

Towards an ecocentric movement?

An ecocentric movement is one which mobilizes and organizes people to transform, or abolish and replace, existing anthropocentric societies, which seek to dominate the other-than-human world. The instrumentalities of anthropocentric domination will not simply wither away. They must be forcefully dismantled. That dismantling will be neither quick nor easy, and will be met with enormous resistance from those that benefit from domination, and from those that fear change. Only by keeping one's eyes on the prize – the recovery of biodiversity and the Earth – and not being diverted by other goals, can the prize be attained.

An ecocentric movement is one which mobilizes and organizes people to transform, or abolish and replace, existing anthropocentric societies, which seek to dominate the other-than-human world. It is, at heart, an anti-colonial movement which would end human violence against the natural world and non-human species. In the words of 16 US Code §1532, definition 19, to “harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct” would be prohibited with regard to not just endangered species but *all* species. An ecocentric movement seeks to safeguard and restore the integrity of ecosystems and ecological processes; it seeks to secure at least half the Earth – marine and terrestrial – in a self-willed state, with an emphasis on highly productive lands and waters; and it seeks to bring into existence human societies that are compatible with ecologically healthy populations of all species native to a place.

The contemporary conservation movement is not unified or mostly motivated by ecocentrism or biocentrism. In North America the Earth First! of the 1980s was ecocentric; the Center for Biodiversity (www.biodiversitycenter.org) is ecocentric; and many smaller NGOs strongly lean to biocentrism. But larger conservation groups, seeking to exercise influence via insider approaches such as lobbying,

and to raise money from the wealthy and from big foundations, tend to the lowest common denominator. Most of their rhetoric – and, more importantly, their actions – are decidedly anthropocentric and pro-growth. They ignore the reality that one can only bargain *down* not up, so if a million acres are needed then ask for 10 million. Moreover, few conservation organizations are prepared to talk honestly about the causes of biodiversity decline – human population and consumption – and instead focus on the symptoms. After all, raising the matter of fundamental social change can be divisive and is likely to run contrary to the interests of big funders. Keeping in mind that ecocentrism is a strong minority view within conservation but that there are few organizations that express it, to build an ecocentric movement we must ask and answer what must change within conservation as conservation seeks to change the world.

Social movements undertake collective political action to bring about change. They must be strong enough to do that, so they must not only invest directly in their goals but also in making the movement itself stronger – recruiting participants with commitment and skills, and building coalitions. They must be able to see and exploit opportunities. Within movements there are both centrifugal and centripetal forces, which can often make

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discussion about direction and strategy intense. Creating a movement that can fundamentally transform human societies is a messy business, and they have more often failed than succeeded. What is more, dismantling the institutions of control and domination of the natural world, and the withdrawal of humans as an occupying or colonial force from much of the world, is a new and monumental task for a movement. It has never been done.¹

As the herald in Peter Weiss's play *Marat Sade* observes, "Talk's cheap. The price of action is colossal" (1965: 52). Change has many enemies; it is a risky enterprise. Yet nothing but decisive action can halt the sixth mass extinction. It was the same with the abolition of human slavery, the overthrow of the European colonial empires, and the ending of apartheid in South Africa. Organized and committed groups shed their meekness and said to those who ran things and their minions: you do not get to do this any longer; if you try to continue you will be met with resistance and, if that fails, the necessary and proportionate force to cause unjust behaviour to cease. In the famous words of Frederick Douglass (1985: 204):

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both.

Can people be successfully mobilized on behalf of all life?

Typically social movements are about human-on-human injustice. Human groups give voice to their grievances and the grievances of other humans, organize in their own defence, and tap into common emotions and other traits. However, sharks, wolves, forests and coral reefs cannot speak for themselves, and cannot organize in self-defence or mount a concerted assault on human perfidy. Yet there are successful examples of mobilizing people around

limited goals to protect domestic animals, farm animals and wild animals, forests, grasslands and marine areas.

There is no obvious agent of ecocentric change similar to the proletariat of Marxism. Research into conservation advocacy and support suggests that childhood immersion in nature, and perhaps close relationships with pets, can provide an emotional connection that generates action (Melson, 2001; Kahn and Kellert, 2002; Louv, 2005). Those who have had epiphanies, have a religious disposition for caring, or who possess an expansive sense of justice are further targets for mobilization.

However, an effective movement seeking ecocentric goals cannot consist only of those who are ecocentric or biocentric, as that community may never be large enough to bring about extensive social change. Historically, almost all social movements have consisted of people who shared broad goals, but differed widely in their motivations for seeking those goals. For example, some abolitionists opposed slavery on religious grounds (as a transgression of God's laws), others on entirely secular grounds (such as Bentham's utilitarian objections). Similarly, a movement that seeks justice for the non-human world will necessarily comprise those with a variety of motivations.

