically sustainable bioregional ways of life. Arne Naess has suggested that an acceptable ratio for ecological planetary health might consist of "one third preserved as wilderness, one third as free Nature with mixed communities [of humans and wild animals and plants], which leaves one third for cities, paved roads, etc." This is both sound ecological ethics and ecological science. We need to realize that human health and well-being are inextricably connected with the healthy ecological functioning of the planet. At a deep level, the flourishing of wild species in their natural habitats and our best long-range interests coincide. The ecocentric perspective requires us to leap beyond anthropocentric ideologies (in Leopold's suggestive phrase, to begin to "think like a mountain"), or to take a vision like Teilhard's and turn it in an ecocentric direction.

J.M.: Isn't that what Thomas Berry's telling of the "new cosmic story" does, transcend anthropocentrism?

Sessions: Thomas Berry comes out of the Teilhardian New Age tradition, which is very anthropocentric and megatechnologically-oriented. Despite his supposedly *avant garde* aspects, Teilhard was still solidly in the dominant Christian tradition, holding that the ultimate goal of humanity is to dominate the Earth, for humanity and human consciousness to envelop the planet (the "noosphere"). He portrayed humans as the consciousness and intelligence of the Earth; we should "seize the rudder of the aimlessly drifting planet" and steer it (become the "pilots" of "Spaceship Earth" and "business managers" of the Earth's evolutionary processes). Like Marxist historicism, Teilhard claimed that this new megatechnological planetary culture was an *inevitable* step in the progress of mankind. The historian and critic of the megamachine, Lewis Mumford, saw Teilhard as providing the legitimating Christian theology for the industrial megatechnology vision.

Thomas Berry has retained much of Teilhard's spiritual, cosmological, and evolutionary vision. However, in *Teilhard in the Ecological Age* (1982), Berry repudiated Teilhard's unecological anthropocentrism. He now claims that humans must come to respect and protect the "spontaneities of nature."

But many influential New Age writers such as Paolo Soleri and Alvin Toffler, inspired by the ecologically unreconstructed Teilhard, and by Buckminster Fuller, are still caught up in the idea of the technological domination and domestication of the Earth. For example, New Age historian William Irwin Thompson recently argues that the elimination of the wild and its replacement by a human-contrived artificial world is inevitable (and, from his perspective, desirable).

As the frenzied pace of megatechnology increases, there are now a number of thinkers, inspired by Lewis Mumford, who are providing incisive critiques of this New Age planetary vision. I am thinking of people like Morris Berman, Theodore Roszak, Langdon Winner, Jeremy Rifkin, Jerry Mander, and Ivan Illich.

Now that the Gaia hypothesis has come along, many New Age people interpret this to mean we are the consciousness and intelligence of Gaia. The main idea of Gaia, that the Earth is a living organism, is most likely true. But, immediately, some people start speculating about where we fit in. Are humans the central nervous system of Gaia, a control mechanism? Some people who should know better (for example, Norman Myers in his *Gaia: An Atlas of Planet Management*) use the Gaia hypothesis as the basis for vast anthropocentric global management schemes. And so, I don't think the Gaia hypothesis alone is going to move us to ecocentrism. It could move us into another (and perhaps the last) phase of human transcendence over the Earth. This has been the dominant thrust of Western culture from the biblical tradition through Bacon and Descartes. Many people are looking for a new rationale for that same mentality.

JM: Given this propensity for humans [in some cultural traditions] to look for

their place in the scheme of things somewhere near the top, how does Berry's description of the human as the self-reflexive consciousness of the Earth fit with an ecocentric perspective?

Sessions: Berry may be right that humans are the only species that can understand the basic outlines of the cosmological and evolutionary processes. Our theoretical science can be used to help appreciate and understand the world and our place in it, and to produce what ecologically benign technology is necessary and desirable for a moderate number of humans to live comfortably and creatively on the Earth, or we can erroneously try to dominate the planet with it, or turn the Earth into an artificial environment for humans.

It would appear that both Berry and Arne Naess see the special role of humans on Earth to be primarily *appreciators* of the biotic exuberance and natural processes, rather than managers, stewards, or consumers of the Earth. In this, they would agree with Thoreau. Joseph Wood Krutch claimed that Thoreau's ultimate conviction was that "this curious world which we inhabit is more wonderful than it is convenient, more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used."

Our self-reflexivity has also made us aware of the ecological crisis so that we can try to take steps to correct our path. It can also help us take a more objective long-range cosmic and ecological perspective.

