

Getting Deep About Deep Ecology

Anthony F. Tresca

Trinity University, San Antonio, United States

Despite being a philosophical group since the late 60s/early 70s, Deep Ecology has failed to produce the type of change necessary to effectively combat the climate crisis. This paper examines Deep Ecology's more spiritual/philosophical approach to climate change, including: their history, their advocacy for biocentric equality, and their focus on cultivating an ecological consciousness. The paper then examines major criticisms with the movement and finds that all critics come to a unifying and damning conclusion about the movement: Deep Ecology does not offer a realistic solution to the fast approaching climate crisis. Yet, Deep Ecology's inability to solve the climate crisis does not mean the philosophical movement is a failure and bad; instead, it just shows that Deep Ecology in combination with other more tangible steps should be taken to effectively combat the current climate crisis. Reformist groups, led by former Deep Ecologists, like Social Ecology and Green Anarchism, still maintain many of the core principles of Deep Ecology; however, they include a stronger focus on how to take direct action in order to combat climate change. The reformist approach provides the best—and most realistic—solutions to the current global climate crisis.

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On November 26, 2019, the United Nations issued bleak finding in their Emissions Gap Report for 2019. The UN's report confirmed that—despite warnings from numerous scientists—countries had failed to halt the rise of greenhouse gas emissions; in particular, the two largest polluters, the United States and China, had actually further increased their emissions in the last year (Sengupta, 2019). The executive summary of the report states that countries have “collectively failed to stop the growth in global GHG emissions, meaning that deeper and faster cuts are now required” (*United Nations Climate Change-Summit 2019*, 2019). The United Nations' recommendation for deeper changes seems to open the door for a movement that has “deep” in the name: Deep Ecology. Despite its existence since the late 60s/early 70s, Deep Ecology has failed to produce the type of change necessary to effectively combat the current climate crisis. While Deep Ecology, as advocated by Bill Devall and George Sessions, has not failed as an intellectual movement, Deep Ecology lacks the necessary depth to solve real global problems—thus, other more realistic solutions to the climate crisis are needed.

What Is Deep Ecology?

The study of ecology was ushered into the cultural zeitgeist during the 1960s. Other individuals, such as Aldo Leopold, contributed to the movement earlier; however, it was not until the 60s that the public became aware of the science of ecology and its relevance to environmental matters (Sessions, 1987). It was during this “Age of Ecology” that the Deep Ecology movement began to emerge. Despite ecology's growing relevance, it was mostly limited to scientific discourse; this all changed when distinguished Norwegian philosopher of

Anthony F. Tresca, Undergraduate, Political Science, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, United States.

science and linguistics, Arne Naess, delivered and published his lecture entitled “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements” (Sessions, 1987).

In his now famous lecture, Naess attempted to describe a deeper, more spiritual approach to “Nature” and how to better understand ecology (Devall, 1985). Naess argued that while it was positive that the scientific community was taking ecology seriously, they fundamentally misunderstood what the true problems were. Naess asserted that the scientific community was wrongly focusing on “shallow”, pragmatic reformist solutions to problems such as pollution and resource depletion which were merely symptoms of the environmental disease (Sessions, 1987). This approach, Naess argued, was anthropocentric and would only serve to benefit the health and prosperity of people already living in developed countries. Instead of focusing on short range, “shallow” solutions, Naess advocated for a long range, “deep” movement that would include a “major realignment in our thinking about humans and nature consistent with an ecological perspective” (Sessions, 1987, p. 112). In this lecture, Naess both defined Deep Ecology and laid the groundwork for what would develop into an incredibly influential movement.

Naess would go on to work with other key thinkers, such as Devall and Sessions, to further articulate the Deep Ecology movement; between both their independent and collaborative works, these three thinkers crafted a detailed description of Deep Ecology. The main argument of the movement is to persuade people to begin cultivating an ecological consciousness within oneself (Devall, 1985). In order to develop an ecological consciousness, one must go through a “process of learning to appreciate silence and solitude and rediscovering how to listen, it is learning how to be more receptive, trusting, holistic in perception and is grounded in a vision of nonexploitive science and technology” (Devall, 1985, p. 8). The self-realization that comes from being ecologically conscientious will, Deep Ecologists argue, naturally lead one to adopt the mindset of biocentric equality.