Can the movement maintain itself for the long struggle?

Many people do have sympathy for other-than-human life. They give their money and time. But does the flame burn bright and hot enough to sustain risky, intense political action over the long haul – for example, the length of time it took to end slavery in the Americas? We know that people can tire of risk and fervour, yet some struggles need to continue over generations.

One risk to the longevity of social movements is internal conflict. There will be factions within any movement for ecocentric societies, and likely many ecocentric movements, not just factions within one movement. Factional struggles consume energy. Nor is it likely that

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leadership conflicts can be avoided – after all, narcissists gravitate to leadership positions. Furthermore, the motivations and hopes that initially charge a movement can fade with time, with partial victories or with repression.

How to sustain a movement's mobilization is a challenge, especially because the ecocentric community is relatively small. Untested recruits will always threaten to corrode commitment to the mission. Conversion is a long, difficult path, but it is important to remember that it is not the only path. An ecocentric movement must not only seek recruits but coalitions, and the latter are often the most efficacious path to influence. Allies will vary from issue to issue.

Building an *ecocentric culture* within the movement is crucial to sustaining mobilization, as well as for changing the dominant anthropocentric culture. That involves creating not just a culture of purpose, but also a common identity. An ecocentric culture must create a new sacred – the fundamental, unchallenged meanings and purposes for a group – and the myths that carry it; it must also produce lesser stories to guide day-to-day behaviour. This can be done through a range of practices – from the structure of everyday interaction, to ritual, literature, music, theatre and the like, to new forms of enculturation and socialization that immerse children and older people in the natural world.

Can humans adequately represent the interests of the other-than-human world?

Experience has shown that if a movement does not incorporate, or 'prefigure', practices it seeks to order the larger society by, then such practices are unlikely to be realized. The Bolshevik Party adapted to the repressive Czarist state that it overthrew and that regimentation continued into the decades that followed, making democracy impossible (Bahro, 1978); small farmers committed to equality and radical democracy could not hold their own against those who sought to transform the North

American colonies into a British-like state committed to wealth and power (Wood, 1969). What practices must be incorporated into an ecocentric movement? In particular, how does such a movement begin now to integrate the needs of other species and create institutions and practices that do so? There is not a simple answer to this question.²

A central difficulty is that our understanding of the world is profoundly limited in many ways – one reason why the concept of 'environmental management' is an arrogant and dangerous fantasy (Ehrenfeld, 1978; Wright, 2004). We also lack adequate empathy and wisdom. Nonetheless, the careful study of other-than-human life can tell us much about what it needs. We know, for example, that big, self-willed and highly productive areas need to be left alone (Soule and Terborgh, 1999; Wilson, 2016). Furthermore, there is a growing understanding of what other creatures feel (Bradshaw, 2017; Darwin, 1989). But there are places and creatures we do not know or understand, and scientific expertise is not a substitute for grasping what it feels like to be another – to know another's needs from the inside.

Assuming that our knowing and understanding will never be complete, how are other species' needs to be integrated into human decision-making, which has such a huge effect on their lives? Group decision-making even among humans is grossly imperfect and contentious. The hunter-gatherer campfire or the deliberative democracy of the New England town meeting do not work with hundreds of millions of people. The alternative is some form of representation. But non-human species (or future generations of humans, for that matter) cannot vote, otherwise directly give their consent, or hold representatives accountable. Rituals such as Councils of All Beings may help, but they remain *human* rituals, which are not always well-informed. Our tremendous capacities for denial and rationalisation allow us, all too easily, to create self-serving belief systems and justifications. Our species

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has grown distant from the Earth and our emotions potentially untrustworthy.

Can fundamental human social change be brought about given the inertia of 12,000 years of anthropocentrism?

Fundamental social change that is both deliberately planned *and* successful is rare. Efforts at such change often fail or generate unintended negative results. Historically, those events which are labelled 'revolutions' have tended to move human societies further away from the natural world by generating more energy use, more domination over nature and consequently more hierarchy within the human community. To heal the Earth we must dismantle power, not create new and more pervasive forms of it. Humans have never successfully done this. As the old East European joke used to go: under capitalism man exploits man; under socialism it is just the reverse. Anarchism, syndicalism, various utopian communities and other efforts at re-establishing egalitarianism have never taken hold in large-scale society. It seems that the Neolithic marked the end of that possibility (Boehm, 1999; Flannery and Marcus, 2012).

Many ecocentric thinkers and other critics talk about power and egalitarianism without any understanding of how either relate to population size. At least two obstacles limit egalitarianism among humans and between humans and other species. First, the coming of agriculture involved the control of soil, water, plants and often animals, and this demanded intra-human hierarchy to manage it (Johnson and Earle, 2000). Second, the transformation of egalitarian cultures into hierarchical ones is not easily reversed. This is in part because of social and psychological habituation. But it is also because an ecocentric and egalitarian society would be unable to support the level of population produced by our hierarchically organised, anthropocentric society – dependent as it is on massive energy subsidies from fossil fuels and extensive exploitation of the natural world. Hence, to dismantle

highly institutionalized hierarchy will require major population and population density reduction, and reliance on smaller-scale means of social control. Any such dismantling will also demand the creation of new institutions, and new mechanisms for enforcing ecological restraint.

