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*The Humane Society of the United States*

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## **WILDLIFE AND NATURE LIBERATION**

**Michael W. Fox<sup>1</sup>**

### **Opposing World Views**

Some people today with a wildlife management orientation who do not question the ethics of exploiting animals on a sustainable basis, have a world view that is the antithesis of those who oppose the killing of all wildlife. This preservationist view, which is endorsed by many animal rightists, stands in opposition to the conservationist's recognition of the need to monitor wildlife populations and at times, violate the rights of individual animals by killing or relocating them in order to maintain the integrity of their habitat-sanctuary, not for the benefit of humans, but for the benefit of all species and individual animals therein. This is very different from the management mentality where species and ecosystems are manipulated and exploited primarily for human gain. Sometimes the line between such human-centered management practices and conservation for the sake of the animals is unclear. Hence, conservationists and deep ecologists dedicated to protecting wildlife may be misjudged by humanitarians and animal rightists as being on the side of wildlife management, placing human interests before those of the animals, when their killing is encouraged. Likewise, humanitarians and animal rightists may be misjudged as being unrealistic, anthropocentric, and ignorant, especially when they fear, for example, that to condone the killing of wild animals could lead to a kind of "ecological fascism," where conservationists play God, violate the rights of animals and do not let nature take care of things. But while nature knows best, many wildlife habitats and sanctuaries are no longer natural because of human interference, ranging from adjacent farming, forestry, dam construction, acid rain, etc. Hence, the need to monitor ecosystems and all species therein is a part of responsible stewardship.

Humane ethics—animal welfare—and animal rights are not incompatible with ecologically sound wildlife stewardship. They are an integral part of it, from treating wildlife for necessary research purposes humanely, to finding humane ways to control the populations of species that are out of balance and thus threatening the viability of other species and the diversity and integrity of the ecosystem. That mistakes may be made in stewardship-management policies is inevitable. It is, for instance, difficult to know if the sudden abundance of one or more species and the dwindling of others is part of the natural process of succession and should be allowed to continue,

or if these changes are abnormal and should be corrected. Perhaps the best that can be done with our present knowledge and expertise is to “freeze” many wildlife sanctuaries by endeavoring to maintain optimal species diversity and numbers. Clearly, in any of our actions, we should take the conservative, cautious approach so that if we err we can correct our errors before irreparable harm is done. Wildlife ecologist-conservationists and deep ecologists who are insensitive to legitimate animal rights and welfare concerns need to be confronted. And likewise those animal liberationists who take animal rights philosophy too far and lose sight of the ecological principles of sound stewardship and of the rights and interests and subsistence needs of indigenous peoples.

### **Deep Ecology and Animal Rights**

In their recent book entitled *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, authors Bill Devall and George Sessions (1985) reject animal rights philosophy and vegetarianism. They state, “mutual predation is a biological fact of life” and criticize “animal liberationists who attempt to side-step this problem by advocating vegetarianism are forced to say that the entire plant kingdom including rain forests have no right to their own existence.” Yet it is the rain forests that are being destroyed in part by the beef cattle industry in South and Central America, much of which is exported to the United States. It is narrow-minded for deep ecologists not to endorse vegetarianism because of its ecological significance. Devall and Sessions seem blind to the fact that raising livestock and poultry and the food for these animals propagated for human consumption, entails a massive displacement of wildlife. It has been estimated that within the next thirty to forty years, 40% of the total biomass of animal life on Earth will be comprised of people and domesticated animals, particularly cattle. Vegetarianism, or at least a drastic reduction in meat production and consumption should be an integral aspect of the deep ecology movement as it is now of the animal rights movement. Here lies one area of common ground between animal rightists and deep ecologists, both of whom are concerned about the impact of agribusiness and meat consumption upon wildlife and their habitats.

Some animal rightists contend that farm animals have a right not to be eaten. This does smack of anthropomorphism and alienates the deep ecologist who sees predation as natural and farm animals as prey species. That humanitarian animal rightists are also concerned about farm animal welfare need not set them apart from deep ecologists unless the latter see such concern as trivial sentimentality and of lesser priority than more global ecological concerns. The abusive treatment of animals is no different from abusive treatment of Nature: both are symptoms of a lack of reverence for the sanctity and dignity of the life of the individual and of life as a whole.

Hence, I see animal rights philosophy and “ecosophy,” the philosophy of deep ecology, as two sides of the same coin of a new currency: A new dialectic where the dualities of individualism and holism—specifically concern for the rights of the individual and for the integrity of the biospheric whole—are reconciled.

The authors uncritically cite deep ecologist John Rodman who concludes that the animal rights movement “while holding out promise of transcending the homocentric perspective of modern culture, subtly fulfills and legitimizes the basic project of modernity—the total conquest of nature by man.” Then they take to task animal rights philosopher Tom Regan, who with others of like mind, “have expressed concern that a holistic ecological ethic (such as Leopold’s land ethic) results in a kind of totalitarianism or ecological fascism.”

It disturbs me that this otherwise excellent book has taken such a negative attitude toward animal rights philosophy. George Sessions, however, does suggest that philosophers do need to work toward nontotalitarian solutions to environmental problems and that “in all likelihood, this will require some kind of holistic ecological ethic in which the integrity of all individuals (human and non-human) is respected” (Appendix H of the book). I interpret “integrity” as rights and sanctity.

