

An ecocentric journey

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One of the central questions animating my decades-long research has been: *What precipitates dramatic mobilization toward environmental and social justice?* In this effort I have become especially interested in the roots of biocentric and ecocentric values and have interviewed hundreds of thinkers and activists, and read many of their works. I learned that for some, there is a decisive moment in their ecocentric journey. For others, the process has been more gradual, with a number of forks along the path as they wound their way toward such a perspective. I am more accustomed (and comfortable) exploring experiences of others than I am relating my own. Yet I have had experiences that resemble those of others with whom I have spoken. So, despite some personal reticence, at the request of *The Ecological Citizen* – and thinking that perhaps some readers will find it helpful – I'll do my best to reflect on my own.

I am one of the many who cannot identify a specific decisive event in my ecocentric journey. There are many things in my past that I think may have played a role, but what that influence might have been is difficult to assess. I wonder, for example, what role my father's experience as a combat soldier, and liberator of the Dachau concentration camp, might have played. He died before I could have an adult conversation with him, but I surmise that his post-war vocation as a geologist, his desire to spend time in wild areas, and his membership of the Sierra Club were in part because, like so many soldiers, he had lost some innocence, and perhaps even some connection – some trust – in his own species. One consequence of this may have been that, when we were young, my brothers and I were regularly taken camping in the mountains and

deserts of the western US. I cannot say that this conveyed great meaning to me, but it was adventurous fun and I wonder whether the privilege of being in relatively intact biological systems imprinted itself, somehow, on my young mind and heart.

Unfortunately, my father and mother, well before the time I entered my teenage years, had a deeply troubled relationship. Although I will never know all the reasons for this, what was obvious is that my mother became deeply distraught and I witnessed her sometimes violent behaviour toward my father. On one such occasion, in the middle of the night, after something was thrown through a window in anger by her, I left and wandered down to the ocean, only a few hundred meters from where we then lived in Ventura, California. I was probably about fourteen years old. Distressed, I went and sat on a rock jetty. Gradually I began to notice my surroundings. Schools of anchovies jumped in the light of the moon reflecting on the sea's surface. After a while, clouds floated across the sky and obscured the moon. The stars intensified. Even the Milky Way galaxy appeared, since there was less light pollution from the city back then. As I sat there, the travails at home, behind me, retreated from my mind, and I realized – and have known ever since – how tiny and insignificant we are. And I felt viscerally how wondrous and beautiful the world is, especially when one can look at it with the madness of the human world out of sight, as it is when we stare at a great wild ecosystem, like the ocean. I found myself feeling, despite the pain on the family front, that there was something right and good about the universe. The experience left me with a lifelong understanding that, in the big picture, my own travails, and

that of my species, were of little ultimate significance. This realization has been liberating.

I blundered on coping with the problems at home, largely without adult supervision, and ended up finding people who cared about me among evangelical Christians. Their concern may have been foremost with my soul but they were good to me. My years within that religious tradition probably kept me out of some trouble. When I was finally able to get my mother stabilized and go away to college, I double-majored in Psychology and Religion. There I encountered the so-called liberation theologians who were inspiring Christians to dramatic, risky and sometimes violent acts in resistance to authoritarian and plutocratic regimes, as well as other Christians who took seriously the non-violent teachings of Jesus. Convinced that, despite their different approaches, these approaches to Christianity were trying to promote a more just world, I became a Christian social activist and entered an evangelical Protestant seminary. There I participated with other activists battling nuclear power and weapons technologies, resisting US policies in Central and South America, and promoting disinvestment in companies doing business in apartheid South Africa.

Despite finding a small activist community, I lost my Christian faith while there. My mind could not accept the existence and goodness of the angry, capricious God of Abraham, who would order the slaying of entire populations during war, permit rape and slavery, and demand that humans be loyal and engage in blood sacrifice to appease him. I concluded that if there were such a God, the only moral stance would be to stand against Him in abject resistance.

Even if the tradition's theodicy (theological jargon for efforts to explain why a powerful god allows bad things to occur) could have convinced me of the existence and goodness of a universe-governing god, I was also coming to see that concern about something I cared about was almost entirely missing from

the tradition: a valuation of wild organisms and biologically diverse ecosystems. This concern grew after high school when I became a California State Park Lifeguard, spending a great deal of time in the ocean, which I still consider my first love.