Berry also makes the point that we have to reinvent the human at the species level. In other words, we have to understand ourselves biologically in relation to other species and ecosystems, as well as culturally and socially. Ecology is a biological science; it looks at species and the interaction of species within communities. Social Ecologists and other humanists look suspiciously at this as some kind of biological determinism, but it does set limits on human activity on Earth and helps define our niche in the ecosphere.

And very importantly, a biological and anthropological understanding of humans also connects us with our evolutionary past. The anthropologist, Loren Eiseley, for example, was fascinated with this. As mentioned earlier, many ecophilosophers are concerned that the kind of passive Disneyland technological/consumer hyperreality societies we are creating is resulting in the self-domestication and diminishment of humans. These kinds of concerns also go along with the totalitarian fears expressed by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. In *Brave New World Revisited*, Huxley claimed that human overpopulation, in addition to its role in the ecological crisis, is the chief factor leading the world toward totalitarianism. Some have claimed that megatechnology, itself, is inherently totalitarian. Sophisticated electronic surveillance technology and vast interlocking computer data banks increase the likelihood of the kinds of futures Huxley and Orwell envisioned. Singapore has already developed complete computer data banks on its society and citizens, this is the goal of other Asian nations, and the West is undoubtedly not far behind.

Evolutionarily, we are wild animals, shaped by the Pleistocene, and so, to be fully human, we must be in touch with the wild: both the wild within and the wild without. According to Max Oelschlaeger modern humans need to recultivate Paleolithic consciousness. Paul Shepard also skillfully explores these themes, as does Dolores LaChapelle and Gary Snyder. Shepard claims that intimate identification with wild nature is part of our natural human developmental (ontogenetic) process. Primal peoples provided for this identification through various rituals and adolescent rites of passage infused throughout their religions and cultures. Shepard claims that primal peoples were (and are), in this respect, more fully human than we industrial/urban moderns are. It seems clear that we have a genetic need for the wild. There are billions of urban people who never get in touch with the wild. This separation from the wild is contributing in a major way to our social as well as our ecological problems. Wilderness and wild places have to be preserved not only for species diversity and planetary health; they are equally important for who we are as human beings.

Unfortunately, our contemporary model for humans is the machine, the computer, not the organic world. The New Age megatechnology vision is basically an urban vision, dreamed up by urban minds who are pathologically out of touch with wildness. If most modern urban humans do go to wild, or semi-wild places, it is often for superficial, mechanized, destructive recreational purposes.

One ray of hope is that these "wild" themes are beginning to be picked up by the mass media and in widely read literature. For example, the movies *Dances With Wolves* and *Never Cry Wolf* can be seen as explorations of "wild" ways of life. Clarissa Estes' recent best selling book, *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (1992), claims that

Within every woman [and man] there is a wild and natural creature...
Though the gifts of wildish nature come to us at birth, society's attempt to 'civilize' us into rigid roles has plundered this treasure...
Without Wild Woman [and Man] we become over-domesticated, fearful, uncreative, trapped.

But this new interest in wildness runs the risk of being the latest fad, and of being deflected into a new version of superficial New Age urban "spiritual" self-absorption. We need a deep understanding of "wildness". With deep understanding, we might come full circle to Thoreau and Muir, and the primal Paleolithic mind.

JM: We do, however, live in a culture that is very urbanized. How will people make these leaps of consciousness from the part to the whole and from the mechanistic to the organic?

Sessions: The change amounts to a "conversion" - a psychological/spiritual "paradigm shift." It is not exclusively, or even mainly, intellectual. It is deeply

and personally experiential - an emotional, gut-level experience that one doesn't get from reading books about ecology or the wilderness (although this can help guide us toward the conversion). Many of the ecocentric writers, from Thoreau and Muir, to David Brower, Arne Naess, Gary Snyder, Paul Shepard, Ed Abbey, Mary Austin, Dolores LaChapelle, Annie Dillard, and Terry Tempest Williams, have spent a great deal of time in wild places, and they have followed the path towards becoming contemporary Wild Men and Women. Loren Eiseley found this wildness in Robinson Jeffers:

Jeffers' peculiarly distinctive style...has the roll of surf and the jaggedness of rocks about it. Something utterly wild had crept into his mind and marked his features... The seabeaten coast, the fierce freedom of its hunting hawks, possessed and spoke through him. It was one of the most uncanny and complete relationships between a man and his natural background that I know in literature.

But just being in wild places doesn't guarantee the consciousness change. One has to be open to Nature on its own terms, and not be there for ego or exploitive reasons, or allow irrational fears to get in the way. There has been a great fear (which often results in hatred) of wilderness and wildness, of our wild Mother Earth, in Western culture.