The attributes of successful social movements

Perseverance

Without a long-term commitment that is apparent to the opponents of conservation, they will simply try to outlast change-seekers, hoping they will tire. As pointed out above, achieving change – especially fundamental change – has always required pressure and disruption over the long term. Conservation confronts a special difficulty in that goals and milestones can take a long time to show results: it may take decades to protect an area but even longer to know if the protection is working.

The perseverance of a social movement depends upon a number of factors. It rests on mobilizing and harnessing strong emotions and deep beliefs, so that action survives both failures *and* successes (Goodwin *et al.*, 2001). Ritual is also important, because through it a community declares and celebrates achievements, and recommits itself in the face of adversity (Kertzer, 1988; Rappaport, 1999). Perseverance also depends on leadership, on feelings of effectiveness grounded in tactical innovation, and on a sound ideology. Ideology is the vision and purpose of a group brought to ground: it explains the nature of the struggle and its importance, fulfils supporters' need to make sense of things, and sustains people by sanctifying purpose, not just by providing it. Extant religious and secular beliefs may inform ideology with notions of divine justice or historical inevitability.

Clear, bold vision

Movement success depends in significant part on a vision for the future – the world as it should be. A strategy is about getting from here to there, and both the present and the desired future need to be understood.

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Broad common themes such as equality or justice are critical components of a vision, helping to check internal divisions. Nurturing a vision takes resources, but the cost of not doing so can be very high. Elites have effectively exploited movement factionalism.

Vision frames specific guides to action – how to fix what is wrong. Its vehicle is a compelling story embodying core values expressed in manifestos, song, films and the like in which people can find themselves. Structurally rooted failures of justice, such as the destruction of biodiversity, require a bold vision and action rather than aspirin-like treatments. Although it does not guarantee success, only boldness can inspire. It is also a tactical imperative.

Uncompromising position on goals with flexibility in means

A bold vision is not much good if it is compromised in implementation; and no human, ecocentric or otherwise, has the right to compromise the lives of other species. Compromising the vision, those goals and purposes essential to achieving the vision, or acting ineffectively drains energy and determination, undercutting the purpose the vision embodies. Neither opponents nor decision-makers take seriously those who compromise their vision.

However, what counts as a compromise for one organization may not be compromise for another. It can be a source of strength when movements consist of different organizations, because they attract those with different levels of commitment, different views about what needs to be done, and different risk tolerance. Such variety provides a pathway for people to move among organizations as commitment and political sophistication shifts. Different organizational approaches also coincide with different policy options – for example, influencing legislators or agencies, or striving to change whole systems. But if key elements of a vision are not broadly shared amongst the different organizations in the movement, elites can easily play groups off against each other, making progress more difficult.

Partial success is often a great enticement to compromise. Attaining a seat at the table with decision-makers creates internal and external pressure to compromise. Leaders like being ‘players’ and will too often ‘go along to get along’. Decision-makers exert strong pressure on organizations to limit demands if they want to keep their seat (Michels, 1962). If unwillingness to compromise on goals is critical to achieving those goals, so is flexibility in the means employed. Many paths may lead to a goal and being open to taking the most advantageous one can make all the difference (see the discussion of crises below).

Combining of insider and outsider approaches

Achieving ecocentric human societies is about changing the limits of what is possible. That means it cannot exclusively rely on, though it must make use of, insider approaches such as lobbying and electoral involvement and personal connections with elites, and on the largesse or personal inclinations of some leaders. But the wealthy and the powerful seldom ignore their material interests; their support is always conditional on truncated conservation goals. And conservation opponents are well positioned to dominate the insider game.

Changing what is possible invariably requires breaking the rules imposed by the elites for their benefit, and creating new rules. No major societal change has been achieved without the credible threat of disrupting business-as-usual until demands are met (Gamson, 1990; Giugni, 1998). But, of course, outsider strategies are high risk and require people willing to take on the inevitable dangers of repression (Wood, 2001).

For outsider strategies to work, movement organizations must accurately anticipate the mix of concessions and repression that disruptive action will trigger from elites. Forecasting elite responses – given their divisions, uncertainty and fear – is not easy, but success depends on it. Outsider approaches also depend on making

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coalitions with those pursuing insider approaches, especially those with strong connections to decision-makers. Insiders can act to limit repression against outsiders, and can use the threat of disruption to force concessions in negotiations.

