

Section 1: World views and approaches to wetlands

A deep ecological approach to wetlands

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Abstract¹

Deep Ecology is a philosophical approach well attuned to Environmental Education. It creates a context in which the natural world can be viewed apart from traditional "useful" human-bound categories. Many educators see the "value" of nature as an educational resource, but fail to notice the deeper meanings recognised by deep ecologists. It is in this inner illumination that deep ecology has its greatest educational appeal. It provides a philosophical setting that encourages individuals to seek meaning outside themselves in nature itself. It promotes direct and personal identification with natural systems as an important path towards ecological consciousness.

According to deep ecology, there is intrinsic value in nature, independent of humans. In particular, there is value in ecological wholes, perhaps uninhabited by humans or unknown to them. Rich ecosystems, such as many wetlands and rainforests, are valuable in themselves, irrespective of benefits and advantages which they offer to humans, and not merely for their importance for birds and other creatures which inhabit or depend upon them. Because wetlands are valuable in and for themselves, they have a right to continued existence², and there should be little or no further major interference with them.

Nonetheless, deep ecology does not totally repudiate shallow utilitarian arguments in terms of the advantages they confer on, and the utility they have for Australian people. Undoubtedly, wetlands supply local populations with useful water resources and drainage sinks, with recreation and education areas. Nor does deep ecology repudiate somewhat deeper utilitarian arguments for wetland retention in terms of their utility for other sentient creatures, for instance, that they provide essential habitat or breeding grounds for a variety of birds and other individuals. On the contrary, it endorses many of these sorts of arguments, and deploys them where appropriate. But, in spite of the usefulness of these arguments, it cannot be denied that "many of the major threats to ... wetland resources result from human activities"³.

What deep ecology emphatically rejects is the assumption that value is exhausted in such utilitarian (and economic) terms. There is much more to value than mere human interests (many of which, such as promotion of new high-rise office blocks, may be of no real value). Deep ecology rejects therewith the assumption that humans form a superior species, of greater or sole value, above or beyond the "brute" natural world. Thus, too, it rejects the assumption that humans are somehow invested with, or have acquired, an overseeing capacity or stewardship role in nature, or an entitlement to manipulate as they see fit. Humans comprise one species among others, not apart from nature.

There is, though, much more to deep ecology than a theory of value, and of its perception grounded on ecological bases. Much flows from the discernment of such value in natural systems: due respect, careful practices and respectful use, and limited interference. From these, in turn, follow policy implications, such as curtailment of further excessive human interference. Smaller policy implications quickly grow to larger ones (as ecological principles concerning interconnections would lead us to expect). Curtailment of human interference implies in turn fewer humans or lighter-impacting life-styles or more careful, less damaging technologies or, as deep ecology argues, all of these. Only a few features of such a deep ecological approach, some of special relevance to wetlands and environmental education, will be elaborated in this paper, and those by contrast with usual shallow or resource-oriented approaches. This shallow/deep distinction is fundamental to this paper, and needs to be clarified from the beginning.

Deep versus shallow ecology

In *shallow* approaches, landscapes, places, wetlands, rivers, and other significant natural units are broken into physical fragments (often in ways diametrically opposed to natural divisions) and regarded as property and resources of individual humans or their organisations or their states⁴. Their conservation is then dependent on the owners' interests or fancies, or at best upon "multiple use" directed by some "cost/benefit" analyses. Wildlife and habitat no longer persist without oversight and, likely, interference, e.g., in forest management the emphasis is on commercially-preferred pioneer stages. Wildlife "management" and the associated resource policies of "sustained yield" or "sustainable development" are in general imposed to "conserve nature" and provide a heavy yield of natural products at most for "future generations", that is, future generations of humans. Humans come first, and in shallow approaches, they are all that matter.

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(“As in the past, wetland management today is concerned with the preservation, use or establishment as dictated by human needs”, so a typical wetlands-ecology text asserts.) Natural systems, such as wetlands, are simply human “resources”. The degeneration of water, soils and other basic items and natural values, important for longer-term human welfare and survival also, may be noted, though these things do not enter seriously into most economic analyses. Moreover, a strong commitment to future technological progress makes any radical change of policies appear quite unnecessary.

By contrast, a deep approach endorses only light management (enlightened, mainly “hands-off” practices), for instance to rectify past errors or excesses, and accompanying appropriate technology. For, in a deep approach, the earth does not belong to Man, or humans. It is not theirs to manipulate or do what they will with, or to maintain and oversee in their own interests, short term or long term. The Australian landscapes, forests, fauna and flora, wetlands and oceans, are not property of Australians (old or new). Humans inhabit the land, make use of its resources carefully and respectfully to satisfy nontrivial needs, but have no right to plunder, lay waste, interfere unnecessarily, and cause unnecessary destruction. Such destruction is, however, now proceeding on a grand but unwarranted scale, in parts of Australia as well as, more extensively, elsewhere. It will continue unless ways of production and consumption, and ethical and economics ideologies¹ encouraging and justifying these ways, are changed.

With regard to deep ecology and its view of wetlands, the vision is clear. They are to be seen as areas with their own intrinsic value, independent of human interest and needs.

Deep ecology and wetlands

How does one come to recognise the value and richness of wetlands, and the variety they offer? The answer is partly by experience, partly by wider learning and acculturation processes. Experience is important, as with appreciation of and participation in music. Full experience involves immersion, it involves really approaching natural regions, getting into the field, getting boots and binoculars wet and muddy. Those who are attuned and sensitive can observe and follow the rich processes and interactions of wetlands, and can feel to some extent the mood and pulse of specific places. Those who are also skilled with cameras and tapes can help to bring something of the variety, colour and intricacy of wetlands to others who lack ability, inclination, or the knowledge to obtain first-hand experience.

