

Another route to ecocentrism

I grew up in Huddersfield in the industrial conurbation of West Yorkshire, living for eighteen years in a council house there. My parents both worked in local factories, my father a lathe operator in an engineering works and mother sewing in a textile mill. Many of my father's relatives, however, lived in Scotland and indeed further north. My father had grown up in the Shetland Isles before World War Two took him into the army.

The contrast between the crowded towns of industrial England and the open spaces around the family croft on Shetland made a big impression on me when we visited there. In retrospect, I now see that the land there, as across most of the British uplands, is a man-made wet desert, thanks to massive deforestation followed by overgrazing of sheep and deer herds as well as grouse moors. On the croft itself, fertilizer applications to enrich the grass have produced extensive eutrophication in the nearby loch.

Those first experiences made me very aware that industrial conurbations were not the only environments in which people could live. The sinking of the oil tanker *Torrey Canyon* in 1967 (still the worst oil spill in the history of the UK) also added to my growing awareness of the human impact and its negative sides. The then-raging Vietnam War spotlighted another side to the world's ills.

In my last year at school, I thought that better land-use management might be one way forward, so I went to study a Town and Country planning degree course at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1968. However, I soon saw the error of my choice, since planning seemed to be all about facilitating more growth, with, if lucky, a few cosmetics to hide its worst features. We were taken on many visits, such as to a motorway

construction site, dam building (we were some of the last people to walk along the North Tyne before it was flooded by Kielder Dam, creating the biggest artificial lake in Britain), 'exotic' conifer plantations (again the biggest in Britain), and a heavily mechanized and monocultural farm. All were presented as 'progress'.

A particular turning point for me was a visit to a big new housing scheme that quickly turned into a social disaster. I also read articles and books by *The Observer's* planning correspondent Ian Nairn, who criticized what he called "subtopia" – drab urban sprawl (Nairn, 1957; Darley, 2019). Britain's towns and cities were indeed being torn apart by developments that Newcastle city planner Wilfred Burn called "new towns for old" (Burns, 1963). It was a wrecking ball on a scale greater than the destruction caused by the *Luftwaffe* in the war (Stamp, 2010). As a teenager, I had seen the process first hand, with fine old Victorian buildings demolished to make way for glass and concrete blocks across the towns and cities of West Yorkshire.

My politics were partly shaped by a great uncle, a former coal miner who had an extensive Left Book Club collection, which I worked my way through. I joined in the Labour Party Young Socialists in time for the 1966 General Election, my first experience of campaigning. In 1968, I joined the International Socialists (now Socialist Workers Party). It regarded the Soviet Union, China and the satellite states of Eastern Europe as 'state capitalist', in no way socialist. For a period, I worked as the full-time district organizer.

Following my eviction, along with many others, from that organisation in the mid-1970s for opposing its 'Leninization', I became involved in various 'solidarity'

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campaigns (Chile *etc.*) and helped at a radical bookshop called 'Days of Hope' in downtown Newcastle. In the meantime, I had got a job teaching in a college of further education (mainly sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds, plus some adult 'returners').

During this period, I read *Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith and Allen, 1972) and *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). The two books lodged in my brain the nagging thought that, on a finite planet, there could not be infinite growth. I also heard the American biologist Barry Commoner and the Australian trade unionist Jack Munday (leader of the 'green bans' movement in Sydney; see Burgmann and Burgmann [2011]) give a joint lecture in 1973. Commoner denied any threat from overpopulation. That position seemed plain daft to me, given that I already realized that more people must put more pressure on a finite and, beyond a certain point, fragile planet. Yet Commoner forcefully explained the dangers of messing around with Mother Earth, and his concept of 'flawed technology' certainly spotlights *some* significant parts of the ecological problem (Commoner, 1971).

During my time at university, I spent every summer working as a relief lock keeper on the River Thames. It too provided more education, this time about the so-called 'tragedy of the commons'. The river was essentially an open-access but finite resource. As a result, more and more people kept hiring or buying boats and trying to sail them on the river. The result was routine congestion, which sometimes, especially on sunny Sundays, led to a very long wait to get through the lock, due to the sheer number of boats. Such growth seemed counter-productive, destroying the very pleasures people sought in the first place. It was also one that could only be resolved by the setting of public limits on boating.

Through the 1970s, my first vague thoughts about the significance of the Earth's life-support systems and the nature of threats to them began to firm up. I did more reading, with Paul Ehrlich, Herman Daly and Edward Goldsmith in particular making a big impact on me. Because I had always enjoyed 'wild' environments, I had no problem

in accepting notions about the intrinsic worth of landforms and of individual non-human species, when I came across books that argued this position. Writings by David Ehrenfeld and John Livingston especially impressed me. In contrast, utilitarian, anthropocentric arguments about environmental conservation seemed a limited and limiting standpoint – one that would eventually lead to acquiescence in the destruction of life and landforms not deemed to be 'useful'.

By the mid-70s, I had become active in the Newcastle branch of the Socialist Environment and Resources Association, before joining what was then known as the Ecology Party towards the end of the decade. I started to do more writing as well as direct campaigning. That included books, pamphlets and entries for encyclopedias (*e.g.* Irvine, 1989; Irvine and Ponton, 1988). At the start of the 1990s, I was elected to the first national executive of the (renamed) Green Party of England and Wales.