One thing that was especially impactful during my lifeguard career was learning, and observing, that the pesticide DDT had killed off most of California's brown pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*). Indeed, they had disappeared from the coast by the time I started lifeguarding, which was in 1973, the same year this poison was banned. It was not until about 1980 that the few survivors from a rookery on the offshore Channel Islands began repopulating the coast. Like many surfers and ocean lovers I was fond of these seabirds. I had spent many hours watching them, considering their playfulness and intelligence. I imagined them as kindred spirits. Their near extinction and dramatic recovery made a big impression on me.

During my Park Service years I would often seek solitude after the intense and busy summer season through solo backpacking trips in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Since I had been there over many years, I was able to see the expansion of human settlements, the increasing air pollution, and the scars from logging and grazing. I also began to learn more about the ecological dimensions of these insults, such as the way air pollution was threatening the Sierra's remaining ancient redwoods, the *Sequoiadendron giganteum* (commonly known as the giant sequoia). I learned as well that the fish we enjoyed catching and eating were put into lakes where they never existed previously, all for the pleasure of anglers like me (and the profits of those catering to us). But these fish were feeding on the insects that native amphibian species needed to survive. At a visceral level that just did not seem right.

Although my concern about such dynamics was growing during the 1980s while I pursued a PhD in ethics, none of my teachers and few of my fellow students seemed to care about issues like that, let alone the emerging environmental crisis itself. Only later would I learn that the legal theorist Christopher Stone, who

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wrote the seminal article, ‘Should trees have standing’ (Stone, 1972; 1974), arguing that humans should be allowed to speak up for other species, was a professor at the University of Southern California, where I was studying.

The lack of mentors interested in the environment led me to perk up when, in about 1987, I began to notice stories about an Earth First! movement battling to defend forests and wildlife in the western US, even using extra-legal tactics developed by the anti-war, anti-nuclear and civil rights movements. I began to get the movement’s publications and realized that they were expressing feelings I had, but that few around me shared. So, soon after finishing my PhD (in 1988), I decided that I would study this movement, using it as a muse for my then underdeveloped *environmental ethics*.

I am still writing about this movement and my entanglement with it, and so here I will just mention three memorable moments that occurred during this research.

In 1989 I assumed a position at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh; the following summer I attended my first Earth First! wildlands gathering, which was held in a National Forest in Northern Wisconsin. After approximately 30 activists gathered around a campfire, a songfest commenced. The first song sung was *I Am an Animal*, by the environmental balladeer Dana Lyons (www.danalyons.com). Funny, and sung in a kind of erotic way, its chorus and verses declared that we are animals, like other animals; we are wild like them; we eat, dance and love like them. The song also celebrated plants and ended with long and loud howls from the assembled *Homo sapiens*.

Hearing this song I recognized that it was a kind of ritual of inclusion in the way it blurred the line between humans and other organisms. And, personally, the song struck a chord within me with its emphasis on our own animality. Looking back with some embarrassment, I must acknowledge that, despite having received a decent education in the biological sciences and understanding the explanatory power of the theory of evolution, I had not *really* considered myself

an animal. I had to ask myself why. Perhaps, I thought, it was because in mainstream society, people regularly speak in ways that distinguish humans from animals. Perhaps it was because the dominant religions of the world draw a sharp distinction between humans and other organisms, in part as a strategy of cognitive distancing from them, so we could more easily be indifferent to their well-being and the health of the ecosystems they depend on. I was reminded that the world’s religions typically and self-servingly consider our own species to be of greater value than other ones. Around that campfire that night, I began a long pondering of the implications of these thoughts.¹

Because these Earth First! activists were arguing that human beings were precipitating a massive extinction event, and because ethics requires one to figure out what the values *and* facts are that are pertinent to a given issue, I began to read widely in the environmental sciences. Especially influential were understandings emerging from conservation biology and island biogeography. It did not take long for me to realize that human beings, through the devastating impact of such activities as logging, mining, river damming and road-building, were driving untold species off the planet, and that anthropogenic climate change was looming as possibly the most critical extinction driver yet. I also began to understand where and why some bioregions are exceptionally rich in biodiversity and biomass, and are thus particularly important to conserve, especially if conservation is motivated by ecocentric values.

