Becoming ecocentric

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About the author

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Citation

Noss RF (2017) Becoming ecocentric. *The Ecological Citizen* **1**(Suppl A): 30–2.

Keywords

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How does one become ecocentric within a human society that is overpoweringly anthropocentric? How does one break through the perceptual barrier of human exceptionalism, which blinds us to our evolutionary heritage and our ecological connections with the rest of life? Are there certain life-changing events, experiences or epiphanies which show us the light? Or is it a more gradual process of realizing that the individual self is just a part of a larger Self, reinforced by the biological knowledge that life on Earth almost certainly arose just once, and that all living things are kin derived from a common ancestor?

In my case, the gradualism model seems most accurate. I share EO Wilson's (1984) suspicion that biophilia – the feeling of affinity and love for other living things – is *innate*, and furthermore that some people are genetically more prone to biophilia than others. People with irrepressible juvenile biophilia grow up to become biologists, naturalists, environmental ethicists, birdwatchers, conservationists or some combination of these. Biophilia and biocentrism are natural partners. It would be schizophrenic to have one without the other. I can't recall it ever occurring to me that animals, at least, are fundamentally inferior to humans. From my earliest memories, I had a strong intuitive feeling that all animals have intrinsic value. As I grew older, I began to sense value not just in individuals but in species, and not just in animals, but in plants and other organisms. Old trees, especially, took on spirits of their own for me, and I regularly conversed with them.

By the time I was in high school, I argued vigorously with my religious acquaintances that if humans have souls, then all living beings *must* have souls – or else none of us do. It seemed to me irrational and unfair to believe that humans were inherently superior to any other species. It made me furious to hear people claim that Man was created in God's image. If there were a God, why would he or she give preference to humans, who in my view were fundamentally no better than any other species? As I witnessed more and more stupidity and cruelty on the part of humans, I became more misanthropic. As a college student I was inclined to believe that humans are severely flawed in comparison with other species. We ostensibly have the intelligence to act responsibly on Earth, yet we do not. Now, tempered with age, I take a more egalitarian view: humans are not fundamentally superior to other species, but we are also no worse. Still, I know objectively that the sooner *Homo sapiens* goes extinct, the greater the number of other species that will remain on Earth. Looking at my wonderful kids and grandkids, I find this thought uncomfortable and depressing.

If biocentrism arises naturally from biophilia, how does one proceed from biocentrism to ecocentrism – the system of values that encompasses the non-living as well as living components of ecosystems, along with ecological and evolutionary processes? For me, it was a mixture of direct experience of wild nature and an education in biology that prepared me for ecocentrism. I was fortunate to grow up during a time (the 1950s and 1960s) when unsupervised outdoor play by children was the norm. We kids were always outside doing something. Our parents did not constantly watch over us. As long as we returned home soon after dark, everything was fine. I did not particularly like sports, so my outdoor play was exploring wild areas relatively close to home, at first

just a few blocks away and later, as I roamed farther, within a few miles from home. These places were not wilderness, not by a long-shot, but they were semi-natural areas that possessed perhaps as much wildness as Henry David Thoreau (1854) found at Walden Pond, just 1.4 miles from his home in the bustling town of Concord, Massachusetts, and which influenced him so profoundly. I was often, with a friend or two, exploring these wild areas, especially in my early years, but from adolescence onward I was increasingly by myself – but not at all alone because I had nature with me. Most of my friends 'grew up' and no longer enjoyed exploring the woods and streams with me, climbing trees, swinging on vines, fishing for bluegill and bullheads, or capturing darters (often brilliantly coloured small stream fish in the family Percidae), snakes, and snapping turtles.

As is typical of biologists, I was fortunate to never 'grow up'. I remember clearly the semi-religious feeling of oneness with nature during those childhood jaunts, a feeling that has never abandoned me. I realized deep inside that wild nature was my true ancestral home. And by spending so much time outdoors observing wild plants and animals, I was becoming an increasingly competent naturalist. I felt at home in large part because I knew the names and something about the habits of the creatures around me. They were, it seemed to me, both my best friends and my family. I still feel that way.

