

# My path to ecocentrism

I learned when I was a child, with some prodding from my father, to appreciate and empathize with the wild. This further developed during my teenage years, a process made easier by the close proximity of both the family cottage and by frequent visits to the nearby Gatineau Park. As I grew older, trips to Algonquin Park and other wild places (but which I now realize had already been much lessened from their original state) facilitated an increasing love for the wild. This process was hastened by the stark contrast between the quiet beauty of the wild and the harsh reality of the barrenness, the noise, and the pavement and concrete on returning to the city. I started to ask myself how one could be so right and the other so crass, ugly and empty of value. Often I was astonished that I had voluntarily returned at all.

Years ago, I started to flower watch, more or less akin to bird watching. I came to love these elegant ephemeral lives and through them to appreciate the beauty of the Earth. Then, startlingly, the Earth started occasionally to speak to me (as she would, I suppose, to any who listened). There was Iris Pond, Crow Lake's blue flags, Gatineau's firefly night, the Alvar's low bindweed day, the Tim River's lady slipper hill and Ragged's shimmering light show. And the comets! I was repeatedly jolted by these messages, these brief flashes of intuition, and it slowly became obvious that, rather than being an observer, I was a *participant*, a part of all this. The wonder of it was that it took so long, that I had to be repeatedly knocked on the head, for me to notice, to integrate it into myself. After understanding had

dawned, my realization of being part of the Earth became more internal; I was changed, and much that had been previously obscure became casually real. On the personal, emotional level, I started to feel a strong empathy, of oneness, with the Earth and her creatures. In many ways their joy is my joy; their loss is my loss. Their needs are, in some way, my needs. In some indefinable and indescribable way, I sometimes feel, strongly at times, that we are (at least partially) an integrated whole. It became important to follow my heart and express my love and feelings for the Earth and her creatures.

Simultaneously, it slowly became obvious that the places of value I loved, and the Earth herself, with which I was discovering a co-identity, were being smashed by the juggernauts of the human population explosion and rising consumption. Incrementally, facilitated by a moving baseline, the new norm of development, pavement and concrete was crawling across the landscape. It seemed that everywhere life and diversity was being overwhelmed by dead things and monoculture domesticates.

My many thoughts and feelings were disorganized and often at cross purposes. Early on I wrote letters to politicians about the seal slaughter, among other things. Politically my family had been Progressive Conservatives, but much that they represented I could not support, although I have retained a bit of right-wing thinking. In fact I was not able to support any party as, at best, what I was feeling was only very partially represented by the mainstream parties. Additionally, the parties all supported

## Ian Whyte

### About the author

Ian is a field naturalist who lives in Ottawa, ON, Canada.

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some policies which I abhorred. Later, I joined groups like the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and the Green Party, which all supported working within the system. It was not for another ten or fifteen years that I came to fully realize the futility of working within the system, which was (and is) dedicated to consuming the whole Earth, until death reigns everywhere.

Sometime in the late 1980s, I met David Orton, a committed Marxist, and he introduced me to Deep Ecology. Suddenly, all my disparate thoughts snapped into place, with hardly a loose end anywhere. I instantly became a follower of the Deep Ecology philosophy. It made such good sense and cleared up so much that had been obscure before. This wonderfully coherent philosophy



Painted trillium.

clearly stated that all creatures have inherent value, in and of themselves, that humans were taking too much, and that things must change. Wow! I continued the conversation with David until his death in 2011. He was adamantly against both compromise and mainline groups or politics. I gradually came to accept the realization stated immediately above, of the futility of working within the system. Realization is one thing, acting on it completely another. It is hard to negate a lifetime of values, and to then strike out in a completely new direction. How will one survive in the once familiar but now inimical territory? I have not yet resolved this conundrum.

David, chiefly, but aided by me and several others, developed and propounded a version of Deep Ecology which included a strong commitment to social justice and which became known as Left Biocentrism. It is through this lens that I see the world, or at least through which I try to see it. Over time I've come to adopt the term 'social ecocentrism' to mean the same thing. We started a listserv to discuss ecocentric issues which, now called the Ecocentric Alliance, continues on today.

During this time, I was fortunate also to come into a lifelong friendship with Ted Mosquin (co-author of *A Manifesto for Earth* [[www.ecocentricalliance.org/#mfe](http://www.ecocentricalliance.org/#mfe)]). His immense knowledge of natural history and, resulting both from this and his friendship with Stan Rowe, his firm Deep Ecological convictions, gave guidance to my own development. He looked at things from a different, but similar, position to David's; the meld of the two was very helpful to me. In particular, Ted helped me realize that there was an important place for collective responsibility, alongside but different from individual responsibility: in fact, that in many areas, collective is the only responsibility that counts and that can make any difference to a problem. Also, Ted was influential in my realization that there was an Earth ethic; one merely had to look at the Earth and

her history to discern what she wanted, and one would then be able to figure out a right course of action.

There were many books which helped me on my way. Early on Thoreau's *Walden*, Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, Rowe's *Home Place* and Livingston's *Fallacy Of Wildlife Conservation* led the way. Slightly later came Catton's *Overshoot*, Naess's *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Bahro's *Avoiding Social and Ecological Disaster*, Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous*, and, after that, Livingston's *Rogue Primate*. In a similar vein, both *Earth First! Journal* and *Wild Earth* influenced me. Of course there were many others, but these are the ones I particularly remember.

My arrival at an ecocentric viewpoint was enabled by many things. First there was the slowly developing realization that I loved the wild, which was facilitated by many years of relatively easy access to it. Secondly, this led to, and was accompanied by, flower watching – each fed the other. The flowers opened a multi-faceted beautiful world which had always been there but is unseen by most. Thirdly, the Earth herself helped immensely with the brief glimpses of her alternative reality, granted me once I became receptive. Fourthly, I met two very different but wonderful teachers, both of whom remained lifelong friends. And, finally, an important thread was provided by knowledge garnered from books, some classic and some not.

As I age, it seems that smaller things can elicit amazing responses. Time stops as I gaze at the exquisite and delicate beauty of the ephemeral *Hepatica*. The muggy heat of a summer's day on a swampy pond captivates me in a sunny magical wonderland. The real world always beckons – and sometimes allows a meeting.

One thing has been consistent throughout this lifelong change. Nothing ever occurred in groups, in the built environment, or while in conversation. Revelations mostly happened when I was alone, or while in the company of my wife of over 40 years. ■

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