

Loving Earth: How I came to ecocentrism

Perhaps we are born ecocentric. Children often sympathize with animals, for example, viewing them as they view other humans. They seem to recognize instinctively that animals pursue a good of their own – that they need food and shelter just like us. I trace the stirrings of my own ecocentrism to my childhood spent collecting fish, frogs, snakes and salamanders in the New Jersey woods, a stone’s throw from Manhattan. My friends and I quickly learned that these animals would die if mistreated, and we did our best to care for them (it didn’t occur to us to just leave them be at that time). By keeping aquariums and terrariums we learned some of the ways of these creatures, and what they needed to thrive. One of my college mentors, Robert (Bob) Behnke, recounted a similar experience in encountering his first trout – an experience he credited for helping make him one of the leading native trout advocates of the 20th century (Piccolo, 2015a).

I recall needlessly killing a songbird with an airgun when I was a boy – 40 years later I could still pinpoint the exact spot. Similarly, Charles Darwin regretted till the end of his life the time, when a small child, he beat a puppy “simply from the sense of enjoying power”; he too could remember the exact spot till the end of his days. He was thereafter renowned for his love of animals and his ability to steal the affection of others’ dogs. But for me it was a long road between my childhood love of animals and my formal recognition of the importance of ecocentrism for conservation of the biosphere. This road took me from New Jersey, through the Rocky Mountains and the desert west, to the wilds of Alaska. I never stopped

loving nature, but I don’t think I came all the way back to ecocentrism until I landed in the Old World, on the shores of Sweden’s Lake Vänern.

Becoming an ecologist

My love of the outdoors led me to apply to the Fisheries and Wildlife Programme at Colorado State University (CSU) in 1984. These were heady times for conservation biology – the following year Michael Soulé (1985) would publish “What is conservation biology?” in *BioScience*, accompanied by Holmes Rolston’s (1985) “Duties to endangered species” and EO Wilson’s (1985) piece titled “The biological diversity crisis”. This growing movement would later become a global force in nature conservation. Today the Society for Conservation Biology has over 10,000 members, with chapters worldwide. At the time though, I was just glad to be taking my first college courses that focused on fish, wildlife, ecology and resource management. In my free time I enjoyed the vast expanses of wild nature in the Rocky Mountains and desert South-West, especially hiking and fishing. I had no doubt I had found my true calling.

At the university we studied both ecology and ‘management’ – we learned about organisms and their complex interactions, and how we humans could sustain the flow of natural resources, both consumable (*e.g.* fish, wildlife and timber) and non-consumable (*e.g.* recreation and photography). It was fish and fisheries that interested me most, and I had had the good fortune to land at a department with leading ecologists and conservationists, foremost among them then being Bob Behnke. At a time when

John J Piccolo

About the author

John is Associate Professor in the Department of Environmental and Life Sciences, Karlstad University, Sweden.

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‘trout management’ meant stocking as many hatchery fish as people wanted, Bob taught both academia and the public about the importance of biodiversity and conservation. Never afraid to stand up for his principles, Bob described in no uncertain terms the conservation plight of native trout for scientific colleagues, US Government officials and fishing enthusiasts. Bob and his colleague Edwin (Phil) Pister (see Callicott [2017]) were graduate students under Aldo Leopold’s son Starker at UC Berkeley in the early 1960s – thus they inherited the Land Ethic from one of the 20th century’s legendary conservationists. I can therefore trace my own conservation lineage back through Behnke and Starker Leopold to Aldo himself.

A little way across campus from our fisheries building stood the philosophy department at CSU, and it was there, I suppose, that I was first truly, as Holmes Rolston has written, “put in my place” in this world. I enrolled in a course in environmental ethics taught by Rolston. We read his new book *Philosophy Gone Wild* and we began to understand what it meant to be, as Leopold wrote, “a plain member and citizen” of the Earth. I wish I could say I had become an ecocentrist on the first day of class, but that moment lay some years ahead. I did refocus my Master’s thesis to include a concentration on endangered species, and I spent as many hours as I could reading environmental ethics and attending Rolston’s lectures. But the wide world was calling, and I left CSU with a Master’s degree, determined to live and work in nature and not academia.

I worked in conservation in and around the American West for ten years – my path lay through Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Nevada and finally to the wilds of Alaska. I spent a lot of time with ranchers, miners, foresters and fisherman. A significant part was living and working with Native Americans for a few years. All of these people depended on nature for their livelihoods – we didn’t always agree on what was best for the land, but

there was always a connection to the land. I experienced the wildlands of the West, but nothing prepared me for Alaska.