Soon after I entered college, I began to have true wilderness experiences during breaks between semesters, backpacking in southern and western US national parks and wilderness areas and canoeing in the wilds of northern Ontario, Canada, where I worked several summers as a camp counsellor. These experiences reinforced my evolving view that large, wild natural areas, replete with large carnivore and herbivore populations, and natural disturbance regimes such as fire, have the greatest integrity of all landscapes. They are autonomous, self-managing ecosystems that function just fine in the absence of humans. Over more than three decades I received large and frequent doses of rugged wilderness experience that quite literally wore my body out. Today, remote wilderness is something that I am thrilled still exists, but I can't spend much time in it. I must console myself with regular (near daily) doses of wildness close to home. I could never live in a big city or anywhere far from wild areas.

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Mills Creek, the author's current personal Walden. Like Thoreau's Walden Pond, this sacred place is just 1.4 miles from Reed's home.

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A scientific education can help inspire ecocentrism, too. There is nothing quite so gratifying as when rational knowledge and intuition not only do not conflict, but in fact tell you the same thing. Ecology and evolutionary biology were wondrous subjects for me; I took all the available courses in these subjects at each of the several universities I attended, in addition to the ‘ologies’ (herpetology, ornithology, mammalogy *etc.*) and plant taxonomy courses. Reading a good ecology textbook was like reading an engaging novel. The ecological concept that each species is ‘master of its own niche’ reinforced my ideology that all species are ultimately equal in value. As I learned more about how nature works, and how living things evolved over millions of years, the dominant worldview of anthropocentrism – and virtually everything in the Abrahamic religions – became increasingly nonsensical and repugnant to me. How could anyone not accept biological evolution and not see the fundamental kinship and interconnectedness of all life?

Looking back now, I realize I was privileged to have opportunities that many others lacked. I should not be so judgemental about the dearth of ecocentrism among the less fortunate, for example those who spend their entire lives in the inner city. I am a member of an educated elite: both of my parents and two of my grandparents had college educations, and several of my relatives had PhDs. I think, however, this elite status is something to be proud, not ashamed, of. I'm sickened by the growing populist sentiment, epitomized by the followers of Donald Trump, that the possession of higher education is somehow dishonourable. I have never heard a Trump supporter express a love of nature. The ‘elite’ sentiments of biophilia, biocentrism and ecocentrism should be cherished, and we should provide more people the opportunity to join this enlightened segment of society.

And then there are the wounds. Aldo Leopold wrote: “One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds” (Leopold, 1949). The wounds I saw in nature probably nourished my budding ecocentrism as much as the biological richness and beauty. Loving nature as I always have, the sight of destruction filled me with a potent mix of sorrow, pain and rage. It still does. Seeing a bulldozer rip into a forest is agonizing. I can never forgive anyone who knowingly and willingly destroys a natural area, unless they literally have no other way to survive and feed their family. Even in those cases, if imperilled species are pitted against an expanding population of humans, there is no doubt where my loyalties lie.

I do not want to end on a depressing note. One of the best things about nature for us humans is the happiness it can bring. Recognizing intrinsic value in other species and in entire ecosystems helps us appreciate the beauty of nature in a much deeper way. I'm increasingly convinced that the practice of natural history may be the key to the salvation of the fractured conservation–environmental movement, which no longer seems to share a set of core values. Most environmentalists don't get outside nearly often enough and don't know much of anything about the Earth they say they are defending. Hence, their emotional ties to nature are not strong. Virtually all good field naturalists I've known throughout my life are strongly ecocentric. There's a reason for this. Naturalists spend their lives observing wild creatures in wild places, they develop affection and feelings of kinship with these creatures, and they want to see them protected from harm. The practice of natural history may be the key to restoring joy to conservation (Noss, 2013), and for helping people recognize intrinsic value in nature. ■

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