The Ecological Citizen

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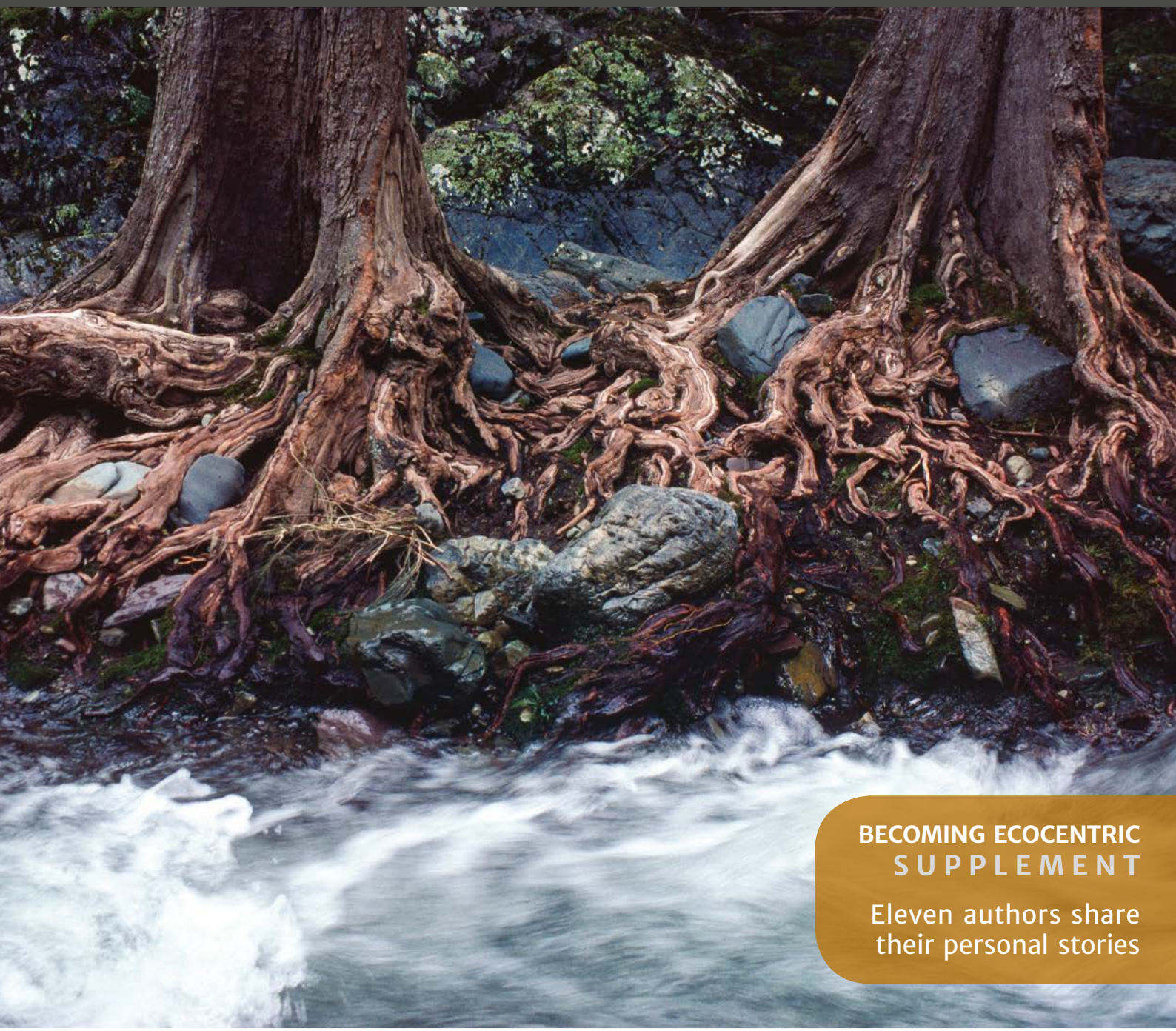
Advancing ecological knowledge | Championing Earth-centred action | Inspiring ecocentric citizenship



BECOMING ECOCENTRIC
SUPPLEMENT

Eleven authors share their personal stories

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The Ecological Citizen

An ecocentric, peer-reviewed, free-to-access journal

ISSN 2515-1967

Aims

1 Advancing ecological knowledge
2 Championing Earth-centred action
3 Inspiring ecocentric citizenship
4 Promoting ecocentrism in political debates
5 Nurturing an ecocentric lexicon

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A note on terminology

Because of the extent to which some non-ecocentric terms are embedded in the English language, it is sometimes necessary for a sentence to deviate from a perfectly ecocentric grounding. The 'natural world' and 'environment', for instance, both split humans from the rest of nature but in some cases are very difficult to avoid without creating overly complex phrases. For usage notes relating to terms such as these, when they appear in the Journal, along with other language considerations, please visit: www.ecologicalcitizen.net/lexicon.html

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> "I believe that childlike feelings for the Earth and its marvels should be nourished and accepted as fundamental truths in their own right. They should not be watered down with tears for the sad music of humanity."
>
> **Stan Rowe**

The Ecocentric ALLIANCE

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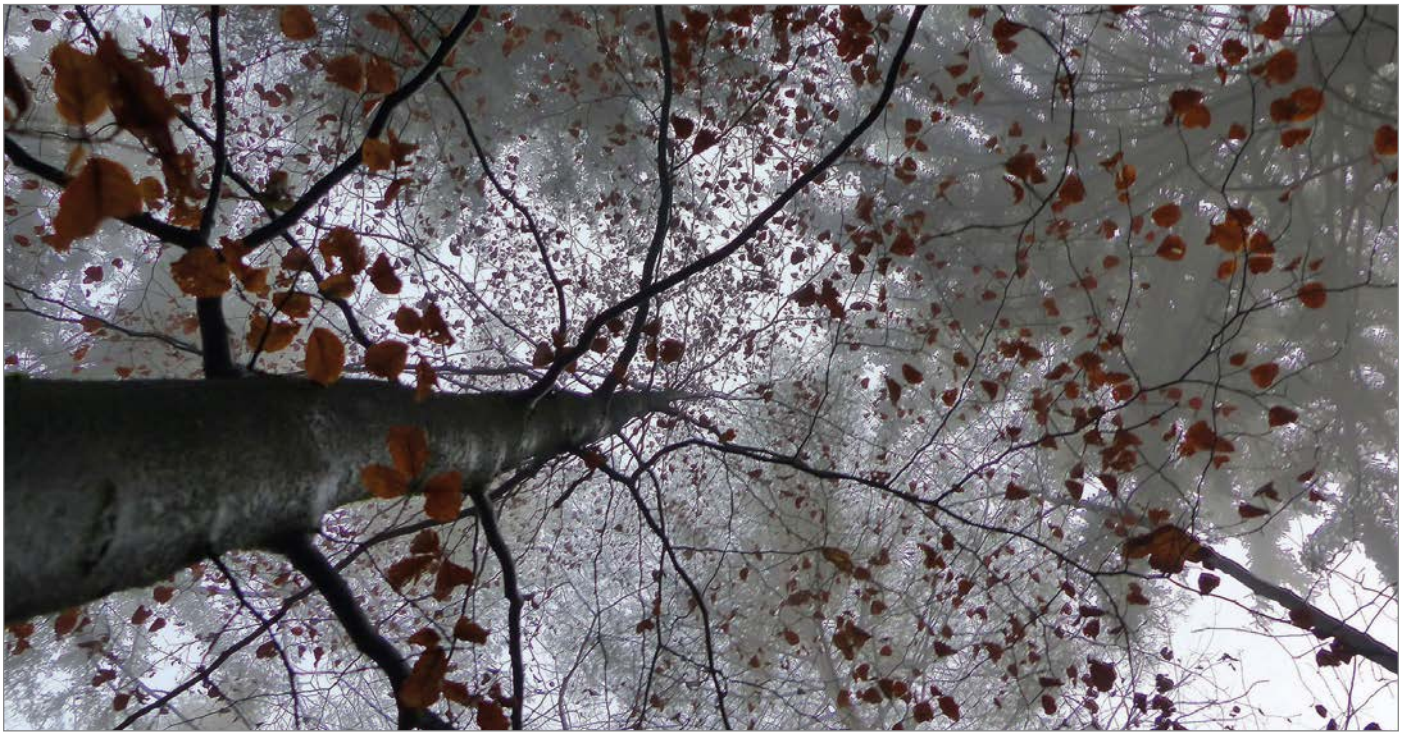
Flood-scoured *Casuarina* roots in the Blue Mountains National Park, NSW, Australia (courtesy of www.ianbrownphotography.com).

Ian Brown



A European beech in Austria

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Sharing stories of deep connection

Haydn Washington

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Citation

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Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

It struck me while writing a paper on ecocentrism for issue one of *The Ecological Citizen* that we tend – as academics – to overanalyse nature and our bond with her. After all, academics *love* to talk! So I suggested this supplement of essays on "how I came to ecocentrism" to try to bring forth the deep stories and feelings involved. Originally it was going to be six essays, but it grew through peer-group discussion, and so now we have eleven fascinating essays. There *is* a mystery involved in talking about this (which Helen Kopnina and others touch on in their essays): given that all children have a sense of wonder at nature, why are only *some* adults ecocentric? After all, the natural world around us is incredibly beautiful and full of wonder, so why do many adults seem blind to this? The short answer is education and culture, and the anthropocentric worldview and ethics of that culture. I would add also that going through puberty and finding a mate and a job can easily bury our bond with nature. Like Reed Noss, I was lucky to 'never grow up', to stay a 'big kid' and keep alive my wonder at life. These essays give glimpses of insight on this debate. Non-human animals were key teachers about ecocentrism for several of us – the lyrebird for me, the moose and the toad for John Vucetich, the horse Freja for Reingard Spannring, the dog Belisarius for Eileen Crist, and many animals for Marc Bekoff and John (Jack) Piccolo. Plants, or rather flowers in particular, were key teachers for Ian Whyte. 'Place' itself is also a key teacher. For me it was the Colo Gorge and later my land on Nullo Mountain; for Helen Kopnina it was the wilds of Russia as a child; for Eileen Crist it was the wilds near her home and later in Greece.

