

Ecocentrism: What it means and what it implies

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In this short piece, we aim to provide a concise statement of what ecocentrism is (and is not) and to highlight some practical implications of the ecocentric worldview. We also present, in **Box 1**, a plain-language definition of 'ecocentric' and a short set of questions for use in helping establish if an individual holds this worldview.

What ecocentrism means

Ecocentrism sees the ecosphere – comprising all Earth's ecosystems, atmosphere, water and land – as the matrix which birthed all life and as life's sole source of sustenance. It is a worldview that recognizes intrinsic value in ecosystems and the biological and physical elements that they comprise, as well as in the ecological processes that spatially and temporally connect them. So when human wants clash with the health of the Earth as a whole or any of its ecosystems, the former should, practically and ethically speaking, give way to the latter: human needs, like the needs of other species, are secondary to those of the Earth as the sum of its ecosystems.

Ecocentrism thus contrasts sharply with anthropocentrism, the paradigm that currently dominates human activities, including our response to ecological crises such as the sixth mass extinction. If you think that ecocide and anthropogenic extinctions are unethical for reasons greater than just depriving humans of resources, and if you see, for instance, the destruction of a mountaintop for mining as being a deeper wrong than merely reducing the amenity value of the landscape, then you are thinking ecocentrically.

If, as we hope, the term 'ecocentrism' becomes established in mainstream political and ecological discourses, we

believe it is crucial that it does so without dilution. By this we mean that ecocentrism should be understood as being at the end of the ethical spectrum of inclusiveness rather than serving as a 'catch all' for ecocentrism proper plus any other worldview (such as sentiocentrism and biocentrism) that grants intrinsic value more generously than does anthropocentrism.

Implications: Moving from the armchair to the front line

Ecocentrism offers a robust ethical analysis of the negative impact that humans are having on the community of life on Earth and the physical systems on which it is dependent. It shows that ecocide and the rapid diminishment of life are unethical in a way that is immeasurably more significant than the loss of goods that arises from depleting the pool of ecosystem services. Arising from an ecocentric awareness, therefore, is a far more compelling urgency for remedial actions and societal change.

The changes that the ecocentric worldview demand are many, but high up the priority list are humanely transitioning to a far smaller human population, dramatically curbing our voracious appetite for carbon, swiftly moving from industrial agriculture to genuinely sustainable and humane food systems, and greatly shrinking the world's economies. We can – indeed, are obliged to – play a part in the necessary changes, not only by considering our own ecological impacts as individuals, but also through activism. Knowing that this may not happen until we are even deeper into the sixth mass extinction – and witnessing even more severe ecological consequences than we are at present – we must nevertheless strive now to do all that can be done to see the necessary changes happen. ■

Box 1. Are you deep green?

A plain-language definition of the term ‘ecocentric’

You are **deep green** (or, in more technical terms, ‘ecocentric’) if you feel that it is wrong for humans to have an unreasonably large, negative impact on the biological and geological natural world (e.g. causing other species to go extinct) AND you believe that it is a *deeper* wrong than just affecting the quality of life of other humans in some way. That is, it also does wrong to the Earth and to the rest of life.

Questions to help establish if you are deep green

Below is a tentative trio of questions (with answers rotated 180° in the bottom-right corner of this box) intended for use in helping establish if an individual sees the world in a deep green way. The authors would welcome comments to enhance these questions (via <http://ecologicalcitizen.net/contact.html>).

- 1 If a group of humans causes the extinction of a species that is unknown to us, and we never find out that it has gone extinct, have these humans done wrong in causing the extinction?
 - A Yes
 - B No
 - C Not sure

- 2 There is one human left on Earth. For amusement, this person uses a toxic substance to kill all of the living things in a pond. They wanted to act this way, and there is no other human left on the planet to be negatively affected by their actions. Do you consider what the person has done to be wrong? *[continues above right...]*

- D Yes
- E No
- F Not sure

- 3 If the top of a mountain was blown off using explosives for the purpose of mining, but no living thing was harmed by this act, which one of the following statements would best describe your thoughts on this?
 - G It is not wrong
 - H I am not sure if it is wrong
 - I It is wrong, but only because the mountain would be more ugly to look at for humans
 - J It is wrong, whether or not anyone happens to see it, because the mountain as a whole has been violated

Note – Question 2 is inspired by Richard Sylvan’s ‘Last Man’ argument. See: Sylvan R (1973) Is there a need for a new, an environmental ethic? In: *Proceedings of the XII World Congress of Philosophy* (no. 1). Varna, Bulgaria: 205–10.

Further reading – For fuller, academically grounded scales of environmental attitudes, see:

- Dunlap RE, Van Liere KD, Mertig AG and Jones RE (2000) New trends in measuring environmental attitudes: Measuring endorsement of the New Ecological Paradigm – a revised NEP Scale. *Journal of Social Issues* **56**: 425–42.
- Kopnina H (2013) Evaluating education for sustainable development (ESD): using Ecocentric and Anthropocentric Attitudes toward the Sustainable Development (EAATSD) scale. *Environment, Development and Sustainability* **15**: 607–23.

Answers – You are seeing the world in a deep green way if you answered A, D and J

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