For a number of years I was an Associate Editor of *The Ecologist* magazine. I have contributed articles and reviews to several magazines including *The Ecologist*, *Resurgence* and *Wild Earth*. I have written on many topics, from 'limits to growth' and overpopulation, to environmental education. I also wrote material on media matters for journals in that field, as well as a full-length study of the Ridley Scott film *Gladiator* (Irvine, 2008). At times I tried to combine the themes of film analysis and ecology.

Direct contact with the Earth's marvels has been a truly life-enhancing experience and education for me. Three events stand out in particular. First was a hike through the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve in Canada. At one point, the trail crossed from secondary growth into primal forest. The contrast between the two, between ecological poverty and richness, was striking. The second was a trip out on the Pacific in a little motorboat, in which we found ourselves right next to a huge whale that suddenly surfaced. The magnificence of this creature only underlined the folly of people who destroy the wonders of creation. The third was on another visit to western Canada, when we went for a hike

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across Sunshine Meadows near Banff. A Park Ranger there told us that the bears had been driven from the area simply because of the sheer number of people who now regularly hike there (which, of course, included us!).

However the realization was also dawning on me that the environmentalism of *some* so-called ‘greens’ was actually very shallow. Their agenda is an anthropocentric one and at odds with a serious appreciation of the various social and environmental limits to growth. In particular, many deny the threat from human population growth, as if our numbers do not count. There are also widespread fantasies about the productive power of new technology, coupled to unwarranted faith in ‘technofixes’. Thus such people often say that conversion of industry from arms production to more socially useful products would do the trick, not realizing that nature’s accounts make no distinction between armoured cars and ambulances. Nor is there proper recognition of the extent of human ‘overshoot’ and need not just for a ‘steady-state’ economy but also in several sectors, substantial ‘degrowth’.

On this journey to ecocentrism, I met and corresponded with many people who impressed and influenced me. I became friends with Teddy Goldsmith, for example. He was a true polymath and a generous man. His magnum opus, *The Way* (Goldsmith, 1992), is surely a major contribution to the ecocentric canon, though at times it is a bit deterministic in its analysis and makes the mistake of spending too much time looking backwards rather than forwards.

I also corresponded several times with Canadian scientist Stan Rowe. His books (e.g. Rowe, 2006) should be on every ecocentric shelf. I did worry, however, when he criticized Aldo Leopold for promoting ‘biocentrism’ rather than ‘ecocentrism’. Stan may have had a point but, to the vast majority of ‘outsiders’, this debate is a bit like arguments over how many angels can stand on the head of a pin. That said, Stan was right to consider the ethical significance of landforms as well as life forms, geology as well as biology.

At present, I am still an active member of the Green Party on Tyneside and co-

chair of the party’s regional council, a body with oversight of party strategy, manifesto approval and guardian of its ‘well-being’. Its defects notwithstanding, there is no political alternative in the current scene. All the other political parties in the UK are far, far more flawed.

But I’ve always felt that party politics must also be rooted in ‘extra-parliamentary’ activities such as mass protests, pickets and boycotts. So I’ve also been active in several grassroots campaigns, not least against the growth-oriented development plans of local councils. I am a strong supporter of the national pressure group Population Matters (<https://populationmatters.org>), one of the few organizations in the UK that treats human numbers with the seriousness and urgency they deserve.

We urgently need action for sustainability at all levels by all non-violent means – judicious mixtures of both ‘carrot’ and ‘stick’, of both ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’. Certainly, individual lifestyle change and purely voluntary change are far from enough. Though I remain hopeful about the better side of humans, I cannot swallow the romantic image of the masses lodged in the minds of many radicals. There is a lot of empty rhetoric about ‘empowerment’ and ‘direct democracy’. I’ve always been doubtful whether they are the roads to sustainability, unless other changes – especially at the level of values and goals – accompanied them. The same pattern repeats itself when ‘Western’ radicals find ways to excuse or deny the part played by other cultures and countries in planetary destruction.

I have come to the general conclusion that the ecological crisis is ultimately a crisis of culture and beliefs. It cannot be reduced to economics, very important though factors such as poverty and injustice can be. The most thoroughly democratic and equitable social system could set totally unsustainable goals. Most people either worship at the shrine of ever-higher consumption or imbibe the poison of religious fundamentalism.

Over rather many years of political activity, I’ve seen some battles won but

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many more lost. But I've always thought it important to take a stand, whatever the chances of success. Looking back, it now seems so obvious that, even if all these campaigns had been triumphant, none would have achieved anything of lasting value unless we humans find the right relationship to the rest of nature. Furthermore, in each and every one of those campaigns, the particular problem would have been less serious and more easily resolved if humankind had not been so numerous.

I often feel that we have collectively passed the point of no return. The juggernaut of destruction now seems so big and is moving too fast to be stopped before vast and irreparable damage to planet Earth has taken place. The industrialization of countries such as Brazil, China and India, with the explosive growth of the so-called 'new middle class' around the world, is probably that final straw which will break the proverbial camel's back.

I do hope I am wrong! I have to keep reminding myself of the dictum that it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness. ■

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