from ego-self to eco-self

Toward an Ecocentric Community

by Bruce A. Byers

Any discussion of community that addresses only its *human* dimension is incomplete. As Aldo Leopold, the pioneer American ecologist and ecophilosopher said, an ecocentric view "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it." Arne Naess, the "father" of deep ecology, wrote a paper titled "Self-realization in Mixed Communities of Humans, Bears, Sheep, and Wolves." Our lives depend on mixed-species ecological communities whether we recognize it or not.

Chico Mendes, the Brazilian peasant who was murdered because he organized rubber tappers and other forest people to nonviolently oppose the cutting of the rainforests upon which their lives depended, is sometimes portrayed as a "tree hugger," willing to give his life to defend the forest. But Mendes' real wisdom was to recognize that one cannot be a "people hugger" without being a "tree hugger," and vice versa.

Innuit (Eskimo) print, artist unknown

Yet some people — notably "social ecologist" Murray Bookchin (see "Will Ecology Become the Dismal Science?" in *The Progressive*, December '91) — have made the charge that environmentalists are "reactionary misanthropes." Bookchin understands correctly that deep ecology promotes an ecocentric perspective and rejects anthropocentrism. (Ecocentrism recognizes that other species, and even whole ecosystems, have an intrinsic value and right to existence apart from any "instrumental" or "use" value they may have to humans. Anthropocentrism, in contrast, is a hierarchical view in which humans are assumed to be the pinnacle of evolution, and of greater value than any other species.) But to equate ecocentrism with misanthropy is a complete misunderstanding. In fact, deep ecology argues that if you really love humans you *must* love and defend the biosphere that is their only home.

Why must we be ecocentric in order to love humans and sustain human communities? One answer flows naturally from the Buddhist view of "dependent co-arising" (*paticca samupadda* in Pali) and its metaphor in the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Net of Indra. Because of the net-like, interdependent structure of reality — what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "interbeing" — what we do to the natural world, we ultimately do to ourselves. Robert Aitken Roshi has called Indra's Net "the harmony of universal symbiosis."

Ecology and evolution provide concrete evidence of the interdependence or "interbeing" of ecological communities. Nutrient cycles show this clearly. For example, animals take in oxygen from the air in order to release the energy from their food, and in the process create and release carbon dioxide; plants use carbon dioxide in photosynthesis and release oxygen as a waste product. Food chains and food webs — metaphors for the flow of energy through ecosystems — also illustrate this interdependence. A food-web diagram of a species-rich ecosystem like a tropical forest or coral reef provides a beautiful image of the Net of Indra.

Evolution, over eons of time, has shaped interdependent and sometimes even cooperative relationships within ecological communities. Predators and their prey are clearly shaped by these evolutionary forces. Wolves and mountain lions, for example, are responsible for the fleetness and grace of deer; and deer are responsible for the ferocity and stealth of their predators. Insect-eating birds are responsible for the beautiful camouflage of moths, and moth camouflage is responsible for the sharp vision of birds. Parasites and their hosts also can co-evolve relationships of mutual dependence; relationships that begin as harmful to the host and beneficial to the parasite seem often to evolve into relationships that are mutually beneficial. Lichens, reef-building corals, and the nitrogen-fixing bacteria that live in the root-nodules of legumes may all be examples of this coevolution of cooperation.

If we took the idea of ecocentric communities seriously, how could we best protect the jobs of loggers in the Pacific Northwest and the economies of the logging communities they support, not to mention supplying the needs of the rest of us for affordable building materials, paper, and other forest products? By making certain that logging is an ecologically sustainable economic activity — otherwise we would condemn loggers, or their children, to the economic collapse of their means of livelihood. Developing forestry practices that are ecologically

sustainable in the long term probably requires that we protect the last relict stands of old growth forests. They are a natural ecological laboratory in which forest ecologists can study, and perhaps come to understand (which they do not now) the complex processes that make forests sustainable. These ancient forests are also a repository of genetically diverse trees, which could allow future forests to adapt to changes in climate, or outbreaks of new pests or diseases. People employed by the "forest products industry" take it as a matter of faith that tree "farming," which replaces a complex forest ecosystem with a genetic monoculture of nursery-bred trees, is ecologically sustainable, but there is no history to prove that it is. The spotted owl, marbled murrelet, and other endangered species of the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest should be seen as the "miners' canaries" of the logging industry, warning of imminent danger if we continue to mine out the old growth.

