



“Summary of article by Ramachandra Guha: Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 1: A Survey of Ecological Economics. Island Press: Washington DC, 1995. pp. 317-320

Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being

“Summary of article by Ramachandra Guha: Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique”

This article critiques the deep ecology movement, and argues that despite its claim to universality, it is a uniquely American phenomenon.

THE TENETS OF DEEP ECOLOGY

While there are political and philosophical differences among deep ecologists, there are four defining characteristics of the movement:

- 1) Deep ecology argues that the environmental movement needs to shift from an "anthropocentric" to a "biocentric" perspective. Anthropocentrism is thought to be at the core of Western society and many of our current environmental problems, and others such as "shallow ecologists" are criticized for continuing to frame arguments in human-centered terms. There is also a belief in the intrinsic value of preserving nature quite apart from the benefits it would bestow on humans.
- 2) Deep ecology focuses on "the preservation of unspoilt wilderness - and the restoration of degraded areas to a more pristine condition."⁽⁷³⁾ This obsession with wilderness follows logically from the biocentric world view described above. Scientifically, preservation of wilderness is supported on the grounds that it maintains a gene pool for future generations.
- 3) Eastern spiritual traditions are invoked as the forerunners of the deep ecology movement, helping to strengthen its claims of universality.
- 4) Deep ecologists see themselves as the spiritual, philosophical and political vanguard of American and world environmentalism.

TOWARD A CRITIQUE

Some critiques of the deep ecology approach include the following:

- 1) The call by deep ecologists for a shift from an anthropocentric to a biocentric perspective should be welcomed. However, the radical conclusions that they draw from this shift are unacceptable. Deep ecologists argue that preserving biotic integrity should be the guiding principle of intervention in nature, rather than human needs. However, focusing on the anthropocentric-biocentric dichotomy sheds little light on the true dynamics of environmental

degradation, since the two major ecological problems facing the world are over-consumption (by the industrial economies of the West and Third World elites) and growing militarization. These two problems are consequences of the interactions between economic and political forces as well as individual life style choices; they cannot be explained in terms of the anthropocentric-biocentric dichotomy. Blaming environmental problems on anthropocentrism is therefore "at best irrelevant and at worse a dangerous obfuscation."(74)

- 2) While the anthropocentric-biocentric dichotomy may be merely irrelevant, the focus on preservation of wilderness is actually harmful to the Third World. For example, setting aside wilderness in India results in a redistribution of resources from the poor to the rich. Project Tiger, an internationally acclaimed program, displaced poor peasants who had been living in the areas around the new reserves. The initial impetus for programs like Project Tiger came from members of the Indian feudal elite, and from organizations like the World Wildlife Fund, which wanted to transplant the American system of national parks into India. Until recently, environmentalism has been equated with wildland preservation, ignoring the environmental problems that affect the poor, such as shortages of fuel, fodder and water resources, soil erosion, pollution, etc. The deep ecology approach provides a justification for such inequitable conservation practices.
- 3) In invoking Eastern traditions to buttress their position, the deep ecologists lump together a number of complex and different traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. The philosophers of these traditions are identified as the forerunners of modern deep ecology. However, while it is true that thinkers in these traditions such as Lao Tzu did reflect on the interactions between man and nature, the development of their philosophies must be understood within the context of the communities and societies of which they were a part. Their reflections were based on the active relationship between man and nature within these communities, rather than "on a mystical affinity with nature of a deep ecological kind."(77)
- 4) Deep ecology should be seen as a radical movement within the wilderness preservation movement in America, but its radicalism is limited. The movement for preservation of wilderness in America is an outgrowth of economic expansion; having met the earlier goals of attaining necessities and conveniences, the national parks have been developed as the avenue for meeting newer aesthetic goals. In this sense, the deep ecology movement parallels the consumer society, and reflects the coexistence of wilderness and civilization in America. By concentrating on the preservation of wilderness, however, the deep ecologists do not question the ecological and socio-political basis of the consumer society. Equating environmental protection with the protection of wildlife is a uniquely American phenomenon.

In contrast, the environmental movement in Germany (particularly the Greens) finds the roots of the problem in industrial societies themselves, and calls for limits to growth. Their prescription for ecological problems is a change in cultural values, arguing for an ethic of renunciation and self-limitation, with spiritual and communal values playing a bigger role in social life. This view has a strong resonance in countries like India, where industrial development has benefited only a small elite. The environmental traditions in both Germany and India therefore emphasize equity and social justice.

A HOMILY

Concerns about over-consumption, efforts to develop ecologically benign technologies, and opposition to a permanent war economy are all missing from the deep ecology perspective. By highlighting the anthropocentric-biocentric dichotomy rather than concentrating on a synthesis of appropriate technologies, alternate life styles and peace movements, the deep ecologists are doing American and world environmentalism a disservice.