When existing structures or foes are strong and united, disruptive protest may be the only path. Non-violent protest was successful in the US civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, but those successes were owed in part to other groups in the movement espousing revolutionary action (Nimtz, 2016). Furthermore, non-violence is no guarantee of personal safety, as the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 demonstrates (Li *et al.*, 1991). It was the looming threat of civil war in South Africa – a civil war the elites knew they could not win – that ultimately brought authorities to the bargaining table to end apartheid (Wood, 2000).

Successful movements prepare for repression and minimize it by exploiting elite divisions and finding sympathizers within the elite who may limit its use, by demonstrating to those using it that it will not work or will backfire, and by gaining broad recognition that repression is unjustified and indicates elite malevolence and moral failure.

Exploiting of crises and divisions within elites

Crises and divisions may weaken opponents and de-legitimate dominant ideologies and institutions, but they must be recognized and acted on.

United elites are more difficult to overcome compared to those that are divided. In the midst of crisis and divisions there is greater potential for alternative definitions of problems and solutions to be accepted, and more room for action by non-elite actors.

It is no coincidence that some of the strongest US conservation laws – such as the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act – were passed by a governing elite faction that sought to fend off popular resistance to an aggressive war (Repetto, 2006). Conservationists

exacerbated divisions among tuna canners, fishermen and some members of Congress, and won greater protection for dolphins. To take other examples, the divisions between economic and political elites was a major proximate cause for negotiations between rebel groups and the governments of Guatemala and South Africa (Wood, 2000).

Crises offer differential opportunities depending on how deeply rooted they are. Structural crises (such as an economic collapse) offer greater opportunity for change than idiosyncratic scandals, which may only offer the chance to replace an unfriendly decision-maker. Incremental change is the norm, interrupted by periods of significant policy change resulting from the concatenation of factors such as media and ‘public’ attention cycles, temporary shifts in the relative power of opposing groups, new knowledge that contributes to new definitions of issues and problems, a catastrophe, and the unexpected consequences of legislation or court decisions (Repetto, 2006).

Movements, networks and community

Movements arise from pre-existing networks and communities that are the source of purposes and resources that fuel the movement. For example, the US civil rights movement was embedded in black churches, universities and fraternal orders; the anti-apartheid movement in the townships and labour organizations. The US conservation movement has arisen from more amorphous networks of naturalists, scientists and those enthralled with grand scenery and solitude, from religious and philosophical threads that have roots almost as old as civilization, and from those who grew up immersed in nature facing the rapid loss of wildlands. Conservation has, however, generally not extended its community as successfully as other social movements have. In the 1980s, Earth First! was extraordinarily creative in generating an ecocentric culture, but it lacked the capacity to reach a broad audience. The lack of movement building and network development has left conservation a

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sideshow or an afterthought rather than a society-changing movement.

The bonds of community – not just bonding with a cause or with leaders – sustain political action in the face of repression, success and failure. Trust and loyalty are built upon strong interpersonal ties that extend beyond politics, to friendship, family, marriage, sex, love, play, music and other cultural relationships including ritual. Such bonds buffer against isolation, and forestall attrition resulting from the uncertainty of outcomes, the often multi-generational path to realizing significant change, the oppressive asymmetry of power relationships, the potential for demobilization following major interim successes, and the vilification of movement members by defenders of the *status quo*. Virtual social networks can be effective at recruitment for one-off mass events, but are typically inadequate to support the organization building necessary to sustain the active involvement of large numbers of people over a long period of time.

Conclusion

The instrumentalities of anthropocentric domination will not simply wither away. They must be forcefully dismantled. That dismantling will be neither quick nor easy, and will be met with enormous resistance from those that benefit from domination, and from those that fear change. It will be tempting along the way to rely on those very instrumentalities – such as the state – to achieve interim goals (such as the defence of species and protected areas). Labour, for example, has often supported strengthening the state to check capital, only to find the state and capital teaming up against it. In the 1970s, the US conservation movement made use of the state's need for legitimacy to pass legislation such as the Endangered Species Act and other good laws. But the danger is that in propping up the state the very system of growth is also propped up. The state, after all, seeks to maintain hierarchies and secure economic growth; it has little choice but to pursue these ends and to vigorously resist any effort to undermine them (Dryzek *et*

al., 2003). But, ultimately, the ecocentric movement must seek to undermine those ends.

Only by keeping one's eyes on the prize – the recovery of biodiversity and the Earth – and not being diverted by other goals, can that prize be attained. To do otherwise is to stay stuck, focused on the short term and enmeshed in the *status quo* and the merely human. ■

Notes

- 1 For fuller referencing of the claims made about social movements in the following discussion, the reader is referred to Johns (2019).
- 2 For more extensive discussion of this complex matter, see O'Neill (2006), Gray and Curry (2016; 2020) and the article by Gray *et al.* in the present issue.

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