

The Ecological Citizen: An impulse of life, for life

Welcome to the first issue of *The Ecological Citizen*! I would like briefly to outline our first principles and the facts to which they are a response, in addition to some other essential markers. You may also want to consult our Mission Statement (<https://is.gd/umjXSP>) and read John Davis's generous endorsement in this issue.

The fundamental fact was summed up in the WWF's Living Planet Report 2016: by 2020, human activity will have destroyed two-thirds of the world's vertebrate populations relative to 1970, a mere 50 years ago (WWF, 2016). The result of our relentless assault on forests, oceans, rivers, air and the world's remaining wild places and animals is ecocide; and given that a healthy planet is the prerequisite for everything we and our fellow-creatures are and do, there is no more important issue. It is as important as climate change, for example, and more immediately urgent.

Nor can there be any doubt concerning the primary interlinked causes: too much human economic activity, too much human consumption and, far from least, too many humans. Yet in this era of truthiness and alternative facts, building on our species' already well-established propensity for denial and wishful thinking in the service of perceived self-interest, very few people are facing up to reality.

This is the context for *The Ecological Citizen*. It will offer a platform for the ecocentric values, views and voices that are rarely heard in mainstream and even alternative media, yet have never been more important. By 'ecocentric' I mean centred on the Earth as a living ecosystemic whole, including all the life it supports. For ecocentrics, this is the ultimate source of value, locus of meaning, and appropriate recipient of respect and

reverence. (See Haydn Washington and colleagues' article in this issue and the associated Statement of Commitment to Ecocentrism, which we are proud to host on the Journal's website.) The most important thing, therefore, is the nature and quality of our relationships with the Earth and our fellow-Earthlings. This means that far from being an optional add-on, questions of ecocentric ethics are present from the start (Curry, 2011).

We believe – or perceive – that nothing less will suffice to counter the destructive impact of humanity so far. Certainly its converse, anthropocentrism – or what Eileen Crist, in this issue, calls 'human supremacy' – will not. According to this modern *de facto* religion (albeit one with old roots), all value and meaning inheres in one uniquely special species: humanity. The rest of the Earth, including all its places and creatures, is entitled to respect only instrumentally, insofar as it is needed for humans to 'progress'. An auxiliary assumption is that we know what we do and do not need (Ehrenfeld, 1981). (See John Michael Greer's article in this issue for some pertinent reflections.)

A closely related term, often used synonymously with ecocentrism, is 'biocentrism'. Technically, the former is preferable, since it explicitly includes the essential abiotic dimension of life. But although we are passionately committed to ecocentrism, we are not concerned with ideological or linguistic purity, and *The Ecological Citizen* will welcome non-anthropocentric contributions of any appropriate kind. By the same token, although it is not a requirement, we particularly seek contributions that include strategic advice and practical steps for developing ways forward, and encouraging action.

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About the author

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“Using the economy to frame the natural world, upon which economies are completely dependent, is allowing the tail to wag the dog, and the end is the death of the whole animal.”

Within that ambit there is room for widely differing subjects, from rewilding and conservation biology to greening cities, from political strategy and green citizenship to green spirituality and cultural expressions of nature. The sciences, humanities and arts all have something vital to contribute, and none has the final say. (None is immune from corruption, for that matter.)

Our Journal’s title is a nod to Aldo Leopold’s epically incisive comment that “A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (Leopold, 1987: 204).¹ Perhaps our most important single touchstone, however, is the work of the ecologist Stan Rowe,² some of it written together with one of our Consulting Editors, Ted Mosquin (e.g. Mosquin and Rowe, 2004). Of course, we have also been influenced by Deep Ecology (as was Rowe, to some extent) and honour that ancestry. That said, there are a couple of significant differences. As befits ecology, ecocentrism values not Self but relationships. By the same token, it emphasizes alliances and solidarity across differences rather than a metaphysical unity (Curry, 2011: 101-11).

The need

To give you another perspective on why an ecocentric platform is needed, I recently wrote to several conservation organizations in the UK concerning two things: their silence on human overpopulation and their endorsement of a recent report entitled *Response for Nature* (<https://is.gd/8sh3Hs>) which concluded that “The natural world, its biodiversity and its constituent ecosystems are critically important to our well-being and economic prosperity” and that conservation should be led by its “benefits for health and well-being”, adding that “natural capital” and “smarter financial instruments of nature” should figure prominently.

Our well-being, *human* health and *humans’* economic prosperity; no mention, even, of the well-being or health or prospering of the millions of other Earthlings. This is not only ethically

bankrupt, it is a recipe for failure even in its own terms. By making conservation solely about us instead of the natural world as a whole (including us as one tiny if self-important part), to be treated well for its own sake and its intrinsic value, environmentalism ensures its own failure, as Neil Evernden (1985: 10) says, “whenever self-interest can be perceived as lying elsewhere.” And led by developers, planners, economists and politicians, it will be.