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How can we best love and support the native people of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge area, some of whom *want* oil development? Certainly not by getting them hooked on the short-term economic benefits of an extractive, oil-based economy, but by encouraging them to maintain the health of their traditional, sustainable subsistence economy based on hunting caribou, birds, seals and other sea mammals, and fishing.

These examples may give the impression that I am arguing for preserving other species and the "land-community" because of their instrumental value to people — to provide renewable resources, as a repository of genetic diversity, or as an early warning system to warn humans of ecological collapse — rather than for their intrinsic value. The Buddhist perspective of interbeing suggests that the distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental values of nonhuman species, a distinction so often debated by ecophilosophers, is based on a false view of reality. The distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value blurs when the view of "self" is widened from an "ego-self" to an "eco-self."

The Net-of-Indra view of reality suggests our own radical complicity in both causing and solving ecological problems. On the negative side, anything we do affects the whole system; our ecological "sins" have a global reach. When we drive gas-guzzling cars, don't hang our clothes in the sun to dry, or don't recycle our paper, it will come back around to affect us. Eating bananas, tuna, or fast-food hamburgers influences the life-potential of other beings, both human and nonhuman, around the globe. But on the positive side, when we do something right, no matter how small, it sends ripples of healing throughout the whole system. So hanging our clothes out to dry, taking the bus, and growing an organic garden will help to save the whales and the forest peoples of the Amazon, and prevent another war in the Persian Gulf. Taking this view seriously gives rise to humility, compassion, and an "eco-bodhisattva" ethic of environmental action. ❖

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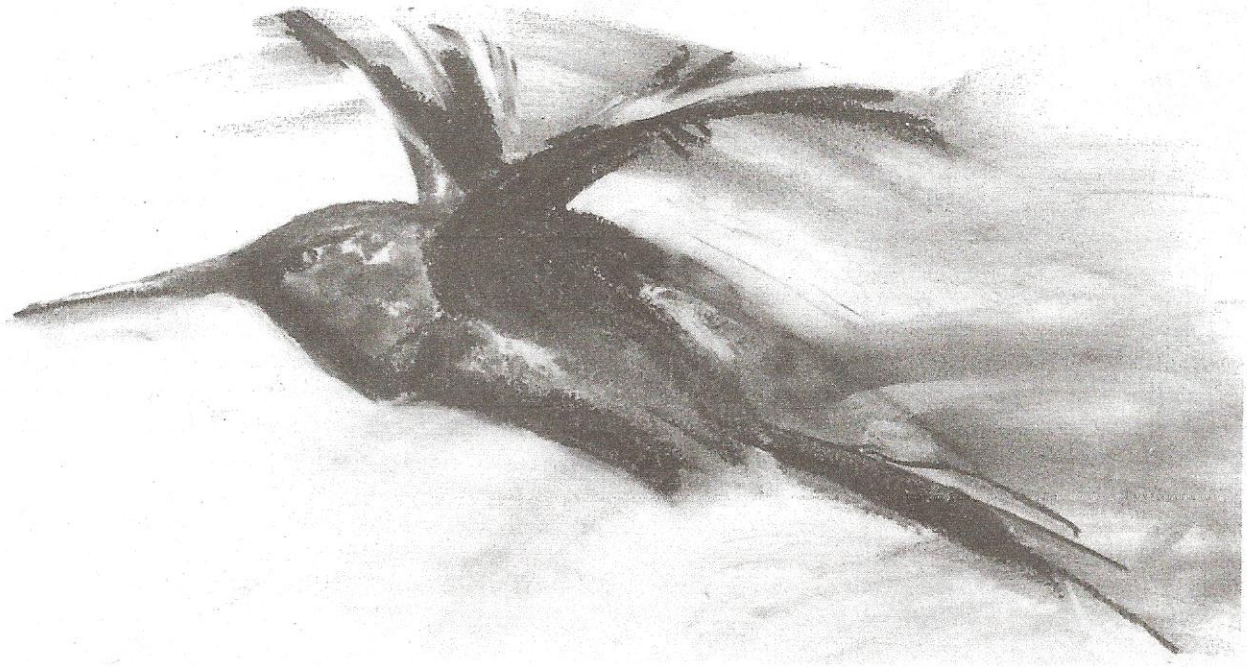

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