It is ironic that while the authors are so critical of the animal rights movement, they quote Arne Naess (who coined the terms ecosophy and deep ecology and is arguably the founder of the deep ecology movement) who expresses many of the views of the animal rights movement. For instance, Naess (1973) states, “The intuition of biocentric equality,” [what I term trans-species democracy] “is that all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own forms of unfolding and self-realization. . . .” He also observes that “with maturity, human beings will experience joy when other life forms experience joy and sorrow when other life forms experience sorrow. Not only will we feel sad when our brother or a dog or a cat feels sad, but we will grieve when living beings, including landscapes, are destroyed. . . . Only a very narrow range of feelings have interested most human beings until now”(Naess 1973).

The depth of feeling and empathetic awareness for other living things that Naess sees us acquiring “with maturity” is expressed in these words of Australian aborigine Bill Neidjie (1985):

Feeling all these trees, all this country: When this wind blow you can feel it. Same for country . . . you feel it. You can look, but feeling . . . that make you.

If you feel sore . . . headache, sore body, that mean somebody killing tree or grass. You feel because your body (is) in that tree or earth. Nobody can tell you, you got to feel it yourself.

This “primitive” aboriginal’s “maturity,” relatively speaking, suggests a regressive or retarded condition of ego development in contemporary *Homo sapiens*.

Lack of feeling—empathy and compassion—for animals and other living things on the one hand, and for the integrity of biospheric ecosystems (Nature) on the other, are two sides of the same coin whose currency is the root and source of the holocaust of the animal kingdom and of the “progressively” destructive transformation of Nature into an industrialized wasteland.

Had Devall and Sessions a better understanding of the ethical, ecological, and wildlife conservation reasons for vegetarianism, they might have taken a step further into the domain of animal rights and considered also the issue of vivisection. They probably regard the exploitation of laboratory animals as a legitimate form of natural human predation, which is a logical and often-used extension of the unquestioned acceptance of humans exploiting animals for food, fur, and other resources. Ironically, while they recognize human overpopulation as a critical issue they are non-critical of humans living as predators, which is a relatively unnatural situation. All natural predators are far fewer in number than the prey they exploit. If the authors had been less ready to dismiss animal rights philosophy and push their own, they might have come out against the wholesale exploitation of laboratory animals because such research generally fails to address the ecological and environmental factors responsible for many human diseases. The connection between deep ecology and holistic medicine is an important one that the authors fail to make.

“Deep” ecologists, who support the philosophy of preserving the natural abundance and diversity of plants and animals in natural ecosystems, find common ground with animal rightists in opposing the “harvesting” of any living species for primarily human benefit when the natural abundance and diversity of life within an ecosystem are disrupted or threatened. The holistic philosophy of “deep” ecology and the more specific, individual and species-focused philosophy of animal rights are complementary and are opposed to the industrialized transformation of natural ecosystems into systems that primarily and most often exclusively provide limited monotypic benefit to human beings at the expense of Nature’s diversity and abundance of plant and animal species. These philosophies should also recognize the absolute right of all life, human and non-human alike, to a whole and healthy environment. That industrialized society is impoverishing and poisoning the environment, destroying natural ecosystems, and forcing thousands of animal and plant species into extinction necessitates a stronger coalition between the conservation and humane, animal welfare movements. And this is happening. With the advent of animal rights and deep ecology philosophies, the ideological differences between conservationists and animal welfarists are giving way to a shared ideology and goal of Nature Liberation—which include respect for both the environment and wild plants and animals as communities and as individuals with interests, inherent value, and rights.

As Chief Seattle said over a century ago, “This we know—the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

More recently, the Six Nations of American Indians (Hau de no sau nee) in a proclamation made in Geneva entitled *A Basic Call to Consciousness*, stated, “The people who are living on this planet need to break with the

narrow concept of human liberation, and begin to see liberation as something which needs to be extended to the whole of the Natural World. What is needed is the liberation of all the things that support life—the air, the water, the trees—all the things which support the sacred web of life.” Linked with Nature Liberation philosophy is an emerging creation-centered spirituality which emphasizes man’s creative participation and role as a responsible planetary steward (see Matthew Fox 1979 and 1983).

Charles Birch in an address in Nairobi before the World Council of Churches a decade ago observed that, “. . . It is a cockeyed view that regards ecological liberation as a distraction from the task of liberation of the poor. One cannot be done without the other. It is time to recognize that the liberation movement is finally one movement. . . all creatures are fellow creatures and human responsibility extends infinitely to the whole of creation. . . if we are to continue to inhabit the earth, there has to be a revolution in the relationship of human beings to the earth and. . . to each other.” The accelerating rate of extinction of unique plant and animal species of diverse ecosystems and of human societies that have lived for generations in a relatively stable if not creative harmony with Nature, attests to the fact that the fate of the Earth, of the animal kingdom, and of humankind are inseparably interconnected.

The principles and goals of animal liberation, conservation, and deep ecology movements are fundamentally complementary. From different perspectives—concern for individuals, species, and whole ecosystems—they converge upon the political and socioeconomic realities of the times but are as yet not consonant with the dominant world view of industrialized technocracies. Differences aside, the supreme task of these movements is to transform the prevailing world views of all nation states to one of enlightened planetary stewardship and respect for all living things.

## Endnotes

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