Indeed, using the economy to frame the natural world, upon which economies are completely dependent, is allowing the tail to wag the dog, and the end is the death of the whole animal. Logging – jobs and, for some, prosperity – will mean the end of the woodland caribou. Oil pipelines and tankers – ditto – will probably finish the Salish Sea orcas; and so on. Framing these conflicts economically is already a death-sentence for life, whatever ‘conclusion’ is reached.³ It is our duty to contest such ways of thinking, not encourage them. (For more on this, see Sian Sullivan’s article in this issue.)

The Chief Executive of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, Martin Spray (2017), issued a subsequent editorial in which he acknowledged that “The use of terms such as ‘ecosystem services’, ‘natural capital’ and ‘millennium goals’ may be fine for some audiences, but they simply don’t work for most people. They don’t touch hearts.” However, in the very next paragraph he asserted that “Our relationship with businesses is, in my view, an increasingly important factor in achieving environmental improvement.” Then, after admitting that “Promoting the need to conserve biodiversity for the sake of the planet is, without a doubt, absolutely right,” he advocated “a more realistic appreciation of the environment for a sustainable and successful future.”

Another more direct response to my enquiries was equally self-contradictory. Beccy Speight, Chief Executive of the Woodland Trust (pers comm: 2016), admitted that “Basic ecological theory tells us that the human population

globally is fast approaching and has perhaps already exceeded the planet's carrying capacity. The UK is particularly densely populated. [...] However, it is not within our remit to campaign for human population control of any kind. Our charitable objectives are around trees and woods." It takes wilful blindness not to see the connection between the two.

Speight also agreed that "Of course we want to see nature conserved for its own intrinsic value. [...] but the conservation sector has held this line for more than a century with little success." This is surely false; environmentalists have mostly emphasized a human services model. A really serious case for valuing the natural world for its own sake – educational, cultural, social: across the board – is something we still await.

Speight concluded by reassuring me that "the Trust has no intention of abandoning its core conservation principles, but we must move with the times." But valuing nature for its financial and economic value means it's already happened. For a better sense of what that entails, imagine if the Western racial and sexual equality movements had abandoned their initial convictions in favour of stating that we need to ease up on protecting the rights of minority races and women because they can then be of more benefit (as human capital) to white people's and men's needs (pers comm: Gray J, 2016). Humanity occupies just that privileged place in relation to the rest of suffering nature.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, while claiming to be tackling climate change emissions, joins hands with Donald Trump resurrecting the TransCanada Keystone XL crude oil pipeline and has approved a couple more on his own account, adding nearly a million barrels a day to the capacity of the ecologically devastating Alberta oil sands. "When people finally realize it's a tremendous business opportunity to lead on climate change," he crows, "Canada will already have a head start" (Kassam and Mathieu-Léger, 2016).

The science editor for the popular TED Talks, David Biello (2016), asks "How do we make a good human epoch?" Having already framed the issues in anthropocentric terms, his answers are characteristic of the denial and wishful thinking that dominates such discussions. One is 'stewardship', understood as the high end of techno-managerialism – as if humanity knows enough to 'manage' the natural world successfully, or (who knows?) one day might, and has a wonderful record of past interventions to give us confidence.⁴ He also favours social justice. So do we, but without the illusion that it would automatically bring about ecological justice. The two do not necessarily harmonize, and when they do not, given what a dead planet would mean, it should be clear which must take priority. (This is a point that will receive a fuller discussion in these pages.)

Even the excellent campaigning journalist George Monbiot (2016) can write an entire article extolling the idea of the common good – rightly, as far as that goes – without once mentioning the rest of the natural world except, and I quote, as 'resources': as if the rest of nature, the very basis of any sustainable human polity, had no stake or even role in the matter.

Let me remind you that these are not cold-blooded poachers or hunters, ruthless corporate racketeers or unscrupulous politicians. They are (if you'll pardon the expression) *the good guys*. This is deeply worrying, and captures why there is a need for *The Ecological Citizen* and other such projects.

In particular, we should be wary of any demand from official sources (including non-governmental organizations) to be 'realistic'. It is too often a call to adopt a model of fantasy, denial and wish-fulfilment. In Kenneth Anderson's words, "It is not hard to see how [such] arguments seek in the end to draw radical ecology into the 'conversation' of bureaucracy and managerialism, from which, once drawn in, it will go nowhere that 'progress' does not approve that it should go" (Anderson, 1995). A runaway population, supposedly

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endless economic growth and unlimited consumption are not things which we should accept. They need urgent countering and stopping, not a mere desideratum but as an imperative.