There is also the aspect of the positive influence of a *mentor*. Jack Piccolo speaks of the positive impact that Bob Behnke and Holmes Rolston had on his ecocentrism. Ian Whyte reflects on the positive impact of meeting both David Orton and Ted Mosquin. Joe Gray remembers the positive impact of meeting Patrick Curry. For me it was meeting my 'spiritual sister' Heidi while doing ecology at university. Being able to *talk about nature*, about our wonder at her, about our responsibilities to her, is important. Similarly, having people look at you as if you were mad can be a real turn-off from expressing wonder or ecocentrism or the sacredness of place. I have friends who I soon found steered right away from such discussions. It seemed especially that they could not discuss eco-spirituality. I can understand how damaging to one's bond with nature it would be if everyone did this. Those of us with mentors were thus lucky we had them. Of course the greatest mentor is nature herself. Empathy, and the ability to listen to place, is such a key part of becoming ecocentric – it comes out in all these stories.

Several authors here feel they were born ecocentric, although Reed Noss argues that some people are genetically more prone to biophilia (loving life) than others. Eileen Crist argues: "Like every human being is, I was born in love with the Earth." Joe Gray tells an interesting story in which an ecocentric child became an adult who did not see more-than-human nature as involving ethics, and then changed to biocentrism and then ecocentrism, largely from what he calls a "rational leap". Now, like Eileen, I have always argued that every child feels wonder at life and that they are innately ecocentric. For example, I once told primary school kids in the Australian bush about the extinction crisis, and (playing devil's advocate) asked them if it mattered.

They responded: "It is just wrong!" And of course they were correct: they understood the ethics of what society is doing very well. How brainwashed then has society become as adults to forget the wisdom of childhood? However, I feel the moral of Joe's story is that there *is* a way back to a buried ecocentrism.

I have spent a lot of time taking people into the Australian wilds, and I have spent a lot of time thinking about *how best* to rejuvenate people's sense of wonder and to change society's anthropocentric worldview, which in all senses is a dead end. My conclusion is that we will not turn things around without rediscovering that sense of wonder. That means going out into nature with our friends and family, slowing our busy minds, and relearning to listen to the land. As Richard Louv notes in *Last Child in the Woods*, Western society has never been as divorced from wild nature as it is today. All of us can be part of changing that, of speaking out for nature's rights, of speaking of our responsibilities to the rest of life, and of celebrating life and place. It has been a privilege to read these essays, where these authors stepped out from behind their 'academic persona' and spoke from the heart. It is in sharing stories of deep connection like this that we foster the wonder and caring that create change for the better. ■

Sunrise in Białowieża Forest, Poland
Melanie Andrej

How I came to ecocentrism: A sense of wonder

"I opened my eyes to stare into deep black eyes a few metres away. Fascinated eyes. Eyes of otherness. There was no fear, none at all. We watched in mutual astonishment at the incredibility of our 'being'. We existed at this moment and time, and the gulf between our histories and separate evolution was gone. Behind us soared steep banks of sand and vertical orange sandstone cliffs. It was just on dawn. There was no thought, nothing but the startling desire to hang on to a connection that we knew could not last – holding on to our harmony for yet another unlikely moment [...] Someone else in the group moved and turned over, and the Superb Lyrebird ran off up the sand slope to vanish into the bush. The connection across different animal realms was broken – though not quite gone. He was a distant relative of dinosaurs, the largest passerine bird in the world, and the greatest mimic of them all. I was a descendant of small furry mammals like shrews, that eventually stood up and walked as primates – yet for a moment we had been one."
(Washington, 2002: 7)

I came to ecocentrism out of empathy, listening and a *sense of wonder* at nature. As a child I used to ramble through the valley of Scotts Creek near Willoughby in Sydney, Australia. My school (a Steiner school) was near my home, and students were then allowed to wander the bush – and wonder. I used to sit happily by a red-bellied black snake basking in the sun, sharing a bond. My brother and I took delight in the sculptured landforms, caves with honey-combing and hidden grottos. Tawny frogmouth (related to nightjars) pretended to be dead sticks on trees, or sometimes looked at you with vast golden eyes. Some teachers called me 'Nature Boy', for I took delight in disappearing into the maze of tracks and seeing what each day presented. Small wonder that my favourite phrase became: "If you listen you will learn." I used to lie in the sun or shade, close my eyes and *listen*, feel the land around me, sharing a sense of belonging. It was due to that close communion with nature that I went to university to study ecology.

Until age 13, I wanted to send rockets to the moon. Walking through my valley, however, I saw people (who presumably moved there to have a bush view) throw rubbish over their back fence into the bush. I changed my mind, seeking to save *this* world, rather than fly spaceships to others. In 1974 (at age 18) I signed up for a bushwalk through the huge (and largely unknown) Colo wilderness, north-west of Sydney. We walked for five days down a deep sandstone gorge, through the heart of the largest wilderness in New South Wales, and revelled in knee-deep quicksand, giant boulder piles, and tangled mazes of water-gum thickets. It was while camping bivouacked (rolled in a groundsheet), on a sandbank where the Colo River rises, that at first light I woke to find my lyrebird (see https://is.gd/cJa8S8) standing, staring expectantly. Like Annie Dillard (1992: 12), who came face to face with a weasel, for a moment we swapped identity. It made me realize that here was the greatest mimic, yet one without a *human* voice to speak for his home. Soon I became the Secretary of the Colo Committee, which led the five-year campaign to create the 502,000-hectare

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Becoming ecocentric

Wollemi National Park (Washington, 2004: 52–67). I wrote later (2002: 8):

> At that moment and in the following idyllic sun-drenched days spent in that sandstone gorge, I fell in love with the land. Absolutely and indelibly. My sense of awe and wonder at the beauty of the place stunned me. I kept smiling at the sheer wonder of its existence. [...] And it was that moment which started (or at least catalyzed) my future path. It was that sense of wonder that seared through to the innermost parts of my 'self', my heart and soul.

So I became an activist as well as a scientist, and more than 40 years later I still walk the path that this experience catalysed.

So, what *is* our sense of wonder at the natural world? Many of us can remember this wonder from childhood. A yearning for a 'sense of place' is a perennial human longing. All peoples need a sense of 'my country', of belonging to a sustaining landscape they respond to in care and love (Rolston, 2012: 15). This can also be called a 're-enchantment' of the land (Tacey, 2000). Part of this sense of wonder is a feeling of being 'one' with the land, of belonging, of finding an 'ecological identity' (Thomashow, 1996: 18). This issue fascinated me to the extent that I wrote the book *A Sense of Wonder* (Washington, 2002). So, is our sense of wonder something we are born with, or do we learn it? Is it something more common in certain races or different societies? Does the fact that only 20% or so of people (in my Australian experience) get interested in environmental issues mean that only that percentage can *feel* the sense of wonder? Alternatively, does the growing interest in the environment in young people mean that our sense of wonder is growing? These are important questions.

The sense of wonder I am talking about here is a connection with the land. As such it must be considered spiritual, even if one does not call it religious. An Agnostic, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Muslim... all of these can feel a *sense of wonder*, even if they call it by varying names (Washington, 2002: 10). This is not something that should be trivialized as a fairy tale. It is about the fundamental relationship of humanity with the land, which has nurtured us for millions of years, one of the deepest and abiding loves of them all: *the love of the land*. There are also 'high points' in our sense of wonder (my lyrebird was one). I have called them "transcendent moments" (Washington, 2002: 43), and, interestingly, Louv (2005: 74) speaks of "transcendent experiences", while others have called them a "hierophany" or epiphany (Oelschlaeger, 1991). Such moments can change one's life (mine did). The sense of wonder is also about empathy. One must let down one's guard, open oneself up and let all one's senses absorb the beauty of the natural world. Aboriginal Elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr (Tacey, 2000) explains that there is a word in the Ngangikurungkurr language, *Dadirri*, which is "something like what you (white people) call 'contemplation'." She notes this is a key gift that the Aboriginal culture can share with other cultures.

"I have given many talks about wonder and realized quickly that most scientists felt *distinctly uncomfortable* talking about it."

I have given many talks about wonder and realized quickly that most scientists felt *distinctly uncomfortable* talking about it. Yet many did indeed feel it, and some would come up afterwards, and literally check that nobody could overhear us, and then say "Well, actually, when I was *x* years old I had this amazing experience in nature, and that was why I became a scientist." And yet they felt embarrassed, almost ashamed, as if it was somehow unscientific to feel wonder. What an indictment of both academia and society that our wonder at life has come to be seen as unacademic! Hence why academics *need to speak out* about the wonder they feel and their enchantment with the natural world. And – as the other essays in this supplement show – some are.

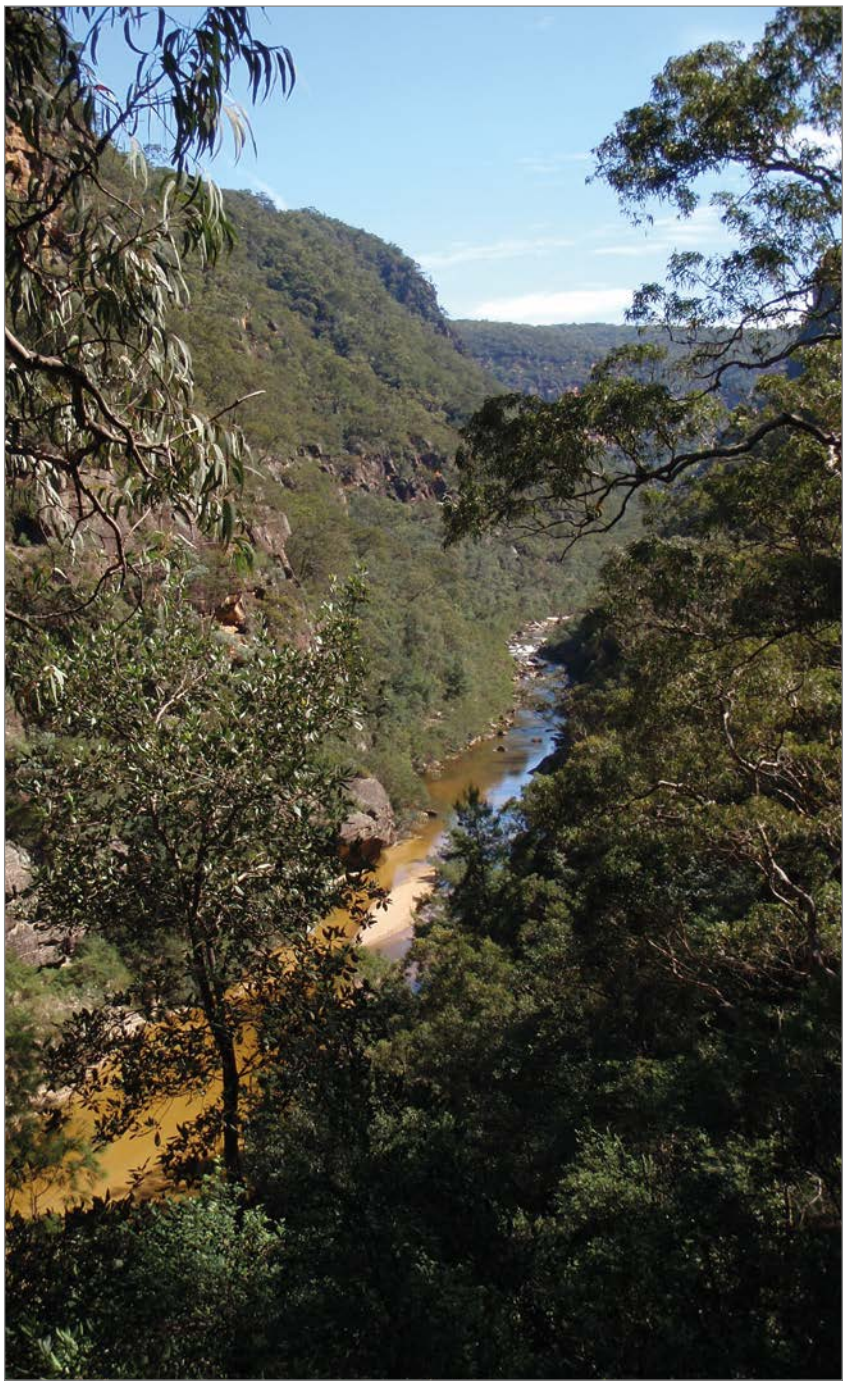
I believe that all children feel a sense of wonder, but it can get buried at puberty.