Biocentric equality is the belief that all things in the biosphere have an equal right to life and right to achieve their own individual form of self-realization (Devall, 1985). Being biocentrically orientated means that one would take no actions that would impede on any organism’s ability to secure their vital needs. The term “vital needs” was left intentionally vague so that the definition could be adjusted later based on differences in climate and other factors that change what is vital to surviving in a given location (Devall, 1985). Biocentric equality removes the need for dominance; instead, its practices focus on the interconnectedness of all things (Devall, 1985). Through the ecological consciousness one has fostered, biocentric equality positions one to live in harmony within nature and accept their place as a singular individual that exists in something much larger than themselves.

In order to reach ecological consciousness, Deep Ecologists demand that one must reject the dominant tradition and embrace the minority tradition. The dominant tradition—also described as the dominant paradigm—includes:

the belief that “economic growth,” as measured by the Gross National Product, is the ultimate measure of Progress, the belief that the primary goal of the governments of nation-states, after national defense, should be to create conditions that will increase production of commodities and satisfy material wants of citizens, and the belief that “technology can solve our problems”. Nature, in this paradigm, is only a storehouse of resources which should be “developed” to satisfy ever increasing numbers of humans and ever increasing demands of humans. (Devall, 1987, p. 300)

Deep Ecologists seek to break people away from the dominant paradigm, and shift society towards the minority tradition. The minority tradition is not unrestrained chaos or unregulated individualism; rather, the

minority tradition would resemble a harmonious self-regulating community (Devall, 1985). In order to achieve this tradition, it requires one to reject the status quo; as such, the world as described by Deep Ecology would look radically different from the one that currently exists.

The difference in Deep Ecology's goals is what ultimately separates the movement from reformist environmentalism. Deep Ecologists acknowledge that reformist environmental groups have been helpful to the planet by temporarily saving some nature reserves and parks; similarly, both groups even agree on the problems and the urgency required to address the climate crisis. Despite the overlap, Deep Ecologists argue that reformist groups are not doing enough because they only work towards changing public policy (Devall, 1985). Deep Ecologists believe that reformist groups are stuck operating—and ultimately affirming—the dominant paradigm just like the scientists that came before them (Devall, 1987). Thus, in the eyes of Deep Ecologists, the solutions that reformists offer are “shallow” and will not foster an ecological consciousness that will lead to biocentric equality (Devall, 1987). For “deep ecologists the balance has long since been tipped in favor of human. Now we must shift the balance back to protect the habitat of other species” (Devall, 1985, p. 127). In order to achieve this shift in the culture, Deep Ecology demands that we move away from anthropocentric solutions and towards solutions that value all life, rather than just humans.

Deep Ecology's Critics

Deep Ecology is a highly controversial and deeply divisive movement. The philosophy advocates for a new world that would be organized in a strikingly different manner than how it is currently orientated (Devall, 1987); this radical nature that is inherent in Deep Ecology has left the movement open to attacks from a plethora of sources. Deep Ecology has strong opponents on both the political left and right (Sessions, 2006). Critics of Deep Ecology vary in the manner in which they oppose the philosophy: some critique Deep Ecology for being too radical, while others submit that Deep Ecology does not go far enough. However, the commonality that exists between all of the criticisms of Deep Ecology is that the philosophy does not offer a realistic solution to the fast approaching climate crisis.

Luc Ferry, a French philosopher and politician, offers a scathing criticism of the more radical nature of Deep Ecology. Ferry is a staunch humanist; this has led him to pose multiple objections to the notion of granting non-human beings legal rights. He believes that “law is always for men, and it is for men that trees or whales can become objects of a form of respect tied to legislation—not the reverse” (Ferry, 1995, p. 139). Ferry argues that while extending rights to all in the biosphere sounds like a reasonable proposal, it does not logically make sense because “the biosphere gives life both to the AIDs virus and to the baby seal, to the plague and to cholera, to the forest and to the river. Can one seriously claim that HIV is a subject of law, equal to man?” (Ferry, 1995, p. 140). While all in the biosphere are important—and there certainly should be actions taken to protect nature—all things in the biosphere are not legal subjects and do not need/warrant representation as such (Ferry, 1995).

Ferry also attacks Deep Ecologists' non-anthropocentric solutions as fundamentally flawed and inadequate to address the climate crisis (Ferry, 1995). For Ferry, the concept of biocentric equality is a foolishly trite notion because it allows humanity to ignore their responsibility and ability to protect nature (Ferry, 1995). Deep Ecologists view humans as being no more important than any other organism within the biosphere; Ferry argues that this is problematic because it removes all agency from humanity to solve the problems that they have created within the biosphere (Ferry, 1995). Ferry acknowledges the seriousness of the issues that Deep

Ecologists raise; however, he does not believe that solutions will “appear on their own, as if part of the natural evolution of things, without our having to mobilize collective thought and action” (Ferry, 1995, p. 127). Instead, Ferry advocates for the integration of an ecological perspective within a democratic framework in order to utilize humanity’s institutions to solve the problems.