John Muir experienced this problem. His experiences in the wild transformed him. If people just came to the wilderness, he thought, they would experience wildness, be transformed, and want to protect it. "Going to the mountains," he said, "was going home." But, to his disappointment, most people just wanted to have a "genteel" experience: to stay in the hotels in Yosemite, socialize, and look at the "scenery" in luxury - and at arm's length. Muir became discouraged because they brought all their physical and mental "urban baggage" with them and, in essence, never left their urban environment. The spiritual dimension and the ability and desire to identify with their wild roots was lacking.

But one doesn't have to go to the Himalayas or hike the Muir Trail to experience wildness. There are wild and semi-wild areas around many cities that need to be protected, restored, and expanded: places where people can be quiet, listen, be open to the natural processes and wild species that are still there, and begin the process of self — healing. Ecologically restructured cities, suggested by Peter Berg's *Green Cities Project*, or Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, would integrate wild areas into the urban as part of an overall process of ecological restoration.

JM: It seems important to note that urbanized people are often alienated from their own bodies, too, and so we don't experience ourselves as part of Nature, or recognize our connection to the evolutionary processes through our bodies. And yet, a wilderness lives inside of us.

Sessions: We individual humans are an interrelated ecosystem and we are em-

bedded and interrelated in larger and more encompassing ecosystems. As a result of our Western cultural heritage, however, we tend to see ourselves as isolated entities, and dualistically in terms of a separate mind and body. We tend to see the mind and the body mechanistically as a management problem over which we must be in control (just as we attempt to control our outer environment - other people, wilderness, Gaia), instead of allowing the spontaneous wisdom of our body/mind, our natural ecosystem, to function. We fail to appreciate the potential of our minds and bodies in harmonious integration, and integrated with a healthy social and natural environment. At any rate, we fail to get in touch with this deep evolutionary wisdom down inside each one of us which has resulted from hundreds of thousands of years of evolutionary development.

JM: Paul Ehrlich has said we need a quasi-religious revival in order to survive. Do the evolutionary story and the Deep Ecology perspective offer that potential?

Sessions: It is possible to be an ecocentrist on a conceptual level and not be religious, but the result of these deep experiences in wild Nature is a religious/spiritual psychological reorientation. We have tended to lose, at a deep level, the idea of the spiritual uniqueness and importance of each individual, both human and nonhuman, as well as a spiritual awareness of the Earth itself. Instead, we tend to mouth the idea of the uniqueness of individuals as essentially political rhetoric.

John Muir was very spiritual. When Hetch Hetchy was dammed, he felt that a sacred place had been desecrated. If you read the history of environmentalism, beginning with Thoreau and Muir, what is evident is a strong religious pantheistic identification of God with Nature. On the other hand, beginning with Pinchot, Resource Conservation and Development became a human-centered secular concept of scientifically managing the Earth as "resources" for short-term perceived human benefit. The Earth and other species had only an instrumental value for humans. There is no religious feeling for the Earth in that approach but, rather, an exploitive economic (and decidedly unecological) orientation which now dominates the public land-use agencies such as the Bureau of Reclamation, the Bureau of Land Management, and the U. S. Forest Service.

Gary Snyder's kind of "mountain Zen Buddhist/American Indian practice" is an outstanding example of spiritual bioregional wild living. It would seem that to be a fully wild human would involve bioregional living, intimate contact with wild animals and plants in wild ecosystems, animistic perception, and probably primal nature rituals. Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* provides a keenly perceptive entry into this world.

Zen Buddhism has a lot to contribute to ecological spiritual renewal with its critique of the ego. The modern Western ideal of the glorification of the self experienced as an isolated ego, for whom the meaning of life is narrow self-aggrandisement, is responsible for much of the destructive materialism in our

society. This view of the isolated immature ego-self is the basis upon which the world-wide megatechnology economic/consumer society has been erected. The wholesale conversion of wild ecosystems into commodities is, at some level, a result of egoism in the Buddhist sense. There is also now a strong worldwide Christian movement toward a genuine ecocentric spirituality which goes beyond human dominant "stewardship" views. But all forms of ecological spirituality, and ecological "total views", must provide the basis for social/political environmental activism and lifestyles.

There is another way that Buddhism can help us: the way in which Gary Snyder writes about such everyday activities as sweeping the garden and washing the dishes with mindful attention. Every activity worth engaging can be regarded as a religious/spiritual activity, deserving of mindful attention, instead of looking just for spiritual "peak experiences." For primal peoples, their cultures and lives were permeated with a religious spirituality which also included having lots of "fun": dances, rituals, art and artistic appropriate technology, clowns, and coyote-tricksters. Arne Naess has proposed a new concept of the self, "the ecological Self" which identifies with all life forms and the ecosphere. This means that we have to look at what it means to be human all over again, to see ourselves in a new ecological/spiritual dimension.

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