So how can we rejuvenate our sense of wonder? Some steps are:

- Be there with nature! *Belong* in the land.
- Take your children and friends to wild places so they can see the natural world as it really is, and bond with it.
- Take time to ponder... whether this is called meditation or empathy or prayer or contemplation or *Dadirri* or just sitting somewhere 'at one with the world'.
- Keep your imagination, creativity and artistic expression alive (poetry is my choice). In these you find the wellspring of your 'being', which renews your sense of wonder.
- Cherish the imagination of your children and youth in general, especially so they can survive the turmoil of puberty. Young people *need* our spiritual help while they undertake their own spiritual journeys (Washington, 2002: 97–9).

Encourage your empathy on a sunny day. Find a beautiful spot,let your defences down and empathize with the natural world. Meditate or just watch and ponder. Perhaps you too will find, as Henry David Thoreau (1854: 68) did, that:

> Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and something kindred to me... ■



The Colo River in Wollemi National Park, NSW, Australia – the author's special place of wonder.

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The importance of Earth jurisprudence, compassionate conservation and personal rewilding

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Becoming ecocentric

"That the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects is the central commitment of the Ecozoic. Existence itself is derived from and sustained by this intimacy of each being with every other being of the universe."
(Swimme and Berry, 1994: 243)

I came to ecocentrism as a youngster. My focus was on other animals, but, as time went on, I also incorporated humans and all of our homes into a broad ecocentric perspective. I always attribute my compassion for non-human animals to my mother's warm and compassionate soul, and my positive thinking, as well as my keeping dreams alive, to my incredibly optimistic father. In retrospect, I know I was very lucky to be born into a home where playfulness and laughter were highly valued, as was hard work. I didn't live with any animals except a goldfish. I used to talk to him as I ate breakfast. It felt very natural to do this. I told my folks that it wasn't nice to keep him cooped up alone. My parents told me that when I was around three years old I started asking them what animals – especially the dogs, squirrels, birds and ants with whom I had contact outside of our apartment in Brooklyn – were thinking and feeling. They said I was constantly paying attention to animals; not only was I attributing minds to them, but I also was very concerned with how they were treated. I always said that we also needed to mind and care for them, because they couldn't do it for themselves. My concern for individual animals has continued on for decades as I work in the rapidly developing field called compassionate conservation.

Ecocentrism recognizes that an Earth-centred, rather than a human-centred, view of nature, calls for a change in people's values if they favour humans over nature as a whole, including non-human animals and their homes. Earth jurisprudence can be viewed as "a philosophy of law and human governance that is based on the idea that humans are only one part of a wider community of beings and that the welfare of each member of that community is dependent on the welfare of the Earth as a whole" (Wikipedia, 2017). Thus, societies of humans are part of a wider community that incorporates societies of other animals and where they choose to live or are forced to live. All community members are dependent on one another. No individual is an island and we all depend on one another to thrive and to survive.

Embracing Earth jurisprudence is essential in the 'Anthropocene' – often called the 'age of humanity'. Given how human animals are plundering our magnificent planet and surrounds, I call the epoch, instead, the 'rage of inhumanity', in which the interests of humans regularly trump the interests of non-human animals. The idea that all of Earth's residents are part of an interconnected community forms the basis of my ideas about personal 'rewilding' that are outlined in my book *Rewilding Our Hearts* (Bekoff, 2014). The ideas are novel and call for personal (and some might say individual) spiritual transformations that serve to reconnect people to nature and to embrace the magnificence of our planet. All individuals are seen as stakeholders who must work together.

The growing international field of compassionate conservation also mandates that all individuals are stakeholders, and it is based on the following principles:

1 First, do no harm.
2 All individuals matter.

3 We must strive for peaceful coexistence among all of Earth's residents.

Currently, while many people talk about how all individuals matter, and how all individuals must work together, in the end human interests regularly trump those of non-humans. This has produced a world of daily chaos – a world that is falling apart. Personal rewilding and compassionate conservation can change how we go about 'business as usual' and can come to the rescue and reverse these destructive trends. As such, I've called for a 'rewilding manifesto' based on compassion and biophilia – our innate drive to connect with Mother Nature – that will help to foster hope for the future.

Along these lines, what I call the 'ethology of rewilding' entails focusing on what we know about who other animals truly are, and using this information to come to a deeper appreciation of the similarities and differences among non-human animals and between non-human and human animals. I lean towards the side of offering practical solutions. We don't need 'more science' to know that we must change our ways, and we already have enough information to mandate making positive changes. We must redefine our relationship with other nature and we must rapidly do it and act on the feelings that emerge. We also need to reconsider our relationships with other humans and do away with resolving conflicts using violent means. A rewilding manifesto would clearly state that we will indeed need – and with deeply passionate and motivated intention – to reconnect with other humans, other non-humans, and their homes, and to do it with as much positive energy as possible.

One trait we share with many other animals is a strong tendency to be compassionate and empathic, rather than inherently violent, and we need to tap into these predispositions as we move forward. The Earth jurisprudence perspective mandates that we need to harness our powerful and positive biophilic impulse and exploit it for all it's worth, and then some, as we move into the future. And let's be sure that youngsters know just what we are doing,

"The Earth jurisprudence perspective mandates that we need to harness our powerful and positive biophilic impulse and exploit it for all it's worth, and then some, as we move into the future."

Marc and Bessie, a rescued dairy cow.

and then they, too, can continue to do the good work that is necessary for our magnificent planet, and for all beings to thrive and to look forward to, and joyously welcome in, many new days. Along these lines, we need to rewild education and allow kids to be kids, to get down and dirty, and to enjoy the outdoors and engage in spontaneous wild play. They seem to give up when they're not allowed to be the kids they are and that they deserve and need to be.

Rewilding also calls for 'undoing the unwilding' that comes not only from sitting in classrooms, but also from media that misrepresents other animals, and from getting lost in busyness. It also means that youngsters must get out into nature and experience first-hand the community in which they live. It is essential to redefine our relationship with other nature, and we must rapidly do it and act on the feelings that emerge. In our forthcoming book *The Animals' Agenda* (Bekoff and Pierce, 2017), Jessica Pierce and I argue for a revolutionary paradigm shift to what we call 'the science of animal well-being', in which the interests and lives of all individuals matter. When these ideas are employed, our decisions will not routinely or conveniently favour humans over non-humans.

I feel that most people do care about the planet, but because their daily lives are so out of control (and over-filled with having to do this and that) that they lose their innate connections with nature. This persistent alienation makes them forget how good it feels to interact with animals and other environs. Many people also 'give up' and don't realize that our one and only planet is tired and surely not as resilient as some people claim it to be. I'm a total dreamer and optimist, but there simply is no way that the methods by which we choose to live today can be sustainable, even in the short-run. Giving up means that our children (and theirs) will live in a world in which I'd rather not live, so I wonder why so many people are so self-centred and selfish, acting as if they don't care what their kids' lives will be like in the future?

What we're doing now will result in a disastrous situation for future generations. Ecocide really is a suicide that crosses time and space. I see rewilding as a process that will result in much closer and deeper reciprocal connections with other humans and other animals and their homes, and I believe that if enough people rewild themselves, rewilding will become a heartfelt and heartful meme, a behaviour that will spread from person to person and to future generations as a form of cultural evolution. There are the '10 Ps of rewilding' – being proactive, positive, persistent, patient, peaceful, practical, powerful, passionate, playful and present. We must clearly speak out about our deep and wild connection with nature. *We must rewild our sense of wonder.*

It's inarguable that if we're going to make the world a better place now and for future generations, personal rewilding is central to the process, and this will entail a major paradigm shift in how we view and live in the world and how we behave. It's not that difficult to expand our compassion footprint (Bekoff, 2010), and if each of us does something the movement will grow rapidly. All in all, ecocentrism surely has to be the wave of the future, yet time is not on our side. All individuals can do something to realize the essential goals of ecocentrism, and everyone who can do something must do what they can right now. ■

"All individuals can do something to realize the essential goals of ecocentrism, and everyone who can do something must do what they can right now."

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Ecocentrism: A personal story

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It has been noted that (early childhood) experiences with nature enhance environmental values (Wells and Lekies, 2006). These findings suggest that nature activities in childhood and youth are key pathways that lead people to take an interest in nature and later work for its protection. Yet, early exposure alone does not explain why some people who grow up next to forests do not try to stop the logging, while others from the same villages do. This question of why some come to ecocentrism and some do not is fascinating. Like others, I have no perfect answer. In the documentary film *If a Tree Falls: A story of the Earth Liberation Front*, environmental activist Daniel McGowan reflects that he grew up as a typical 'city boy'. He came to care about nature from watching a film about deforestation when he was in his 20s (Kopnina, 2014b). It appears difficult to discern why some individuals choose to stand up for nature and others do not; this commitment seems to vary individually, independent of culture, as I describe in my articles and books. In reflecting what wilderness means for me, I have three lived experiences to relate.

