

## Access to Free Nature

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Arne Naess

The greatest slogan of *Agenda 21*<sup>1</sup> is perfectly anthropocentric in the sense that it calls for development which leaves the life conditions for future generations of humans as good as they are today. It is generally recognized that safe access to patches of free nature (a piece of land not dominated by human adult activities) is a component of satisfactory life conditions for small children.

In the cities a generation ago, at least in Scandinavia, small children had areas where they were permitted to do everything they wanted (except make random fires). The free areas were big enough so that the children did not ruin the vegetation. In winter they made small ski jumps. There were no artificial structures whatsoever, but the children occasionally would build things. Very gradually these areas of free nature were ruined. The pieces of the land, by an evil misconception of a fatal sort called “the value of the property,” were considered too valuable to remain “undeveloped.”

In the absence of such areas, and considering the increasing population pressures, we may have to limit space available for all children of the next generation. Therefore, I propose safe access to patches of free nature rather than to “areas.” Based on what older people recount about their happy days as small children in the areas of free nature, it is a duty, at least in the rich countries, to protect every such existing patch of free nature. As the areas of asphalt and other forms of complete human domination widen, high priority must be given to patches of free nature. Parents should be responsible for the behaviour of their children to avoid wanton destructions (a behaviour not endangering free areas a generation ago). The situation is grave: if there are rules of behaviour laid down by neighbourhoods or parents, the feeling of freedom may be reduced. If there are no rules introduced today, some children may destroy for the sheer joy of destruction.

The ready access to *large* areas of non-human dominated nature is yearly diminished at a catastrophic rate through the thoughtless *concentric* widening of cities, suburbs, and towns. A birthday cake, for example, is traditionally cut into moderate pieces with a core remaining. If every other piece is eaten, there remains the core and “free” space between each piece. If “development” may be symbolized by the pieces eaten, there still remains *wide access* to the core, the markets, and the institutions. The wide access guarantees that if you live or work in the core area of human domination, the distance to large free areas is relatively short. How short? Here there is room for visions and utopias. The extremes of decentralization, the vision of global anarchy, picture the cores as mere local community centres.

According to the Gandhian vision of *panchayats*,<sup>2</sup> the greatest units of administration and other institutions are community centres of five villages. There have been attempts to realize this on a small scale in India. The Sami people made up the only (non-violent) anarchy of great expansion I know of, covering large areas of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. A strong feeling of solidarity bound them together. They were completely helpless facing the expanding nation states based on violent “defence” institutions.

The easy access to free nature has been a cornerstone of decentralized societies, that is, regional aggregates of communities. To lose this access may have a deep influence on human character and, as I see it, the continued destruction of such access, especially in the formative years of human personality, should be looked upon as a calamity.

There is a difference between countries where symbols of unity mainly deal with documents and countries where the symbols deal mainly with the land. The Norwegian national anthem starts with “Yes, we love this country . . .” and the annual Christmas address of King Olav to his people for 50 years was accompanied by a series of pictures showing landscapes, very few with human habitation whatsoever. (This did not stop the continued destruction of easy access to free nature, however!) In the North, people were induced to so-called “Centres of Development,” and in many ways they came to prefer life in towns and cities. But to the astonishment of most people, the criminality, the use of narcotics, the dominance of fashions, started very soon.

Easy access to free nature is only one factor that can, in the early formative years, moderate the asocial tendencies and the quest for ever higher levels of consumption. This quest is naturally of great value for producers and makes corporations very powerful.

It is by now fairly clear not only that the terms “wilderness” and “biodiversity” do not elicit the unreservedly positive reaction they did in the early 1970s, but that many groups who work in the areas of environmental problems, like that of climate, downscale the issue of continued decrease of diversity, pointing to the continuing large number of species on the Earth. They instead point to major human problems of clean water, erosion, and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> *Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 3–14, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *Panchayats* are institutions of local self-government with popularly elected village councils (*gram panchayat*) as the basic unit.