Dr. Ariel Kay Salleh poses radically different qualms with Deep Ecology than Ferry by critiquing the philosophy from an ecofeminist perspective. Salleh takes grievance with Deep Ecology on both a logical ground and challenges their tacit methodological approach. Deep Ecology claims to want to move away from anthropocentrism and toward biological egalitarianism; thus, removing man’s desire to dominate nature. However, “the master-slave role which marks man’s relation with nature is replicated in man’s relation with woman. A self-consistent biological egalitarianism cannot be arrived at unless men become open to both facets of this same urge to dominate and use” (Salleh, 1984, p. 340). Salleh argues that if we continue to ignore the sexism that still currently exists within humans, it will be impossible to achieve true equality for all beings.

Though Deep Ecology claims to advocate for diversity—they even include diversity in their basic principles (Devall, 1985)—they will be only partially successful “if the ecologist continues to ignore the cultural inventiveness of that other half of the human race, women” (Salleh, 1984, p. 341). Salleh calls out the hypocritical nature of the philosophy; while it rejects the exploitation of some by others (such as nature by man), “sexual oppression and the social differentiation that this produces is not mentioned by Naess” (Salleh, 1984, p. 341). Women have once again been lumped in with everything else; by ignoring the specific problems of women, the philosophy shows that it is not truly interested in achieving biocentric equality for all—namely, for women.

Similarly, by keeping women and their issues out of the philosophy, Salleh argues that Deep Ecology’s definition of “pollution” is not fully representative of the problem. The objectivist attitude that is present throughout ecological writings—as well as the tacit mind-body dualism which shapes this—means that the philosophy’s comprehension of “pollution” is framed exclusively in external material terms. While ecofeminists acknowledge that pollution in terms of its material sense is a pressing problem, the female consciousness is equally concerned with eradicating “ideological pollution, which centuries of patriarchal conditioning have subjected us all to” (Salleh, 1984, p. 342). Women are more motivated to change this system and address ideological pollution because, unlike men, women do not receive an ego gratification from the patriarchal hegemony that is still present.

Finally, Salleh questions the purpose and effectiveness of Deep Ecology. Deep Ecologists’ proposals are centered around theories of complexity, not complication principle; for example, just because urban life is more complicated than that of nature does not make it more complex holistically (Devall, 1985). Deep Ecology favors a more complex economy that is supported by division (Devall, 1985). Salleh argues that there are serious problems of implementation attached to this overly idealistic worldview. The philosophy’s references to expanding “soft future research, the implementation of policies”, and increasing the “exponential growth of technical skill and intervention”, collapse the movement into the “shallow” ecology paradigm and its human chauvinist ontology (Salleh, 1984, p. 342). Salleh accuses Deep Ecology of falling prey to the masculine sense of sense-worth that has become deeply entrenched in the scientific community that makes it “very hard for men to argue persuasively without recourse to [vague] terms like these for validation” (Salleh, 1984, p. 342). The inflated sense of self-worth that Deep Ecologists’ possess has led eco-feminists to dismiss Deep Ecology as

being more of a “self-congratulatory” reformist movement rather than one that has any chance of getting anything done (Salleh, 1984, p. 344).

Former Deep Ecologist, George Bradford, comes to a similar conclusion: Deep Ecology is not nearly as deep as it says it is. Bradford was initially optimistic of the movement and saw it as possibly being able to positively change the culture; however, now he finds it deeply “troubling and depressing that a movement so courageously and persistently involved with direct action to defend the earth can simultaneously exhibit reactionary, inhuman politics, and survivalist posturing” (Bradford, 1989, p. 35). In particular, Bradford is shocked how such a self-proclaimed “enlightened” movement can remain blind to the interrelation “of capital and the state with the planetary megatechnic work pyramid that is devouring nature” (Bradford, 1989, p. 35). By ignoring these connections, Deep Ecologists continue to protect the real sources of the environmental problem: capitalism, the state, and technology.

While Deep Ecology claims to be asking the deeper question, Bradford argues Deep Ecology fails to recognize that any real solution would also require a deeper analysis on human society. Instead, Deep Ecology takes politics in a capitalist democracy as a given and offers confused suggestions for how to take “direct action” within the already established system (Devall, 1985). Direct action is reduced to lobbying and—presumably—to electoral politics: nowhere “is this ‘working-within-the-system’ centrism questioned; it is simply assumed” (Bradford, 1989, p. 11). Similarly, Deep Ecology harbors an overly simplistic view that countries will just agree to nonviolence in order to secure nature against the devastation of war; this reflects their naïve understanding of how international politics and the global economy work (Bradford, 1989).