The first is about me growing up in Moscow, USSR, with my parents being ardent hikers. My parents were dissident sympathizers, and on their trips to the wild areas of Russia – Karelia, the White Sea region, the Ural mountains – they used wilderness as places of *freedom*. We were climbing mountains, sailing lakes and rivers in *baidarkas* (Russian canoes), walking animal paths in the woods with huge backpacks, sitting around the fire, cooking fish we caught and mushrooms and berries we gathered, and singing songs (my father and uncle played guitar). Being there was like sitting in an open temple, with pine branches forming flying buttresses and with curious spectators such as deer on the night watch peering through the shadows. Our songs, although not religious, seemed to reach all the way up to heaven. My parents and their adult friends talked about politics – something they did not dare do in the city. The granite rocks and the northern pine forests kept their secrets. I wrote about it a few years later, reflecting on the death of my father, Nikolai Kopnin (https://is.gd/8yDiW4; Kopnina, 2014a):

> I returned to those Karelian summer nights with my father and his physicist friends. On the shores of beautiful lakes, he played his guitar and helped friends to fix baidarkas for the next long journey to where the Northern horizon meets the Aurora Borealis, and to where science would meet the beauty of lived experience.

The second experience was when my mother and six-year-old sister left the USSR in 1989 and moved to Arizona, where our relatives lived. In Phoenix, I left home after a fight with my mother. I did not speak English too well but continued going to school. I met some other runaway teenagers. Most of them were addicted, some stole, some begged on the street and some girls were involved in prostitution. As it was not cold at night, I slept in my sleeping bag in the bushes near my school. I slept among the cacti and sweet-smelling dry grass, writing letters to a young man I met by the Mediterranean Sea, who would later (for a short time) become my husband. After school, I worked for a call centre advertising holiday retreats (my

funny English attracted clients), then at Wendy's, a fast food chain, and then for a hospice for dying people. It was that place of prickly pear, saguaro cactus and superstition mallows that brought me peace at night. The coyotes sang in the distance, and occasional hummingbirds fluttered over the fiery orange Arizona barrel cactus bloom, "as small as a world and as large as alone" (Cummings, 1956). It was indifferent to my loneliness, and, yet, always there, like family I had lost. After more than a year sleeping in the bush (and working strange jobs), I received a college scholarship and moved to Massachusetts.

"Perhaps we all come to care about nature from an essential engagement with place, the lived experience of bonding with the land."

My third experience involves my three-year-old daughter and her recovery from respiratory disease in the Sundarbans, West Bengal, India. In 2007 I taught at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India, as part of an Erasmus Mundus exchange programme. While I was teaching, my partner and daughter were exploring the city, and, exciting as it was, they inhaled a lot of gassy fumes. After taking antibiotic cures, we left for a long weekend to the Sundarbans, a mangrove area in West Bengal. At the time, much of it was flooded. The places we saw were magical, with small trembling finger-like leaves of Sundari trees and the luxurious branches of Golpata dipping into muddy waters. These plants made me think of Rabindranath Tagore's story about an Indian boy Balai, who could feel the beauty and the pain of this green universe (quoted in Kopnina [2013: 10]):

> This boy really belonged to the age, millions of years ago, when the earth's would-be forests cried at birth among the marshlands newly sprung from the ocean's depth [...] The plant, vanguard of all living things on the road of time, had raised its joint hands to the sun and said, 'I want to stay here, I want to live. I am an eternal traveler. Rain or sun, night or day, I shall keep travelling through death after death, towards the pilgrim's goal of endless life.' That ancient chant of the plants reverberates to this day, in the woods and forests, hills and meadows, and the life of the mother earth declares through the leaves and branches, 'I want to stay, I want to stay.' The plant, speechless foster mother of life on earth, has drawn nourishment from the heavens since time immemorial to feed her progeny; has gathered the sap, the vigour, the savour of life for the earth's immortal store; and raised to the sky the message of beleaguered life, 'I want to stay'. Balai could hear that eternal message of life in a special way in his bloodstream.

Within a few days, my daughter fully recovered. Maybe, she felt that 'call to life' in her bloodstream as well. I certainly did.

First, wilderness meant being with my parents and friends, and experiencing freedom. Second, wilderness offered me refuge. Third, wilderness offered healing. Other environmentalists have had similar experiences. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841) described in *Self-Reliance* how society limits individual freedom. Perhaps wilderness began where the Garden of Eden ended and human dominion began? Walden Pond offered Henry David Thoreau (1854) his own refuge. Perhaps we all come to care about nature from an essential engagement with place, the lived experience of bonding with the land.

Having travelled around, I have also come to believe that environmentalism is *universal*, not just Western, and sometimes individual – and not culture-based. Some non-Western or indigenous activists are internationally renowned, like Wangari Muta Maathai, the Noble prize winner and the founder of the Green Belt Movement; others are less known. Some have sacrificed their lives to protect nature, like the Cambodian anti-logging activist Chut Wutty, who was killed in 2012; or like Jairo Mora Sandoval, a Costa Rican conservationist who was murdered on the beach where he was trying to protect leatherback turtles (these and other cases are described by

Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina [2016]). At least 185 land and environmental defenders, those who took peaceful action to protect the natural world, were killed in 2015 (Visser, 2016). The Honduran indigenous leader Berta Cáceres was killed in 2016 because of her campaign against an internationally financed hydroelectric dam. Isidro Baldenegro López, an indigenous Mexican activist campaigning against illegal logging, was shot dead in 2017 (Lakhani, 2017).

The environmental movement based on engagement with places that are loved is a truly global phenomenon transcending national, racial and gender boundaries (Kopnina, 2015). However, I have also realized that a lot of what I experienced (or that others did) was still motivated by anthropocentrism. Maathai was planting trees for the sake of her people, Chut Wutty was concerned not just about deforestation but also about his own people losing control over land, and of course my own experiences can be understood as anthropocentric, as it was about *my* freedom, refuge and healing. As a starting point, such a motivation serves its purpose, but there is another stage – the one leading from shallow to deep ecology.

Like other contemporary environmental writers (*e.g.* Noss and Cooperrider, 1994; Crist, 2012; Cafaro and Primack, 2014), I speak of nature or wilderness as an *intrinsic good* that is (or should be) inviolate. Simultaneously to the human sacrifices of environmentalists, millions of acres of habitat and millions of non-human inhabitants have been eradicated in the past few decades. Did they not have rights to life also? John Muir (quoted by Fox [1981: 43]) wrote about a cluster of rare white orchids: "I felt as if I were in the presence of superior beings who loved me and beckoned me to come. I sat down beside them and wept for joy." He later interpreted this transcendent moment as a sudden awareness that the orchids had no relevance for human beings; they would have lived and died whether a human had seen them or not. And wild nature, full of 'free-willed' lives, deserves to have that *right* to continued existence, without just being a 'resource' for humanity (Crist, 2012).

For me, like for many others, wilderness is a place of refuge, freedom and healing but also something else – something *independent* of me, but also *far greater* than me, something that may be part of me, or that I may be part of.

And this is the last story I want to relate about myself. When I was eight years old, I wrote a book, *Bor'ba za sushestvovaniye* ("The Battle for Survival"), in a series of Russian school notebooks. In many ways, my career as an environmental anthropologist is still building on that book, seeking a harmonious survival for both humanity *and* nature. Ecocentrism for me is also intertwined with animal rights, as I want to protect both entire ecosystems (of which humans are a part) and their individual inhabitants. My ecocentrism means I am still (and always will be) part of this ongoing battle. ■

"For me, like for many others, wilderness is a place of refuge, freedom and healing but also something else – something *independent* of me, but also *far greater* than me, something that may be part of me, or that I may be part of."

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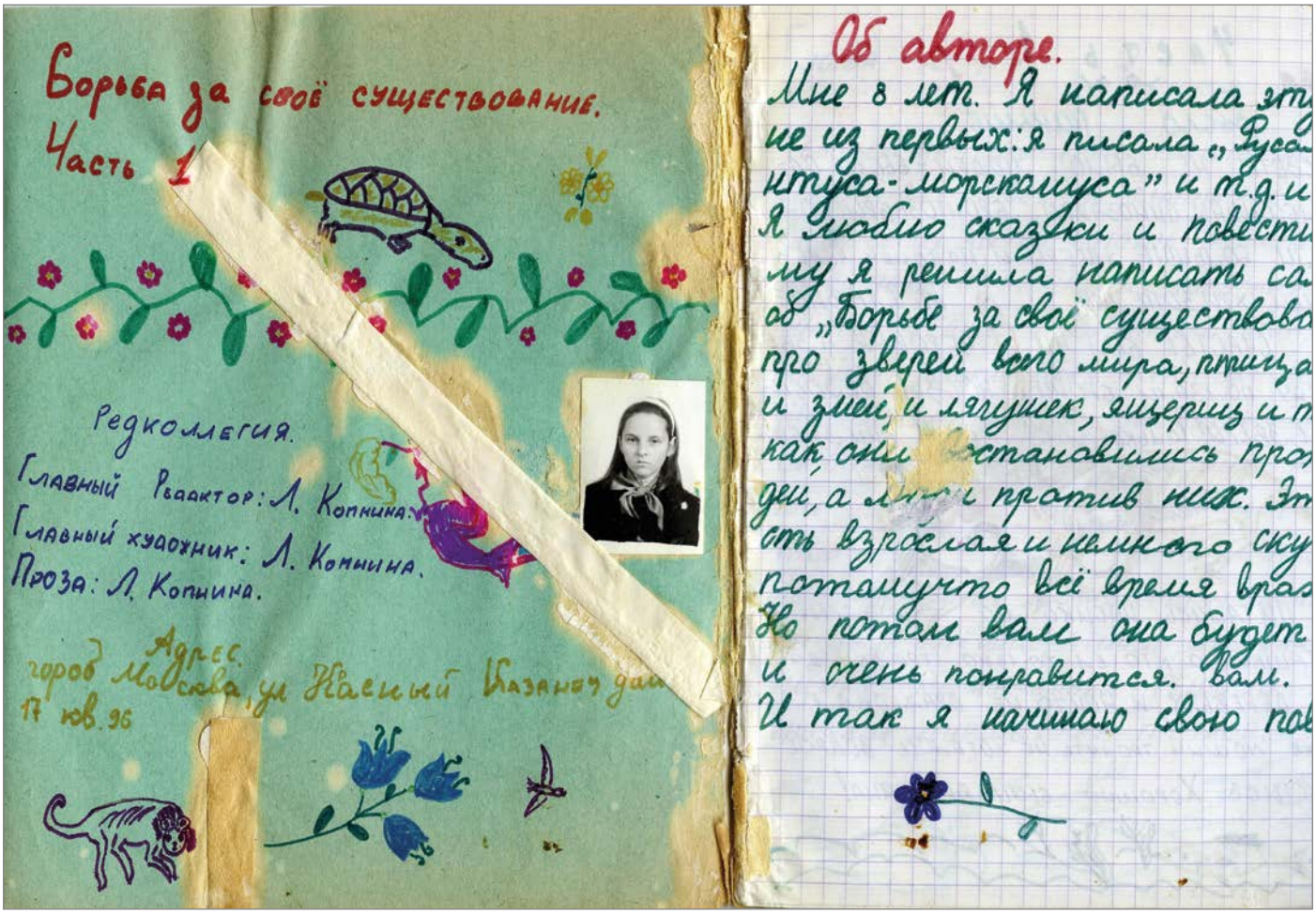

The author's book, written at the age of eight, *The Battle for Survival*.