The alternative vision – the ‘new narrative’ that we really need – is, as Eileen Crist (2014) has shown, an abundant planet, overflowing with life. All that it requires is for we humans, collectively and individually, to learn to limit our numbers, economies, habitations and, to a large extent at least, insatiable desires. Even the last is not as impossible as it sounds; it is quite possible to imagine a culture which encourages ‘the wisdom of limitations’ (in Crist’s phrase), rather than fanning the flames as does commodity consumerism. Indeed, the model already exists in traditional ecological knowledge. But the mainstream prefers to follow the siren voices, leading us into a planet of managed dearth and death, that proclaim we are radical exceptions, universal beings. So the real abundance that could be ours to share turns into the destructive lie of limitless freedom.

If anthropocentrism – always putting human interests first, and never less than equal to the rest of nature – supplies the entire context for the debates that determine what actually happens, then the outlook is dire. So *The Ecological Citizen* will try to provide the missing ecocentric position, at the other end of the spectrum from all-too-common narrow human self-interest. Our intention is not to crush our foes (however nice that might be once in a while) but to pull the centre of gravity of such debates, and therefore their outcomes, in an ecocentric direction.

The dangers

There are two modes we will try to avoid. They are sins, or errors, to which Earth-lovers and defenders are particularly prone. One is despair. What could be more understandable? The power of what Lewis Mumford called the ‘megamachine’ is very great, and the outlook is indeed very dark; arguably even hopeless. But in that case, we must do without hope (Curry, 2014). Despair

is paralysing, and thus self-fulfilling. And the fact is, in the words of someone in the same plight in a similar story, “Despair is for those who see the future beyond any doubt. We do not.”⁵ So the virtue we most need is courage: the courage to resist and to act, whatever the odds.

The second mistake is misanthropy. Again, it’s understandable; why not hate the agent of such destruction? Nonetheless, it’s wrong. First, it is grossly inconsistent; indeed, speciesist. We too are natural beings sprung from the Earth, so why should this one species be excluded from the care and concern we try to extend to all the others? Second, misanthropy merely inverts a linchpin of ecocide: the assumption that we are uniquely important. Becoming a plain member and citizen, so desperately needed, once again drops out of sight. And third, it is far from true that all humans are equally destructive. So damning them all is not only unfair, it drives away those whom we need on our – that is, the Earth’s – side.

The poet Robinson Jeffers is instructive here. The poetry is unmistakably, resonantly ecocentric, hymning “Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty / of the universe. Love that, not man / Apart from that...” (This is from *The Answer*, carried in this issue.) As such, it has been rightly influential; again, see Greer in this issue.⁶ But Jeffers called his philosophy – not his poetry – ‘Inhumanism’, and in his life and letters, it frequently slid into an ugly misanthropy (Karman, 2016). We have no interest in being either inhuman or inhumane; on the contrary, our concern is with the entire more-than-human world, to borrow David Abram’s (1997) term for the natural world which includes, but also vastly exceeds, humanity.

Of course, I am not banning expressions of despair or misanthropy. Who has never felt that way? But they will find no advocacy in these pages.

Finally, on a more personal note, it has already been a pleasure to work alongside my fellow editors, and I am grateful for the fine support from Stephanie Moran (Art Editor) and Victor Postnikov (Poetry Editor), as well as that of our Consulting Editors

and Advisory Board. From the beginning, *The Ecological Citizen* has felt like something that wants to happen – an impulse not only for life but of it. We would be grateful if you would read it, share it with others, and send us your ideas, articles, poems and artwork. Please spread the word!

Thank you. ■

Notes

- 1 See also: *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 2011 5(4) Special Issue, “Aldo Leopold: Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions”; and Holdrege (2016).
- 2 A number of Stan Rowe’s pieces can be found at the website www.ecospherics.net, which is an anthology of ecological, philosophical, spiritual, economic and cultural articles, editorials and reviews exploring the values of the ecosphere.
- 3 In addition to the pioneering work of John Livingston and Neil Evernden, see Ehrenfeld (1976).
- 4 Although it falls short of ecocentrism, ecological stewardship with its roots in religion, and informed by the humility as well as knowledge of genuine science, has much to contribute to the kind of outcomes we seek.
- 5 Gandalf, in *The Lord of the Rings*, quoting almost directly from Goethe’s *Faust*. For a discussion of the ecological dimension of Tolkien’s narrative, see Curry (2004).
- 6 In addition to his article in this issue, see the excellent discussion in Greer (2010) and, for a document and project strongly influenced by Jeffers, Kingsnorth and Hine (2009).

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