An important route to perceiving the value of natural items, but a difficult route for urban humans, is through identification, making oneself one with them or parts of them. The practice of identification (that of *relating to*, much enhanced) is familiar enough from fiction. There a reader of a novel or watcher of a film identifies with one or other of the characters, shares their feelings, joys, apprehension, predicament, and so forth. Identifying with a nonhuman creature is a much more difficult feat, and a much more active one than film-going. Identifying with a whole system, becoming one with a wetland or one with the dusty land, is still more difficult, and probably rarely accomplished except

partially (though the *Lao Tzu* speaks of it and commends the practice). To begin to be properly accomplished at all, identification requires a good deal of field experience, and much knowledge of wetlands and their inhabitants, tortoises, water rats, pelicans, and very many others. It is difficult to identify to any depth with a pelican or a kingfisher, for instance, without knowing a good deal about what it is like to be a kingfisher. But even without much knowledge and without identification, much can be gathered, for it is easy to appreciate other creatures or systems. No knowledge is needed to enjoy the soaring grace and freedom of a sea eagle.

Practices such as direct experience and contemplation, identification, knowledge acquisition from information accumulated by others, all form part of the way not only to improved appreciation of the value of natural systems; they are an integral part of acquiring ecological consciousness⁵.

Of course, not everyone experiences the value of wetlands or gets the lift that being there can give. Not everyone can immediately sense what these environments have to offer. That calls for appropriate and often considerable training and education.

Deep ecology and environmental education

Education is crucial in arriving at changed practices and ideology. Accordingly, some of the many differences between shallow and deep approaches to education and “the scientific enterprise” are highly relevant. On the shallow approach, the on-going degradation of environments and depletion of resources (for humans) necessitates the further education and training of experts, who can give advice to industry, government, and all engaged in development, as to how to combine economic growth with the appearance of a sufficiently health environment. (Seen from outside, it looks very different: the experts will not merely dismiss or discount environmental problems, or plaster over them by short-term, techno-fix methods — solutions always being available on shallow assumptions — but also they will insist upon and conduct much delaying research to ascertain whether there really are serious problems, problems not just from a shallow perspective, but certain to eventuate). If it should turn out that economic growth makes further significant degradation inevitable, there is said to be a need for highly creative development or technology. But if urgently needed, such technological development will of course take place (such is the faith). The industrial-scientific enterprise must continue giving priority to the “hard” sciences, economics and engineering; and this requires high and stern educational standards, and healthy competition in relevant areas of learning.

By contrast, in a deep approach, education would be less competitive, more co-operative, freer, with more choice, more diverse, more relaxed, and more honest. It would concentrate upon increased sensitivity both in relation to the natural world and significant places and systems within it, and as regards material goods, their origins, their processing, and the extent of supply genuinely needed. Education would aim to counteract the excessive valuation of things with a ready-made price tag, in terms moreover of the size of their tags. It would shift concentration from technological and management sciences, to include concerns with living, with less damaging and consumptive lifestyles, lighter on land and water systems, which emphasize *being*.

letting be, and being in place, as well as, or instead of, *doing*. It would stress local and global cultures, their diversity and importance; it would speak for tolerance, co-operation, and peace, both with other cultures and with nature. It would "build support for conservation" (to echo a main objective of various World Conservation Strategies) and for preservation of natural systems, but within the deeper and large framework of respect for the ecosphere. It would help build this by encouraging real understanding, not merely manipulative ability, understanding and not merely packaged knowledge, of natural systems and of their elements and their members, as live creatures, not just as killed items reduced to dead laboratory samples, or as mechanical objects going through fixed programmed routines. It would foster, through rich field experience, the cultivation and growth of ecological consciousness.

Modern Western thought, since the "Enlightenment", has involved extensive alienation from the rest of nature, and has largely excluded elements of deep ecology. Western ethics has not been environmental, but has reflected the exploitation practices and selective perception of the dominant European cultures, including their human chauvinism. Both religious (especially Judeo-Christian) and secular ethics (including utilitarian, Marxist and Kantian ethics), have regarded not merely other creatures but biological regions and the earth itself as purely means to human (or sentient) ends, not worthy of respect and protection for their own sake. Deep ecology, a wide grass-roots movement, with linkages, however, with older philosophies such as Taoism, aims at changing all this. It aims not merely for modification or adjustment of prevailing human chauvinist ethics and ideologies in order to account for and properly justify environmental concern: it also aims for displacement of these by a deeper or environmental ethics, and for an ethical approach appropriately based on ecological values, values which rich wetlands so conspicuously exhibit.

Notes

1. Abstract prepared by the Editorial Committee.
2. The underlying principle, justifying the titlement, is that sufficiently rich valuable systems ought to continue to exist, especially where scarce and irreplaceable.
3. "Manipulating the flow of water is one of the most seductive and rewarding [!] of man's enterprises, and throughout history the drainage and reclamation of wetlands speeding the flow of water ever more rapidly and elusively to the sea has been second only to forest clearance among major impacts on the environment." B. Green, *Countryside Conservation*, (Allen & Unwin, London, 1981), p. 141.
4. The next paragraphs follow the writings of Arne Naess, who coined the term "deep ecology".
5. They are also part of the way to the wider Self-realisation that deep ecology emphasizes, with cultivation and development of subjects in ways that are not merely egoistical and self-directed, but relate to and take account of wider human and natural communities.