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Loving Earth: How I came to ecocentrism

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Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

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

> "Anyone who believes the academic drivel that 'wilderness' is a social construct has not stood face to face with a wild bear."

'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?"

* * * * *

"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.

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

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:

> 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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Ecocentrism: Playing beyond boundaries

"What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you? And all the six of us to the amoeba in one direction and the backward schizophrenic in another?"
(Bateson, 2002: 7)

I vividly remember sitting in the back seat of my dad's car watching the landscape fly past pretending to be a horse running alongside. I could feel the cold wind in my nostrils, my pounding hoofs, the strength of my muscles, the joy of the movement and the changing surface under my feet. Sometimes, the horse would dissolve and I merged with the land, green fields, rolling hills, soaring mountains, forests, alpine pastures and roaring waterfalls. This merging was my favourite play. Can you smell the high moor? See the delicate flowers and hear the insects humming in the high moor? Can you also feel what it is like to *be* a high moor? Dark, timeless, rhythmically pulsating, breathing, basking under the sun, absorbing the rain and melting snow, sharing with thousands of other creatures. This play was enchanted, connected, and made me feel at home in the endless universe. But such a connection to nature also allowed me to feel pain, irritation and sadness, as when my neighbours rescued a kitten and put it up with their cat to 'calm down the kitten', rather than taking it back to its mother. Or when I saw horses shut into little 'loose' boxes for hours, or cattle chained to their troughs for months on end, or logged forests and meadows being eaten up by construction sites.

The barrier to empathy and to responsibility toward animals and nature lies in anthropocentrism. It is hidden in what we perceive as "normal, natural and necessary" (Joy, 2011). Anthropocentrism, "which sees individual humans and the human species as more valuable than all other organisms" (Washington *et al.*, 2017: 35), has many aspects which are deeply embedded in our language and social structures, as well as our cultural practices. There are, first, the dualisms between human and animal, culture and nature, and mind and body, which set the human distinctly apart from all other life forms. The human has defined himself throughout Western philosophy as against the animalistic, the natural and the embodied. Indeed, the notion of humanity and ethics remains largely based on an understanding of *independence* from animals and nature (Oliver, 2009). Second, our categories for animals are formed according to their use for us humans: livestock, laboratory animals, pets, wildlife and vermin. These boundaries define how we can exploit these individuals (*e.g.* horses as 'sports utility vehicles' or deer for hunting). Crossing the boundaries (*e.g.* when farm animals escape and are rescued in a sanctuary), however, makes the ethical dilemma visible – that we are dealing with *live beings*, not with categories.

The strict boundary between body and mind, spirituality and rationality, and empathy and objectivity made itself felt in my life as well. As I progressed through high school and university, my original play disappeared from my life. The 'rational mind' developed, almost to the exclusion of other approaches to the world, and I started to get engrossed in playing with patterns in sociological survey data. When, decades later, I

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Keywords

Becoming ecocentric

rediscovered this play in the form of animal communication, it remained one-half of my life – incompatible with the other scientific part. The feeling of leading a life split in two halves was mirrored back to me when one day I told a research colleague about animal communication and he responded: "That discredits all your academic work." It took me many years to find a way to integrate the two spheres in my professional work, in what I have come to call 'mindfulness-based learning'. Still, the denialism that meets me in academia with respect to animals and nature is still breathtaking:

- "I don't have anything to do with animals."
- "Are you really suggesting that we can learn from animals?"

These quotes not only highlight the dualisms, but also the consequential lack of recognition that animals and nature have as co-constitutive partners in our communities. They also point to another boundary that seems to enclose us, as isolated individuals. Based on subjectivism, the 'other' can only be perceived as an object to be used for *one's own* aims and desires. Hence, animals and landscapes are for *our* entertainment in ecotourism and nature parks, and companion animals are just for animal-assisted therapy and pedagogy. In education, this understanding implies that the human being is the *only* centre of pedagogic effort, that education can be planned and results reproduced, and that knowledge can be appropriated and owned (Spannring, 2015). The alternative approach, which highlights relationship, dialogue and responsibility, is hard to find in today's education systems (*e.g.* Noddings, 2005).

Some postmodern and post-humanist discourses have set out to deconstruct the human subject, stressing 'relationality' and 'mutually dependent emergence'. From such a perspective, Haraway (2007) describes the "mutual becoming" of humans and companion species, one example being the interdependence of extensive sheep farming, the reintroduction of the wolf, and the Great Pyrenees guard dogs, in what she calls "naturecultures". She argues (2017: 4; original emphasis):

> To become one is always to *become with* many. [...] The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living or not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters.

Such a *becoming with*, or 'becoming animal' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013), can serve as an entry point to environmental consciousness (*e.g.* Fawcett, 2009; Stewart, 2011). This was certainly the case in my life.

However, many post-humanist attempts fail to question anthropocentrism, as illustrated by Haraway (2007) in her celebration of 'agility', a dog sport she participates in with her border collie. It overlooks the fact that breeding, training and competing with animals are fundamentally anthropocentric endeavours, with high risks for the animals' physical and emotional well-being. Indeed, it is very hard to discern the anthropocentrism deeply embedded in our cultural practices, and the egocentrism hidden in what is commonly called 'love'. We 'love' horses because we can ride them and some people 'love' wilderness because it touches a romantic spot in them. For love to be truly ecocentric, it needs to be coupled with empathy, listening, respect and a willingness to discard anthropocentric and egocentric blinkers. Finally, it requires finding an appropriate expression in one's behaviour. Society does not provide us with many exemplars, and so we are called upon to develop countercultural practices in many spheres of life. In my own case, I repeatedly found myself caught up in anthropocentric practices because I did not see alternatives. Eventually, however, my compassion for animals led me to an engagement with critical animal studies and cognitive horse ethology (de Giorgio and de Giorgio-Schoorl, 2016), and their respective communities of practice.

"We 'love' horses because we can ride them and some people 'love' wilderness because it touches a romantic spot in them. For love to be truly ecocentric, it needs to be coupled with empathy, listening, respect and a willingness to discard anthropocentric and egocentric blinkers."

The author's friend Freja.

They proved an essential frame and resource to develop my empathy into a critical understanding of anthropocentric practices, and to change my behaviour in a way that would benefit the animals, and be consistent with my compassion. As I started playing with these challenges, I moved from vegetarianism to veganism, and I stopped training my horse in favour of cultivating affiliative–cognitive moments – in which we can both learn.

One last boundary I would like to mention is the one that is sometimes constructed between different groups and perspectives. On the one hand, Paul Waldau (among others) observes resistance to the consideration of *individual animals* within the conservation movement. He believes environmental education is full of "human-centeredness anchored in a formidable coalition of business, political and religious rationalizations" (Waldau, 2013: 30). He attributes this resistance to the fear of loss of human privilege, and the denial of those who consume animal products. Animal advocates, on the other hand, focus on individual animals' sentience, the continuity between the human and animal condition, and their ethical implications. They thereby often overlook the environmental context of animal existence, and their integration in other-than-human-made habitat (Noske, 2004). I personally experience a 'policing of the borders' now that I have started to integrate environmental aspects in my research. Some animal advocacy colleagues repeatedly try to bring me back to what supposedly 'matters most'. Here I see the path as one that others also speak of (Waldau, 2013; Kopnina and Cherniak, 2015) – an invitation to play with and *beyond* boundaries, to expand our hearts and our minds in an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach that fosters ecocentrism.

As I end this essay, my thoughts wander to my last experience with my horse, Freja,

and her equine friends. Rather than walking straight towards Freja, putting a halter on, grooming and saddling her to ride off in one linear movement, I simply spend time with them. I stand at the gate for a while. The horses briefly look up from their hay. Freja nickers as she recognizes me and then continues to delicately pick up single straws of hay with her sensitive lips. I walk into the paddock, but do not approach the horses. I leave the decision as to whether or not to make contact *to them*. Freja turns toward me without leaving her position. Another horse turns and walks past Freja to the other side of the paddock. Then Freja makes a couple of steps toward me, stops and stretches her neck so that she can touch my arm and hand. She steps up to stand with me, relaxed, her hind leg cocked. After a while, another horse joins us. He explores my anorak, and Freja watches him playing with the zip. A third, very young horse approaches and starts nibbling at Freja. I step back and Freja uses this space to walk forward and away from the young horse. Our little group breaks up. As I stand alone, Freja comes back to rest with me again. I feel incredibly enriched by being involved in this group dynamic, in this *play*.

Later, I let the horses into a vast Alpine pasture. They immediately start grazing the short grass and the herbs of the meadow. My own focus on the horses shifts to a broader view of the pasture, with its rocks, spruce trees, dwarf alpenroses and a brook. Jackdaws are playing and screeching. A buzzard flies high above my head, and I feel the cold air descending from the still snow-covered mountain peak. The categories of domesticated and wild *blur*, the land is alive and interwoven with all living and non-living beings. I start wondering about how we might step back – as I did in the horse group – and allow for new dynamics on an ecocentric level. The invitation to *play*, transgressing boundaries and opening up new opportunities, is out there. ■

"The invitation to *play*, transgressing boundaries and opening up new opportunities, is out there."