I attended another wildlands gathering during the summer of 1991 in Vermont; while sitting in a meadow through many workshops, I was stunned by the number and beauty of all the insects who would alight upon me and my neighbours. This reinforced what I had been reading about the importance and value of biodiversity, and that generally speaking, lower elevation habitats were more important for biodiversity conservation than the alpine environments I had come to love in California.

These are some of the more personal experiences that I consider significant in my own journey to ecocentrism. But they did not occur alone: they were shaped in a complex way by intensive reading of the emerging corpus of scholarship in environmental history and ethics. At that time, the late 1980s and early 1990s, the corpus was still small, which made it relatively easy to catch up. The usual suspects had their influences: Thoreau, Muir, Carson and Leopold, of course, but many others as well, including those developing various subfields in environmental studies. I also spent considerable time investigating the obstacles to, and possibility of, religious individuals and groups promoting ecologically and socially adaptive behaviours. Most influential on me were those writers who were clearly grounding their ethics in evolutionary and ecological understandings, which tend to erode ideologies of human supremacy. In these understandings, as complemented by my growing ecological understanding, I found a compelling ethics of kinship between humans and all other organisms. Like Darwin intimated, and Leopold drew out explicitly, such an ethics could be based on an understanding that all organisms share a long evolutionary history and a common ancestor. I have come to believe and have argued that through such facts one can build what scholars variously call biocentric, ecocentric or deep ecological ethics (e.g. see Taylor [2017]).

The Norwegian philosopher who coined the term 'deep ecology', Arne Naess, once remarked that there are many ways that people can take in order to arrive at the realization that all species have value, even if humanity cannot discern a 'use' for them. This leads me to wonder about many other things that might have played a role in my own path to ecocentrism.

Did the time, when I was in elementary school, when a woodland playground was bulldozed to make way for another housing development, play a role? Until a similar thing, decades later, happened to my own son, who came home heartbroken and angry,

I had forgotten about my own experience. His reaction triggered my memory of my own outrage, and how that was dismissed by my parents with a cavalier statement that I remember as, "well, that's progress." At least, remembering this when seeing my son's reaction, helped me to empathize with him, as well as the many activists and thinkers who have told me of similar experiences – no small number of whom have said these were important, if not decisive, in their own ecocentric journeys.

Did the mythic stories by JRR Tolkien about Middle-earth, wherein the hobbits, elves, dwarves, rangers and ents rose up against the forces of world destruction, play a role of arousing a romantic desire to play some heroic role in the saving of our world? I found his books moving and read them several times while a teenager. I later discovered a number of thinkers and activists who were also moved by these stories and consider them important in their own ecocentric journeys.

Have other arts helped to transform people's worldviews and environmental passions? One African American activist told me that he traced his environmental career to the Captain Planet cartoons, noting that there was little nature around his home in Queens, New York, to inspire his concerns. I know still younger ecocentric activists who find inspiration in the heroes and heroines of the Harry Potter novels. Still others have told me they were first moved to action watching the Whale Wars television documentaries, where Sea Shepherd activists risked their lives to save whales and other marine life on the high seas. I expect soon to meet young activists who found the motion picture *Avatar* an important part of their own awakening to environmental concerns and indigenous rights (cf. Taylor, 2013).

I have also found, both in books and interviews, that many ecocentrics have had, sometimes for reasons similar to my own, difficulty connecting to and trusting members of their own species. I have a theory about this, which I think, at least for me, holds true: Some who have suffered abuse or neglect from those from whom they most needed love, look for it beyond their own

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kind. We are, after all, social creatures; how could we not seek belonging and connection? So, sometimes, some people find the social connections they need in other creatures. And sometimes such experiences lead people to recognize the agency and value of non-human organisms, which leads in turn to lives of concern and action that extend beyond the human community.

Our lives are, just like the environmental and social systems they belong to, multivariate and complicated. It is not easy to understand ourselves, let alone others. And yet, in sometimes inexplicable and surprising ways, some people fall in love, outward, with all of life. And people defend what they love. ■

Notes

¹ I have conducted extensive research to assess claims that this or that of the world's predominant religions do or do not promote pro-environmental values and behaviours. My reluctant conclusion is that that only a small proportion of their devotees (whatever the tradition) end up with strong environmentally friendly beliefs and action priorities. The partial exception is that a greater proportion of

indigenous societies have developed ecologically and socially adaptive perceptions and practices. See Taylor (2016) and Taylor *et al.* (2016); see also Taylor (2010).

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