Deep Ecology acknowledges that everything in the biosphere is connected; this view makes it highly ironic that they fail to make the connection between the global corporate-capitalist systems and the environmental crisis. By failing to critique capitalism, Deep Ecology squanders the opportunity to provide a clear and authentic path to combating greedy corporations that are currently destroying the Earth. Bradford ultimately argues that: “anthropocentrism or not, humans are the only beings in a position to wage effective war against the empires and articulate an earth-based culture and a renewal of the land” (Bradford, 1989, p. 12). Deep Ecology fails to be deep enough to provide real answers on how to solve the climate crisis because they ignore that only humans currently have the power to fight against human systems that are destroying the planet.

Deep Ecologists’ Response

The critiques against Deep Ecology did not go unchallenged; Devall, Sessions, and other disciples of the philosophy have written extensive responses to the criticisms. One of the most striking commonalities about their responses is the new-found urgency that Deep Ecologists now write with. When Deep Ecology was in its early days, those in the philosophy seemed optimistic about the future of the planet; however, now they are much more pessimistic in their writings. Both Devall and Sessions admit that the climate crisis has (instead of decreasing) gotten much worse. Devall was hopeful that when the movement got started in the 1970s—a decade proclaimed “the decade of the environment”—things would change for the better; however, reports have confirmed that Earth is deteriorating at a much faster rate than previously anticipated and that, for many, life is going to get much worse (Devall, 2001). Sessions similarly points to damning reports that, he claims, prove what Deep Ecologists have been saying would happen to the Earth for years (Sessions, 2006).

Despite Deep Ecologists’ acknowledgement that problems have gotten worse, they largely fail to present tangible ways for the philosophy to adequately address the problems. In fact, Deep Ecologists seem mostly

content to dismiss critics of their solutions as being unenlightened and being too “ecologically illiterate” to understand what they were seeking to achieve (Sessions, 2006, p. 123). In fact, the chief responses to criticisms of the movements have been a simple reaffirmation of the core tenants of the philosophy. Devall dismisses the efforts of reformist groups to change public policy and practices as being “useless” without the paradigm shift that Deep Ecologists propose (Devall, 2001). Sessions similarly writes off the ecofeminists’ critique of the movement as not being helpful because ecofeminism’s “allegiances lie more with leftist emancipatory politics than with the ecology movement” (Sessions, 2006, p. 149). Sessions insists that only Deep Ecology has the power to change the culture, not ecofeminism or the suggestions they offer.

While both Devall and Sessions attempt to counter criticism, they fail to address the real complaints critics have with the movement: the tangibility of Deep Ecology to orchestrate a paradigm shift of the scale needed to save the planet. Deep Ecologists inability to present a coherent plan on how to implement their paradigm shift comes from an identity crisis within the movement. Deep Ecology attempts to do two incompatible things at once:

1. Avoid having to be able to provide a solution on how to fix the climate crisis by presenting Deep Ecology as a mindset (Devall, 2001).
2. Present Deep Ecology as the only solution to the climate crisis and dismiss all other solutions as being too “shallow” to fully address the problem (Sessions, 2006).

Ultimately, Deep Ecology is really only able to succeed as being a guiding force for how to change ones’ mindset. The philosophy offers clear and specific manners in which individual people can follow their philosophical movement, but fails to show the way in which such a large paradigm shift could be implemented. Deep Ecology’s inability to solve the climate crisis does not mean the philosophical movement is a failure and bad; instead, it just shows that Deep Ecology in combination with other actions should be taken to effectively combat the current climate crisis.

Treating Deep Ecology as an intellectual movement—rather than a blueprint to save the planet—is a stance that many supporters of the philosophy have championed. Two Deep Ecologists, Tony Lynch and Stephen Norris, argue that Deep Ecology can actually stay relevant and be successful if understood as an aesthetically driven philosophical movement. Lynch and Norris argue that Deep Ecology “should be understood in its primary sense as an aesthetically grounded critique of modernity and the corrupt mindfulness it generates and demands” (Lynch & Norris, 2016, p. 65). These authors argue that Deep Ecology is more about awakening consciousness within individuals than it is about proposing a solution to the larger problem of the climate crisis. When understood in this manner, Deep Ecology “is not at all threatened by the metaphysical and ethical concerns that trouble its critics so much as it is characterized by them, properly understood” (Lynch & Norris, 2016, p. 75). Deep Ecology has its place and purpose; however, that purpose is not solving the overall problems that face our planet.