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On the road to ecocentrism

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Every spring, often just as the ice is floating out of the harbours, my wife and I arrive to Isle Royale – an island wilderness in Lake Superior. One springtime interest is to find moose and document patterns of hair-loss left by a peculiar kind of tick that afflicts these moose. The effort invariably includes passing time at mud licks – sites where the groundwater, rich in sodium, seeps to the surface. Moose are attracted to these sites.

Since I was a little boy I'd wanted to become a wildlife biologist, the meaning of which was re-affirmed every Sunday evening of my youth fawning over Technicolor re-runs of *Wild Kingdom* with Marlin Perkins: "Jim and I are here in a remote jungle and we're going to wrestle this anaconda." I now know those antics had as much to do with understanding nature as the World Wrestling Federation has to do with sport. But then I wasn't really interested in understanding nature. I was just bored with what seemed the rote script of suburban life. I just craved adventure. In early adulthood, I attended university. Fortuitously, studying the wolves and moose of Isle Royale became a fixture of my entire adult life. I also grew to become part of a community of conservation ecologists – all in for protecting populations and ecosystems.

We roll out of the tent by 5.00 AM, raise eyebrows at the ice that formed overnight on the pot of cooking water, and stumble over the hill to the edge of the mud lick. Except for the time it takes to eat a bowl of oatmeal in the morning and a dehydrated dinner in the evening, we keep watch from the edge of the mud lick until about 10.00 PM. To maximize the effort, Leah and I typically find different vantage points from which to view the mud lick. After two or three days we have usually seen most of the different moose that frequent any particular mud lick. Time at a mud lick is mostly quiet waiting and listening for the grunt of an old bull, for the shuffling of hooves through the leaves, or for the splash of a young cow crossing the creek up around the bend.

We share the mornings with a shivering boredom that requires some management. Readjust to chase off pins and needles that tingle a calf muscle. Think of reasons to find a new position along the edge of the mud lick. Watch pirouetting water striders. If I move over there the sun will warm my face and chest. Yes, that's a good reason. Make the move. A hoot and a yodel, and a loon rockets across the sky. More pins and needles. Nibble trail mix, one peanut or raisin at a time, at a controlled rate to meter the time. A red squirrel vaults across the branches overhead. If I move over there I'll get better pictures because the sun will be at my back.

At some unscripted moment boredom is shattered – a moose. Must be very quiet. Wolves know these mud licks and their gravitational pull on moose. And moose know that wolves know. Moose approach with vigilance. It's okay to let a moose see you as it approaches. They recognize the difference between me and a wolf. But a moose should see you before they hear you. They are not quick to discern the source of a crackled leaf or snapped twig. Absolute quiet until the moose sees you. Then some talking in a deep gentle voice is useful. Most moose here understand that humans are harmless and that they speak English, whereas they've never heard a wolf speak one word of English.

With four firmly planted hooves, a moose can reach its mouth across a 4-foot arc. Not

impressed? Try it yourself. A large sweep is useful during the winter, when another step means pushing aside knee-deep snow and each bite offers just a gram of nutrition. A moose's mouth does not, however, reach the mud quite so naturally. Some moose reach the mud by spreading their front legs like a stilt-legged clown trying to touch the ground. Others reach the ground by resting on their ankles after turning their toes and feet backward. Five or ten minutes of more-or-less non-stop slurping is typical. We sit behind the camera's shutter waiting for each moose to offer a complete profile of its left side and then its right side. Some moose slurp on and off for an hour or more. Sometimes three or four moose are in attendance at once. But much of the time is just waiting for moose.

"Some moose reach the mud by spreading their front legs like a stilt-legged clown trying to touch the ground. Others reach the ground by resting on their ankles after turning their toes and feet backward."

By early afternoon, the morning chill had dissolved into light delirium induced by a swirling tincture of swamp quietude and solar brilliance. I was tired of sitting. I repositioned and took a turn at standing, less standing and more draped over the tripod and camera. Then a peculiar sensation, a little push from beneath the sole of my Croc™ footwear, worn thin from the wilderness. I straightened up, feigning to myself about having been alert. Was I already that bored with standing? Whatever. I shifted my weight and returned to a hazier state of mind.

Last summer's swamp sedges, dead and desiccated, still stood tall and rustled in a light breeze. Green shoots were still only an accent to the beige hues of early spring. I stood right at the edge, where the soil was soft with moisture, but not saturated. Nothing particularly advantageous about this position, except being just dry enough to keep water from percolating through the tiny hole in the sole of my foam footwear. Again that same funny sensation on the bottom of my foot. I shifted weight again. With a third push, I compared the observation against hypotheses pertaining to the state of my faculties.

I was hungry – not really hunger, just bored-hungry. The six-year-old in me was tired of standing. The grown-up in me wasn't going to reposition, not so soon after the last repositioning. Then another push. Exasperated, I abandoned my post in a huff, took a step aside, got down on my knees, and pushed the grass aside to meet the

A moose.

pointed nose of a baseball-sized toad. She had been pushing her head against my Croc with all the force she could muster by doing toad push-ups. She was trying to stretch out after a long winter's nap. Her black eyes were not half-mast, but wide open. Eye contact was unavoidable. I really do not know the cognitive capabilities of a toad, and I might have projected the thought, but she seemed to be wondering whether I was insensitive – or just plain dumb.

A year before at the same mud lick, in the same delirious state of mind, a thought occurred to me. I hadn't been looking for thoughts. Nevertheless, one scrolled across the teleprompter of my mind. I was sitting in the wilderness counting what was left of the day's allotment of M&M's®. And then: *How many other moose does a moose know?* Then the words: *Is it boring to chew cud for eight hours of every day?* I wondered: *What is it like to be a moose?* Overwhelmed with warm sentiment? No, the questions struck me, cold and horrifying. If you were to select a hundred people, all at random, from all parts of the world and all walks of life. Make that a hundred million people. Line them up in order, most to least knowledgeable about moose – especially moose populations and moose as a species – I would be pretty close to the front of that line. *But I had no idea how to answer those questions.*

Soon afterwards, I realized that moose are not merely alive, but that each moose *has a life*. A moose has memories of yesterday, hopes for tomorrow, joys and fears, and a story to be told. If a moose has a life – so I reasoned (with the awesome powers of deduction I had acquired from all those years in school) – then I'd bet that a wolf has a life too. If moose and wolves have 'lives', then the toad and chickadee and squirrel that live in town (just outside our house) in all likelihood have lives too. Being less familiar with the details of their lives in no way diminishes the fact: *they each have their own life.*

As I understand it, ecocentrism is to acknowledge and honour the intrinsic value of ecosystems, populations and individual organisms – the entire hierarchy of life without prejudice for or against any rung in the hierarchy. And, the basis for this intrinsic value? Curiously, the basis for intrinsic value may be different for the different rungs. For organisms, intrinsic value rises from their interests to flourish. Conjoin that circumstance with what some know as the Golden Rule and a bit of logical consistency – the result is an obligation to treat organisms fairly and with concern for their interests and welfare. What reasoning gives rise to the intrinsic value of populations and ecosystems? Aldo Leopold said that we organisms, populations and ecosystems are members of the same community of life – community membership is what imbues us all with intrinsic value. Arne Naess said it comes from a metaphysical belief that we organisms are so interconnected with populations and ecosystems that we all inherit intrinsic value from, essentially, being one-in-the-same.

Having been thoroughly trained and enwrapped in the phenomena of populations and ecosystems, I came rather late in life to realize how organisms possess intrinsic value. With this realization, I am haunted by a different understanding of ecocentrism, by which concern for ecosystems and populations generally trumps concern of individual organisms. I fear that understanding leads to killing wolves to save an endangered population of caribou in southern Alberta, when humans not wolves are culpable for the harm to those caribou. And trophy hunting lions because we're not wise enough to envision another way to conserve wild populations of lions. When I was younger, I would not have questioned such a view. Then on an outrageously beautiful spring day, I met a moose at a mud lick. Now, I doubt the wisdom of such judgements.

I have no doubt about the shortcomings of anthropocentrism. But I'm still on my Damascene road to ecocentrism. Where that road will take me I cannot say. But I think it's fair to say that I didn't start down that road until sometime after I first wondered whether the thoughts of a moose are beyond my imagination. ■

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The feet of an orangutan in a sanctuary in Borneo

Joe Gray

Becoming ecocentric

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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.

"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."

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.

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?

"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."

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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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

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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]). 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. ■

"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."

All is one

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Like every human being is, I was born in love with the Earth. From before I can remember I loved animals and wanted to become them. As a toddler I crawled on the floor with a box turtle, trying to walk like him. A few years later, at a museum in Chicago, I let a black snake curl around me, fascinated by the smoothness and dryness of her skin. Between the ages of 8 and 10 I kept a diary of observations about birds and other woodsy creatures. I wanted to be like Jane Goodall when I grew up (I was not optimistic about that, because I thought many people would want to be like her and there would be much competition). At the time we lived in Livingston, New Jersey. There were scattered woods, a stream and a pond near my house where I spent many happy hours. One day I caught a frog and brought him home. Secretly, I put him in the basement inside a tub of water. I woke up early the next morning and all excited ran downstairs to see him. When I saw that he was dead my mouth parched with regret and shame. That was life's first lesson never to confuse love with possessiveness.

When I was ten years old we moved to Greece and my naturalist expeditions continued. There were some hills near our seaside cottage, some 20 miles outside of Athens, where grown-ups did not venture. There, I discovered the reptile fauna of Greece: tortoises, lizards and poisonous snakes. I had read about these creatures and knew when it was easiest to find them: when the sun shines again after the loveliness of a summer rain. I also knew that the snakes were poisonous because of their crisply triangular heads and the unmistakable you-don't-want-to-mess-with-me glint in their eyes. (Decades later I would understand that I was seeing the last baseline of these animals taking refuge in the hills.) For two, maybe three, blessed summers my extended family would swim daily and fish regularly. I saw all kinds of creatures when I snorkelled, even a tiny, light orange seahorse. My being was filled with awe and gratitude, although I did not notice those feelings because they just felt normal. One day I spied a 2-foot octopus swimming in the open water, and then she spotted me too and changed what might have been twenty colours. Perhaps it was a normal octopus response upon seeing an eleven-year-old girl with flippers and a mask. The alive with beautiful beings sea seemed like it would always be there. Then, somewhere around 1973, it died. Just like that. Everything went grey and murky and there were only cucumber-shaped slugs at the bottom of the sea, and a random fish here and there. There must have been a wave of industrial pollution or a sewage-dumping tipping point or both around the seas of Athens; in retrospect, not surprising. What was surprising, and stayed with me like a strange riddle, was that no one talked about it. All the joyful swimming, snorkelling, and (in hindsight regrettable) fishing gone – and no one said a word.