Anyone who believes the academic drivel that ‘wilderness’ is a social construct has not stood face to face with a wild bear. South-east Alaska has a higher density of bears than anywhere else on the planet, and these bears depend on two things: salmon and wilderness. The Native Americans and the great bears have lived side by side in the Great North-West for *millennia*. Walk a footpath that has been cut deep into the rainforest floor by a hundred generations of bear paws; see how the soft footpads have worn through a 2-metre diameter downed spruce log, and you’ll be *put in your place* in this world. Bears live in a complex society: they have friends and foes and know well where each resides. They care for their young for years, teaching them to play and hunt, and to avoid the two-legged adversary with the awesome firepower. If you doubt that a mother bear loves her cubs, simply step between them sometime. But bears are just one among the approximately 10 million species with which we co-habitat this planet. Yes, bears seem special to us because they are majestic, and perhaps because they can take a human life with a swipe of their paw. The real reason bears are special, though, is that they need wilderness. Many species can thrive in patches of a few square kilometres. A functioning bear society needs thousands of hectares. If the ‘wilderness is social construct’ people have their way, there will be few bear societies left on Earth by the end of the century.

I didn’t go to Alaska for the bears, however: I went for the salmon. It was there I found some of the last remaining intact salmon ecosystems on Earth – dependent upon the same wilderness as the bears in fact, the pristine spawning and rearing streams. I knew the first time I visited an old-growth salmon watershed that I would resume my research career in Alaska,

learning about how salmon ecosystems work. I took a PhD on salmon ecology and found my way back into scientific research, ending up in Karlstad, Sweden, at a small university with a big research programme on freshwater ecology and restoration. Sweden has a long history of loving salmon, but it also has over 3000 dams that block migration routes and alter freshwater habitat. The government has recently committed to restoring wild salmon populations in as many rivers as possible, so there is a lot of work to do. It was when I began working on salmon

restoration in Sweden that I really came back to ecocentrism – I began to search to the answers to the question: “Why should we conserve biodiversity?”

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“It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one spirit.”

Oglala Lakota Black Elk

as told through Neihardt (2014)



A wild land-locked Atlantic salmon smolt from the Clear River (Klarälven), Värmland, Sweden. Klarälven salmon were once threatened with extinction, but 50 years of concerted effort by dedicated conservationists have paid off – 2016 saw the largest run of wild salmon since at least the 1950s. Salmon have made their annual spawning run up Klarälven since the glaciers receded 15,000 years ago. Salmon like this have existed virtually unchanged for some 5 million years, ebbing and flowing with Earth's climatic variations – long before we humans came out of Africa. It's inconceivable, the author feels, that there was no intrinsic good in these ecosystems before humans arrived to appreciate them. **Photo credit:** Richard Gow.

Becoming ecocentric

It was while working on a salmon restoration project that I had an ‘ecocentric moment’. I was discussing the project with a reporter from Swedish radio’s *Nature Morning* programme, when the topic came round to wolves. There is a lot of controversy concerning Sweden’s wolf population, which has recovered naturally from extirpation by immigrating from Finland over the past couple of decades. What is it about wolves or salmon that drives us to spend money and effort to protect these species from extinction? It was then that I recalled the “green fire” that Aldo Leopold saw in the eyes of a dying wolf, and I began to truly “think like a mountain.” I returned to *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 1949), and a short time later to Rolston’s (2012) *A New Environmental Ethics* and other ecocentric literature. I’ve been writing and teaching about ecocentrism ever since (Piccolo, 2012; 2015b; 2017). Of course, ecocentrism is a way of life, not a textbook subject; being a ‘born again’ ecocentric has meant for me more appreciation of nature in everyday life – and it’s made me a better ecologist too.

On the first page of *A New Environmental Ethics*, Rolston (2012), with his uncanny ability to relate nature to culture, writes:

We are now twelve years into a unique century, the first in the 35 million centuries (3.5 billion years) of life on Earth in which one species can jeopardize the planet’s future.

Throughout the book he goes on to synthesize what the great thinkers of the past century have done to forward our understanding of our ethical relationship with nature, and, more importantly, our moral obligation to save the planet from ourselves. He concludes:

“My vision for the new millennium is to help bring forward ecocentric respect for life on Earth.”

Maybe we can convince ourselves that we socially construct “wilderness” and have differing worldviews about “nature”. True, we have earth-views: a global village, Gaia, God’s creation. Still, looking at those photographs from space, it seems incredible that we socially construct the planet Earth. Earth is the source of value, and therefore value-able, able to produce value. This generativity is the most fundamental meaning of the word “nature”, “to give birth” [...] We are searching for an ethics adequate to respect life on this Earth, an Earth ethics.

My vision for the new millennium is to help bring forward ecocentric respect for life on Earth. ■

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