Ian Whyte (1941–2025): An appreciation

Patrick Curry

Patrick is a writer and scholar based in London, UK. His works include *Ecological Ethics: An introduction* (Polity Press, 2017).

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On the 13th of February 2025, Ian Whyte died at his home in Ottawa in the company of his beloved wife Karen. He was eighty-three years old. But this isn't a full or standard obituary. Rather, it's an account focused on Ian's life as a lover of, and tireless warrior on behalf of, the Earth. A first-rate field naturalist, he was also (in the words of a friend and colleague, Frank de Jong) "a passionate, intelligent, well-read, highly spiritual green activist who essentially dedicated his life to the preservation and conservation of ecosystems, the rehabilitation of degraded landscapes, creation of new wild areas, and to changing the mindset of the public to value nature for its inherent value rather than merely for its dollar value". (The term 'spirituality' here should probably be qualified as 'Earth-centred'.)

Ian and I first met in 2006, when he and Karen visited London, where I live. We had been corresponding through a shared interest in, and commitment to, the philosophy and programme of Left Bio developed by David Orton (1934–2011), and when Joe Gray and I hatched the idea of starting an ecocentric journal over a couple of organic beers on 11 May 2016, Ian was naturally the first person we thought of. So Ian was a founding editor of *The Ecological Citizen* (*TEC*), and it became an important part of his life. But his presence for us, the other editors, was massive and integral. It's fair to say that although we are all ecocentric in our values and orientations, Ian was *primus inter pares*: a one-man ecocentric conscience who could always be relied upon to give it to us, and to our contributors, straight.

Indeed, if I had to sum up Ian in one word, it would be integrity. His was uncompromising. He would have liked what David Brower said: "I was not always unreasonable, and I'm sorry for that". (Brower was executive director of the Sierra Club until it shamefully backed down on human overpopulation and nuclear power.) Does that mean Ian was confrontational? No; he simply insisted, forthrightly and persistently but not aggressively, on questioning "unbridled human superiority", the "vastly excessive human enterprise", and

"the system, which [is] dedicated to consuming the whole Earth, until death reigns everywhere".

But his was not simply a negative critique. To the end of his days, Ian was deeply concerned with what practical steps we could take to realize ecocentrism, to make it real in practice, and he rightly insisted that whenever at all possible, our articles include some attempt to spell out steps forward on the ground, as it were.

Those phrases I've just quoted are taken from Ian's contributions to *TEC* and to *Earth Tongues* (*ET*), the journal's accompanying blog. Ian contributed eight articles to the journal, including two co-authored plus one book review, and six entries to the blog. All are excellent, but particularly indispensable, I would say, are:

- My path to ecocentrism (2017): www.ecologicalcitizen.net/pdfs/v01sa-09.pdf
- Life's defeat is imminent: We must become effective (2017): www.ecologicalcitizen.net/pdfs/v01n1-03.pdf
- Life's catastrophe: An angry editorial (2018): www.ecologicalcitizen.net/pdfs/v02n1-01.pdf
- My ecocentric decisions (2024): www.ecologicalcitizen.net/pdfs/epub-112.pdf

And the blog post:

- Making my decisions – do least harm (13 August 2020): blog.ecologicalcitizen.net/2020/08/13/making-my-decisions-do-least-harm/

Towards the end of his life, Ian also co-authored, with Joe Gray, a chapter in a new and important collection:

- Respecting nonhuman life: The guide for a better pathway in outdoor recreation. In: Gray J and Crist E, eds. *Cohabiting Earth: Seeking a bright future for all life*. SUNY Press, Albany, NY, USA: 193–208.

For insights into Ian's biography, but even more importantly his guiding principles for ecocentrism in action, as well as his uncompromising critique of the mainstream conservation movement, I urge you to read or reread these articles.

Ian also urged people – that's you and me! – to read (or reread) and engage with 'A manifesto for Earth' (https://is.gd/5wJjLA) by the important ecocentrics Stan Rowe and Ted Mosquin, the latter being a good friend of Ian's and a major influence.

Finally, in line with the rest of his life and work, Ian's ideas include not only ecocentrism as a worldview (see his co-authored, 'Ecocentrism: What it means and what it implies' [2018]: https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/pdfs/v01n2-02.pdf) but valuable guidance on how to proceed, including the precautionary approach, the weight-of-evidence principle, the principle of reverse onus, reverse matrix, frugality and simplicity, and the principle of do least harm. Do I need to add that Ian was never afraid to point to and name the elephant in the room, gross human overpopulation?

My partner Susan and I visited Ian and Karen in Ottawa, and they took us on memorable walks at Mud Lake, Blueberry Hill and Algonquin Park. I struggled to maintain my little remaining Canadian credibility in a canoe, but they were forgiving. One incident in particular stands out in my memory. Ian was walking ahead of me along the path when suddenly he stopped. Then this big man, whom I can only describe as manly, bent down, pointed to a tiny flower on the side of the path, and said, in tones of wonder, 'Look – a pink!' Later, I thought: Yes! Forget all the macho bluster, self-pity, and nihilism. *This* is what it means to be a man.

Thank you, Ian.

A collection of photos taken by Ian

Introductory text by Joe Gray: Although I never met Ian in person during our decade-long friendship, I quickly grew, and forever stayed, fond of this man from across the Atlantic. That was hardly surprising given the strong overlap in our core interests and values: the pursuit of a green lifestyle; the practice of natural history; and the defence of wild nature (something in which I can only aspire to be as unflagging as he was). As part of our fellowship, we exchanged nature photos from time to time, so each could learn something of the other's observations. In this way, I built up a library of Ian's wildlife sightings, with permission to draw on them as I saw appropriate. And I can hardly think of a more fitting use of this consent than to add some splashes of Ian's beloved wild nature to Patrick's moving obituary.

Autumn leaves.

Leopard frog (top); hooded mergansers (middle); Baltimore checkerspots (bottom).

Maples (top); Sandbanks Provincial Park (bottom).