A few summers later I fell in love with a dog. The feeling was mutual. We used to run together through wheat fields laughing, or just hung out looking every so often into one another's eyes. When we had to go back to Athens in September, I was not allowed to bring him. We left him behind. Whether he found another home or died of starvation, I do not know. What I do know is that his heart was broken and so was mine. And here's the thing about a broken heart: it never quite mends. But "you got to take your broken heart and make it into art" (Meryl Streep: https://youtu.be/EV8tsnRFUZw). A dog named Belisarius taught me that betrayal is a great crime and that the one covenant with all beings is goodness. He showed me

that goodness is not an ethical choice – it is an ontological condition stitched into the make-up of the universe. Sooner or later we discover that it's the only choice. In that sense, neither the ecological crisis nor its solution is overcomplicated. Human beings (sooner or later) will recognize that killing the living world cannot produce wealth, any more than killing the king for the kingdom could actually make Macbeth king.

I wish for every human the blessing of falling in love with a dog. I wish it especially for those who despise them as dirty or eat them. To see yourself reflected in the eyes of a dog is to feel the grace that lives in you. To gaze into the trusting eyes of a dog is to know our ancient covenant with wolves. Keeping Earth and all Earth's beings near our hearts with unfaltering loyalty is the portal to our very being. ■

A special place for the author.

A journey to Earth-centredness

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"For every thing that has life as naturally endeavours to preserve it, and feels pain as severely as we, the great self-conceited lords of the universe."

Anonymous (1755), from *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth*

"It is only when you suffer that you really understand."

Jules Verne (1864), from *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*

It was a humid night in the summer of 2002, and I was drinking beer in Tortuguero, a village on Costa Rica's north Caribbean coast. I was an undergraduate on a month-long field course. From our base – a field station set in 1000 hectares of rainforest, seven-tenths primary – we spent our time observing wildlife in various ways: swimming in caiman-inhabited lakes; night-trekking along slender jungle paths; and looking, most carefully of all, for the animal that had made a home underneath the deck of our wooden cabin – a bushmaster, the longest venomous snake in the Americas.

The overnight excursion to Tortuguero was our only trip out of the station. Over an Imperial, the local lager, our group reflected on the egg-laying sea turtles we'd just observed, aided by a conservation guide and the light of his red torch. It was on the same beach where the conservation imperative had crystallized for David Ehrenfeld, on a night in the mid-1960s (he witnessed a turtle trailing a line of eggs on the unprotected sand, her undershell having been taken by poachers [Ehrenfeld, 1993]). Another round. Andrew, a bear-like primatologist, looked upset. Contemplating the stress we might have caused these graceful creatures, he said: "That was probably the most unethical thing I've ever done." My reply: "I don't think ethics extends to animals," in a tone more condescending than sympathetic.

The *cerveza* became *ron* and our conversation more radical. A girl from Iowa State University took the prize: if she was driving a car and there was a human ahead, she would not swerve if it meant hitting a jaguar instead. The minds of these American students were broader than those back at Cambridge University. A supposed hotbed of big ideas, it had enclosed me in a materialist-dominated circle, broken only by a few spirited socialists and a solitary green-minded soul (who I ended up marrying). I refuted all that was thrown at me that night, but I could not prevent a seed being planted. Or maybe it was a previously sown grain that was starting to germinate.

From an early age, I felt a great sadness about deforestation and the plight of endangered species, particularly primates. I wrote poems – "Kindness needs to be around / Especially to stop the trees fall to the ground" – and stories. One tale, from when I was 9 or 10, saw a scientist named John team up with the jungle animals to tackle illegal logging. Pippa the parrot was the coordinator, and her grand plan hinged on monkey-wrenching: "John can go and do something to the machinery to make them go away."

I was also deeply interested in the natural world at this time. I kept counts of the birds I saw in my garden, and, with the help of my uncle, learned some of the wild flowers and trees in the surrounding region: the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley, on the English–Welsh border. We took

long walks, collecting nuts and leaves that I could arrange on display tables at school.

I turned eleven and headed to secondary school and a more focused curriculum. There was no place for natural history here, and conservation was little more than a footnote in the syllabus. Although I still cared about the state of the Earth, my attention turned away from natural history towards maths and atheism, and later rationalism, humanism and the scientific method. The school's maths department was having a turbulent time, and I developed a preference for teaching myself. A chemistry report criticized me for getting "sidetracked into irrelevant subject areas" (a relief to re-read today).

I differed from the norm, lacking an interest in learning to drive and resisting the mobile phone. But I was no Luddite. I devoured each new issue of *Scientific American*, inspired and reassured by the promise of techno-fixes to all the Earth's problems. I also sharpened my rationalist edge with a subscription to *Skeptical Inquirer*.

There were times when my interest in natural history was temporarily awakened from its stasis. Perhaps the most memorable was when I travelled around Western Europe for a month, shortly after turning 17. Despite the very limited nature of our funds, my two friends and I made it as far as the French Alps. Climbing the forested slopes there – seeing life on a scale far grander than I'd known before – I felt a new sensation: exhilaration at being alive.

Next came Cambridge. After two weeks of copying chalked equations off titanic blackboards, I decided that I was done with maths. I needed something that would allow me to engage more intimately with the world around me. Looking through the list of other options, I set my heart on studying primatology (a module within the biological anthropology course). Such was the narrow outlook of the university, though, that my permission to change was contingent on completing the year of maths and getting a 2.1.

With my interest in the subject gone, I minimized my activities. A 2.1 was out of the question, I thought, but I was prepared to leave and start again at another university. I made a nervous call home, but my parents were fully supportive. That year, I spent most of my 'academic time' reading books of my choosing (the way I knew to learn), on biology, especially evolution, and nature. Most of all, I loved coffee-table volumes celebrating the Earth's wildlife, which I bought second hand in the institution that was Galloway & Porter. Miraculously, when exam time came, a couple of the papers offered questions that I could tackle by applying what I'd learned at school, and I got the 2.1.

So I studied primatology and then went on to read zoology to complete my degree. However, I opted not to take the module on conservation. To explain why, I need to return to the beach in Tortuguero. My visit had been during the holiday immediately prior to my final year. I learned there how conservationists were considering putting a jaguar-proof fence along the beach to prevent them predating the turtles. "But what about the jaguars?" I thought. It wasn't their fault that turtle populations had plummeted. The more I learned about conservation, the more it seemed to me like god-like meddling (today, though, I would agree that the fence is a lesser of two evils).

By the time I got my bachelor's degree, I was done with academia. The grant-chasing environment, and the culture of backstabbing that I had heard went with it, was not for me. Instead I took a job in medical publishing, and then another, and another. I did some of the things expected of a 'young professional', getting married and buying a house (in east England). My wife and I led a reasonably green life and had already decided not to have children. All the while I maintained a faith in science and progress.

My interest in natural history slowly rekindled, first on trips abroad. Whenever we spent time in forested regions, that feeling of elation I'd experienced as a

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seventeen-year-old in the Alps returned. Then, about five years after leaving university, we took three weeks off work to travel round south-west USA, visiting a dozen national parks and many other state parks. Here, I learned that the exhilaration was not brought about by the forest itself but by immersion in nature, both biological and geological. It was just that in overdeveloped Western Europe, achieving this state of mind required a buffer of trees. With a rekindling interest in natural history came a returning sense of injustice about Earth's destruction. I was now old enough to take action, but I struggled for motivation to do something to help others, knowing that most people around me didn't care.

"With a rekindling interest in natural history came a returning sense of injustice about Earth's destruction."

Loch Mallachie and Scots pine forest, in the Scottish Highlands. Seeing ospreys nesting on the nearby Loch Garten was one of the most memorable experiences of the author's childhood. Joe made his first return to the forest and lochs in his early 30s and shortly after began a mental transition (back) to ecocentrism.

In the year I hit 30, I decided to reduce my working week to 25 hours so that I could start a part-time MSc in Forestry. This increased my interest in the woodland around my home and completed the restoration of my passion for local natural history. However, what I was learning on my local walks, such as the degradation caused by modern agriculture, and on the course – the deep flaws in carbon offsetting, for instance – turned my sense of environmental injustice into full-blown despair.

My response was to come back fighting, but I had a single weapon, rationality. I recalled how I was taught to observe the world as a zoologist: impartially as an outsider. Through the 'zoologist's lens', how could I judge humans differently from other animals? Destroying the Earth was just human's natural evolutionary destiny, like it was a dolphin's to swim in a pod or a chimpanzee's to tease termites out of their nests using grass-blades. Seeing myself as being outside the system calmed my mental suffering for a few weeks, but the veneer was chipped away by every mouthful of food I consumed from the Earth's soil and every sip of water from its river catchments. The bleak basis of this coping mechanism was revealed. And the anguish returned. Until I had this critical thought: Can I not be *inside* the system and still value all life-forms in the same way, as an equal player in nature?

Once the valuation barrier between humans and the rest of life had been broken, there were only two paths that *rationally* made sense to me. One was to nihilism; the other to measuring all life's meaning with the same stick. There was no defensible breakpoint in the middle. I chose the latter and, at the age of 32, suddenly, and finally, had the motivation to fight for the Earth, for all those life-forms *without a voice*.

I reflected on that night in Tortuguero a dozen years earlier, the conversations that challenged the anthropocentric valuation system by considering a human and a big cat side by side in a moral judgement and by applying ethics to reptiles. I did not know the word for it then, but I had emerged from my crisis *biocentric*. My next thought, naturally, was to wonder how many people saw life the same way. An internet search led me to the Deep Ecology platform. The existence of this was reassuring, but I still had unanswered questions. Not knowing where to turn next, I sent a group email to local members of a population charity that I belonged to and had a response from one of its advisors, Patrick Curry. A few get-togethers with Patrick were enough to help me understand what David Ehrenfeld (1993) meant when he argued passionately that books alone are not sufficient for transmission of knowledge; that the process also demands a skilled instructor. Through these meetings I graduated from biocentrism to ecocentrism – for me, another purely rational leap.

