

## In Praise of *Books of the Big Outside*

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This review of *Books of the Big Outside* by Dave Foreman was originally published in *Wild Earth* 3, Winter 1993/1994, pages 88–89.

There has been nothing quite like Dave Foreman's Spring 1993 *Books of the Big Outside*<sup>1</sup> published anywhere on this Earth for this planet: a catalogue of books "available to wilderness defenders." But the members of the group in charge of the undertaking are walking a financial tightrope: "unless our sales volume increases, we may not be in business in 1994." We cannot permit this to happen, and we are all responsible if it happens. I promise that if it happens, I shall as a punishment eat caramel pudding every day for a whole week. It is a dish I have hated since early childhood. I expect others will inflict similar pain if the enterprise falters.

Why books? Surely, one may be a firm deep ecology supporter without reading any books whatsoever. But to many of us, it helps and most of us live among people who do not yet actively support the defence of the planet, but who would do so if we were able to articulate what we experience and what we have read, sometimes in books.

The catalogue has now got the breadth of scope essential to convey the length of the frontier along which activists struggle. The books are organized by category and now include psychological, social, political, and philosophical issues. Dave writes a little about each book, and I am glad that he successfully focuses on what he thinks is good and uses very little space in suggesting what is bad.

There is a section with the heading *Eco-philosophy*, a term I rarely use. In the West, the term *philosophy* has largely lost its old meaning, friend of wisdom. Wisdom is not a theory, but a link between fundamental views and decisions in concrete situations all of us encounter. Ecosophy, household or home-hold wisdom, is a good word, but that

does not mean that I recommend it. Take it or leave it. But my point is to support those who are suspicious about a philosophical view not clearly related to practice. A professor of philosophy at a Western university need not have written anything he or she would consider important for our decisions, except discussion regarding what to read, in order to qualify as a professor of philosophy.

Dave uses at least twice the expression “personal gut feeling for wild things and sunsets.” Not to reveal such a gut feeling or to ignore “all non-academic conservationists in their philosophical analysis” Dave considers bad. “In fairness, I can make these . . . criticisms against most of the books in this cubby-hole.”<sup>2</sup>

One may perhaps be a supporter of the deep ecology movement and even partake in direct actions without strong gut feelings of the kind Dave seems to refer to. But the special driving force of the movement depends heavily, perhaps decisively, on them. Spontaneous, wild, enthusiastic feelings. They alone should not, of course, determine decisions. We need reason to help us decide among alternative actions: priorities, co-operation, and organization. In the ecological movement, important work is done by enthusiasts as well as by the lukewarm, or people with a style that is taken to indicate lukewarmness.

As a professional philosopher, I insist that there is nothing unphilosophical about the gut feelings Dave refers to. On the contrary, the more strong the “positive” emotions, the better the prospect for gain in human freedom, individual and collective (Spinoza). And if strong gut feelings are decisive in philosophy, there can be no argument against their frank articulation in an appropriate context. But beware, if you look for tenure as a philosophy professor, such contexts are very rare. My book *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*<sup>3</sup> was intended to be difficult and academic enough to be used as a text at universities. My hope to conquer a place in the sun (or shade) at philosophy departments was crushed. Their main objection: not enough careful argumentation for and against definite, well-defined positions. Subordinate objection: too much hidden propaganda! Now, 20 years later, “applied” philosophy has a place in universities and colleges, but a very modest one compared to, say, chemistry, or even climatology.

Economics and politics with reference to radical environmentalism are now of growing importance. In Norway, we have been fortunate to have had two Nobel Prize winners in economics. The first fought against economists who accepted pay to lead government and big business economic projects without criticizing the premises and assumptions of

the economic thinking of the institutions paying them the dollars. A very important point in research ethics! Of course, you risk never again being asked about anything by government and business. But if you are already an established expert you must take that risk. The other Nobel Prize winner is a firm supporter of deep ecology and, of course, together with some other leading economists, against joining the European Common Market, a gigantic organization that will intensify economic growth and competition, and try to compete with both Japan and the United States in their ecologically disastrous struggle to maintain or even increase the ecologically and philosophically insane level of unsustainable consumption.

Perhaps, perhaps not, future issues of the *Book of the Big Inside and Outside*, the process of identification reaches far, may contain references to books or articles talking about the million dollar “eco-eco” (economy-ecology) projects, for instance, the attempts to put the price of ecological damage into the prices of cars, sofas, and millions of other things.

Dave criticizes an ecophilosophical book for virtually ignoring “all non-academic conservationists.” Philosophy and ecosophy overlap, but to help practical decisions in concrete situations is part of the function of ecosophies. That their fundamentals are philosophical or religious does not imply that their articulations are academic. Ecological folk wisdom in the West as well as in the East includes tentative solutions to philosophical and religious questions, but articulated artistically or in the language of everyday life.

This belongs to the view most or all supporters of the deep ecology movement agree about: it would be good for humans if there were fewer humans, and very good for non-humans. In the section on overpopulation, this view is of course taken for granted. A future edition may contain reference to books in favour of the substantial part of the population which suffers most from the irresponsible reproduction: the small children. Even a two per cent yearly decrease in the birth rate in the industrial societies would soon result in a satisfactory rate of decrease of the present gigantic population. Policies in favour of population decrease should be intimately connected with policies in favour of children and their safe access to patches of free nature. By “wanting” children here I mean to seriously want to live a life that includes treating them as beings with intrinsic value and protecting them as far as practically possible against physical and mental injury.

The analogy of human population growth and parasitism and cancer may be useful when talking about the past, but scarcely functional in talking about the potentialities of the human species in the future. Here I support the optimistic view that it may not even take many hundred years before the (sadly reduced) richness and diversity of life on Earth is eagerly cared for and increased through human action and inaction. But views may and should differ on this point.

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Foreman's *Books of the Big Outside* is published in Bernalillo, NM by Ned Ludd Books.

<sup>2</sup> Foreman, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, translated by David Rothenberg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.