The Rupture Within Deep Ecology; and, Where We Go Now

How to properly address the climate crisis is one of the most important and pressing questions facing the Earth. If Deep Ecology is not deep enough to provide solutions, what is? This question is not a new one for many former Deep Ecologists who have long known that Deep Ecology alone would not provide the answers to solving the larger problems gripping the Earth. In fact, conflicts from those within the movement have been commonplace since the 1980s; during this time, fights at ecology conventions were commonplace between

Deep Ecologists and various reformist groups (Sale, 1988). These reformist groups have taken many of the core principles of Deep Ecology, but do not focus their work on changing individuals' mindsets; instead, they focus on how to enact real change (on a global scale) in order to save the planet. The various reformist groups, such as Social Ecology and Green Anarchism, provide the best—and most realistic—solutions to the current global climate crisis.

Social Ecology provides a nonviolent approach on what steps to take in order to reduce humans' negative impact on the Earth. Social Ecological groups were the first to reject Deep Ecology as a viable option for solutions (Sale, 1988). Social Ecology rejects Deep Ecology because it has no explicit social analysis; this means that the movement fails to address key issues of: class, injustice, capitalism, race, and imperialism. Instead, Deep Ecology “tends to regard humans collectively and hence tar the whole species for environmental degradations with a brush that would be more appropriately aimed at specific social institutions and systems” (Sale, 1988, p. 672). The Social Ecology movement seeks to take actions that both directly address environmental issues, such as stopping logging and pollution, as well works to fix social rifts in society caused by religion, the state, and capitalism (Parson, 2007). They use specific direct action aimed at institutions and mass organization to advocate for and create change (Parson, 2007). Social Ecology has been instrumental in the formation and implementation of practices for environmental activist groups like Earth First! and Earth Liberation Front (Parson, 2007).

Green Anarchism approaches the climate crisis in a radically different manner; the movement is centered almost entirely around how best to take direct action against the climate crisis through all means possible. Green Anarchism contends that “civilization, as well as domestication, is responsible for environmental destruction and human subjugation” (Parson, 2007, p. 5). In their view, all social systems—including work, morality, education, etc.—have only served to pacify humanity. To Green Anarchists, this domestication has removed two essential things from life: spontaneity and passion. Since domestication is what green anarchist believes is the root source of all human conflict and strife, they are willing to take any action to undermine and destroy civilization to free humanity to act in a less constricting manner (Parson, 2007). The movement has been deeply influential: it has increased the youth dropout rate, broadened the anti-globalization movement, and helped legitimize radical environmental movements (Parson, 2007).

While both Social Ecology and Green Anarchism approach the climate crisis from two vastly different perspectives (Social Ecology from inside the system and Green Anarchism from outside the system), the thing they have in common is their tangibility. Both movements acknowledge that humans live in a society and this has led to problems like overpopulation, industrialization, and others that have negatively impacted the planet. Similarly, they both emphasize the importance of not just changing individuals' mindsets, but also taking direct action to combat the climate crisis now. Deep Ecology may dismiss both groups as only taking “shallow” steps to solve the problems; however, tangible, pragmatic, and realistic solutions are key to ensuring that humanity does not permanently destroy the Earth. Changing people's mindsets and awakening ecological consciousness within people is an important task, but just not as pressing as taking real steps to save the planet. It is impossible to achieve Deep Ecologists' goal of making humans ecologically conscious if all of humanity is dead. This is why greater emphasis on direct action and real change—as advocated for by Social Ecology and Green Anarchism—is more necessary than Deep Ecology to address the current climate crisis.

Concluding Thoughts

The Earth is being destroyed at an unprecedented rate. In order to save the Earth for, not only future

generations of humans, but all life, serious reforms are needed. At its conception, Deep Ecology seemed primed to be the group to provide the necessary deep reforms. However, as time went on, Deep Ecology showed that it could not deliver answers on how to quickly and globally implement the goals of their movement. So, while Deep Ecology is still valuable as an intellectual movement and could be viewed as an ultimate goal for society, the movement is not the answer to how we are going to solve the current climate crisis. Instead, we must turn to reformist groups—like Social Ecology and Green Anarchism—to take direct actions against the systems which have ravaged the Earth. Humans have undoubtedly negatively affected the Earth; however, unfortunately, humans are also the only ones capable of reforming the flawed institutions and systems that perpetuated the Earth's destruction. If we ever want the opportunity to achieve ecological consciousness, it is imperative that we first take real, tangible actions (like those proposed by reformist groups) to ensure that there is a planet to become ecologically conscious of.

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