But I did not yet have a completely stable footing. What was I to do about science and reason? Here I sought help from Stan Rowe and Edward Abbey. Rowe (1987) reassured me that science: "with the goal of fitting civilizations to ecological models" was still fine. And according to Abbey (1984: 228–9), reason was okay too. It just needed to be redefined as "intelligence informed by sympathy." Or as "fidelity to what alone we really know and really must love—this one life, this one earth on which we live."

Summing up: while, in my case, early contact with the more-than-human world presumably laid the groundwork, it took a period of mental suffering to jar me from humanism to a more inclusive ethic. Is this an early rumbling, I wonder, of a Gaia-like 'self-correcting mechanism', in which the Earth's destruction triggers a mass ecocentric awakening while the worst outcomes of the sixth mass extinction can still be averted? This possibility gives me much hope – for sea turtles, for jaguars, for *all* our futures. ■

"It took a period of mental suffering to jar me from humanism to a more inclusive ethic. Is this an early rumbling, I wonder, of a Gaia-like 'self-correcting mechanism', in which the Earth's destruction triggers a mass ecocentric awakening while the worst outcomes of the sixth mass extinction can still be averted?"

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Eucalyptus-flavoured ecofeminism and other ecocentric adventures

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One hot, sticky, mosquito-filled day in my early 20s, I visited a gathering of marvellous environmental activists crowded into an old timber house just outside Cairns, in Far North Queensland, to discuss strategies to stop a development on Hinchinbrook Passage that would destroy areas of seagrass which provided rich grazing for Australia's precious dugong population. While chatting with a small group of older women long connected to the campaign, the topic of where I grew up was raised. When I told them "Central Western Queensland", each member of the group literally gaped at me and one woman, wearing a perky purple beret, blurted out "You grew up *out there*? Who nurtured you?"

I begin with this little vignette to emphasize that for me, while loving the natural world is imprinted into my DNA, it was also the people who nurtured me, and in turn nurtured my love of the natural world, that have played a huge role in my ecocentric adventures.

Mum, Dad and Uncle David

I grew up in a small, hot country town on the edge of the outback, quite a while before the internet existed and gave people the virtual interconnectedness we take for granted today. We lived 800 km inland from the coast and the nearest small city, an hour's drive in any direction to another tiny town and several light years away from the world of middle class environmentalism and perky purple berets.

The geography, landscape and biodiversity of this semi-arid upbringing created the foundations, the roots, of my Earth-centred life. The smell of my childhood was pungent gidgee trees and the more pleasant aroma of eucalypts; the setting for family picnics was the dry sandy river bed of the Alice River while white cockatoos and corellas called out in the shady trees overhead; and my extreme love of rain comes from growing up in a place that hardly ever saw the stuff. Our town's primary water supply came from deep within the earth – ancient ground water, from the Great Artesian Basin. Mobs of eastern grey and red kangaroos were an ever-present sight; so too were non-flying flocks of giant shaggy grey emus. Sunsets were big, red and splashed across an open horizon that stretched out endlessly, sometimes monotonously, for a young woman with grand aspirations to travel the world.

My mother and father were simply fantastic parents, and both are responsible for my core values, which centre on ecocentrism and social justice. My mother was – and I'm pleased to say still is – a formidable woman: her environmentalism and radical feminism was born not from theories or university education, but from something deep in her own being and wisdom. And what was more impressive was that her values ran pretty much against the grain of 'normal life' out where we grew up. I have vivid memories of watching her challenge anyone who wanted to cut down trees, or kill a snake, in a time and place when doing both wasn't just acceptable, it was encouraged. She spoke her mind and had an unwavering belief that all plant and animal life, regardless of its value to us, should be protected. My father was equally wonderful and was (and still is) what I now call "a rampant plant-botherer." He could spend hours picking through the bush, walking about looking at plants, seeds and blossoms. And he was forever trying to propagate strange new seeds that he barely understood. He drove a lot for his work, and would often arrive home at the end of

A group of emus.

the day, or the end of the week, with an echidna, a lizard, a frog or even a harmless python that he had stopped to catch, then safely tucked into a towel, so he that could show his family the wondrous little creature and then take it back to its home. His love of nature, combined with his strong Irish Catholic upbringing, meant that ecocentrism was forged together with empathy for 'the underdog' (whether that 'underdog' was animal or human) and so he emanated an uncomplicated strain of compassion that I'll always be grateful for.

The third and final member of the family that had a deep and important effect on my life was Uncle David. But he wasn't an uncle at all – I'm referring to the fabulous David Attenborough of course. It's actually difficult to explain to younger people today, what life was like before the extreme media flood we now experience on a daily basis. Rather than have to sift through copious amounts of information for any grain of truth, we hungrily sought out news and adventures from other places. I grew up with one, non-commercial TV channel (ABC) that shut down before midnight, and a radio station that closed down at 7.00 PM. Once a week, pretty much every week I can remember, there'd be a David Attenborough documentary on TV and the whole family would sit together and watch it. Sir David's shows enabled a little kid from the Aussie bush to experience the endless parade of biodiversity and witness the wonder of the planet's ecosystems, second hand, from a timber Queenslander on the edge of a small country town. And I'll be eternally grateful to him for that.

University and the Ghungalu First Nations peoples

Despite growing up with a profound and joyful love of all plants and animals, there was one element of my current ecocentric life that was absent throughout my childhood and teen years – and that

"My eucalyptus-flavoured ecofeminism and gidgee-scented ecocentrism are now both deeper and more pragmatic, all, at the same time, thanks to what I learned from my Aboriginal friends and colleagues."

was any sort of understanding about the culture of First Nations peoples in Australia, or the history and devastating impact of British colonization on them. In my town, indigenous and non-indigenous people grew up as friends and neighbours. But my school education, relatives and contemporary TV shows said nothing about Aboriginal Australia. It wasn't until I started university, and enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (majoring in Australian history) and Law degree, that I finally began to read, learn and be taught about that devastating impact.

Several years later, when in my late 20s, I was introduced to an amazing group of women who were to have a huge impact on my life, and my views about ecocentrism. I met Marie, Margaret, Patsy, Hazel and other terrific folks from the Ghungalu Aboriginal community in Central Queensland. We met through mutual friends, and when they discovered I had a law degree, they invited me to help them with the complex and ultimately flawed processes of the (then) recently introduced Native Title Legislation, created in response to the critically important Mabo decision. I quickly came to admire their work and the creativity they demonstrated in order to survive the daily atrocities of white Australian bureaucracy, as they worked to speak up for and protect their country. For ten years I was part of their lives, communities and work projects, and during that time I learnt an incredible amount – including how to fully face the impact of my European ancestors' devastating destruction of their way of life. I also learnt first-hand about the incredible resilience of Aboriginal people, about their profound connection to country and how their laws and cultural practices continue despite what colonialism has tried (and often succeeded) in doing. My views about ecocentrism are different today from what they were when I was young. My eucalyptus-flavoured ecofeminism and gidgee-scented ecocentrism are now both deeper and more pragmatic, all, at the same time, thanks to what I learned from my Aboriginal friends and colleagues. My friendship and work with the Ghungalu women has been profoundly important to my personal life, my work and the way I think about the world.

Thomas Berry and Earth jurisprudence

The final important influence over my ecocentric life is the work of Thomas Berry (1988; 1999). Though I wasn't lucky enough to meet him while he was alive, his work has more than 'nurtured' my own ecocentrism: it has inspired, enriched and shaped my personal and professional life. After working for ten years with the amazing people in the Ghungalu community, my husband and I were delighted to fall pregnant, and I realized that I didn't want to spend as much time travelling around the countryside as I used to – I wanted to work from home, raise my baby girl and rethink my professional life. A year after bub was born I was enrolled in a part-time PhD in law and I attended a special event that helped set the path for the second half of my working life.

In 2009 I was fortunate enough to attend Australia's first Wild Law conference, organised by Peter Burdon and Friends of the Earth, in the Adelaide Hills, in South Australia. It was at that conference that I met and fell in love with Earth jurisprudence, Wild Law (Cullinan, 2003) and the aforementioned work of Thomas Berry. I also met a wonderful group of people (mostly lawyers – yes! – wonderful lawyers) who I continue to work with today. By reading *The Universe Story* (Swimme and Berry, 1992) and then *The Great Work* (Berry, 1999) I felt as if the patchwork quilt of my life experience and formal education was finally meshing together in a coherent way. *The Great Work* seemed to offer to me a dark, poetic guide to the kind of work that a lawyer and self-professed 'governance nerd' should focus on. After the 2009 conference, a group of us worked together to host several other Wild Law conferences and by the time the 2011 conference began, we had announced our intention to create a permanent space dedicated to increasing the understanding and practical implementation of Earth-centred law, governance and ethics in

Australia. The Australian Earth Laws Alliance (AELA; www.earthlaws.org.au) was legally formed in early 2012 and since that time, I have, along with other volunteers, worked tirelessly to build the organization's networks and projects.

Co-founding AELA feels like the ultimate professional expression of my ecocentric worldview. It encapsulates a wide range of programmes that cover issues that are hugely important to me and many others:

- advocating for Earth-centred law and the rights of nature;
- promoting cultural change from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism through education, the arts and eco-spirituality
- creating Earth-centred 'alternatives' to the current flawed, human-centred governance systems, through the Australian Centre for the Rights of Nature, the People's Tribunal for the Rights of Nature and the New Economy Network Australia.

AELA's work also prioritizes working in true partnership with First Nations peoples, to support their claims of sovereignty and land rights, support their self-determination and economic initiatives and increase people's understanding of Aboriginal culture, law and the ongoing impacts of colonization.

As I finish writing this piece, I'm kept company by one of the Earth community's most wondrous beings: a domesticated dog. He is a medium-sized dog, a husky–shepherd cross with a short thick coat of golden fur, deep dark eyes that seem to hold the whole universe within them, and the cutest paws any animal could ever have. He's lying across my bare feet and I can feel the rise and fall of his chest as he breathes and his thick soft fur on my toes. Every time I glance down at him, he looks back up at me. I can think of no better way to finish writing about ecocentrism than to say that the connection I feel, when I look at him, and any animal or plant, fills my heart and soul with a deep happiness. And so my ecocentric adventures continue... ■

"Co-founding AELA feels like the ultimate professional expression of my ecocentric worldview."

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The sun setting over Crater Lake in Oregon, USA

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