Deep Ecology: An Environmentalist Conception of International Society

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There exists today a wide scope of thought in international relations theory. This array of philosophical worldviews, as well as the broad exchange of ideas, both recent and from the past, is essential, if we are to successfully carry out a vibrant and just global society. This essay will examine one philosophy within this scope of theories: That of environmentalism. However, the discussion will focus on Deep Ecology, which is one particular stream of thought within the philosophy. This discourse will seek to prove that Deep Ecology presents a contemporary, relevant perspective in current and in future international relations theory, while offering an important alternative to human-centric worldviews. This essay will begin by outlining the origins and foundations of Deep Ecology, as well as the spiritual and political traditions that influenced its conception. It will study the general tenets that the viewpoint advocates, and briefly touch upon the similar, yet differently motivated, philosophy of Shallow Ecology. After the general perspective of Deep Ecology is established, attention will shift to focus on more specific issues within the philosophy, examining what Deep Ecologists believe in regards to man-environment relations, the nature of man, the nature of state, and the nature of international society. The segment written on the latter subject will stress the questions of international law and organization, international trade and investment, and war and peace. Finally, this essay will conclude by analyzing the evolution of the Deep Ecology philosophy and activist movement, while focusing on what the stance has contributed to international relations theory, and the impact that it has had on our current global society.

Origins and Foundations of Deep Ecology

Deep Ecology originated with a Norwegian philosophy professor named Arne Naess. Naess, who was born in 1912, was appointed to the Chair of Philosophy at the University of Oslo in 1939, and he proceeded to become a renowned scholar. He retired in 1969, in order to focus his attention on developing a new, jointly ecological and philosophical, worldview. In 1973, a five-page paper was published entitled The Shallow and the Deep, Long Range Ecology Movements: A Summary, which was the inaugural document of the philosophy, releasing for the first time Naess' principles of Deep Ecology. The principles were as follows:

(1) A metaphysic of interrelatedness
(2) An ethos of biospherical egalitarianism
(3) Values of diversity and symbiosis
(4) An anti-class posture
(5) An opposition to pollution and ozone depletion
(6) Value of complexity
(7) Emphasis on local autonomy and decentralization

Clearly, these principles point to a philosophy that, unlike human-centric positions, acknowledges all living things on earth as equal. This radical idea places Deep Ecology in a new realm of international relations theory, for instead of solely considering relations between man, between states and between nations as important, Deep Ecology advocates the relations between all living things as equally significant. Principles one through four, as well as principle six, stress the idea of all plants, animals and man being equal and interrelated. Naess emphasized that principle five, encouraging opposition to pollution and resource depletion, although important, should not hold priority over the others. He gave the example that pollution should not be fought in a way that would cause class differences to widen. Principle seven, emphasizing local autonomy and decentralization, is the most political, and like principle...
six, is a plea for change within the system. It demonstrates that Deep Ecology is not exclusively philosophical, but also exists to inspire ecological and political activism.

Along with presenting these principles that served as the basis of the values of Deep Ecology, Naess proposed that each individual should search for their own, personal ecological worldview. He coined this type of worldview, “Ecosophy;” the “eco” stressing the focus on an environmental viewpoint, and the “sophy” stressing the achievement of such a viewpoint to be realized through means of wisdom rather than through means of science and information. He named his own worldview “Ecosophy T” (the ‘T’ is in reference to a cabin he owns on a mountain in Norway, that he calls Tvergastein), allowing others to create and name their own Ecosophy worldview, such as an “Ecosophy A”, or “Ecosophy X.” Ecosophy T focuses on the need for each person to strive for an ecological self-realization. The worldview asserts that, with the accomplishment of such a realization, an individual would recognize that to act on behalf of nature benefits everyone, since the nature that surrounds he or she is just as much a part of his or her self-identity as his or her family, friends, culture and community. Thus, helping the environment is in fact helping to preserve a person’s own self-identity. Nevertheless, as important as Naess believed this self-realization to be, he insisted that one does not have to agree with this particular worldview to support the other principles of Deep Ecology. The existence of Ecosophy T reinforces that Deep Ecology is not a uniform doctrine, but a way of thinking that is open to various interpretations.

In 1984, Naess and philosopher George Sessions created a new set of principles for Deep Ecologists. These principles shifted the idea of biospherical egalitarianism that dominated the previous principles, to the concept of both human and non-human life having inherent value. The new principles were based on the platform that “the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.” Thus, the belief changed from all living things being equal, to all living things instead having intrinsic value. This new stance was fundamentally a non-anthropocentric one. Naess acknowledged that egalitarianism only works in principle, and that humans cannot be expected to treat everything as equal, although they can be expected to appreciate everything’s inherent value, and not just the value that it offers to man. These new principles also claimed “present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive,” and that the flourishing of non-human life requires a substantial decrease of the human population. Finally, Naess and Sessions encouraged activism among followers, to try to implement changes in policies affecting economic and technological structures, as well as an ideological change that would discourage adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. This new set of principles set the foundation for what the Deep Ecology movement of today is based on.

The principles, both the original and the updated, of Deep Ecology had many diverse spiritual and political influences. These influences ranged from Eastern religion, such as Taoism and Buddhism, to Western academic philosophy, such as the writings of Spinoza and Whitehead, to conservationist and wilderness thinking, such as that of Henry David Thoreau. Deep Ecology also possesses some similarities to notions of eighteenth century romanticism, and nineteenth and twentieth century anarchism. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that, especially since Deep Ecology originated in the early 1970s, some inspiration was drawn from the radical political consciousness and New Age thinking of the 1960s. Finally, Naess himself acknowledged, many times, significant influences from the teachings and practices of Mahatma Ghandi.

Naess named his ecological philosophy Deep Ecology, with the ‘deep’ signifying the level of thought he wished its followers to strive for. As opposed to Ecologists, who solely examine the systems as they exist, Naess wanted Deep Ecologists to ask more meaningful questions such as why, and how these systems exist the way they do, and how they can be improved. He pushed for not only the examination of society as it exists, but for the further questioning of “what kind of society would be the best for maintaining a system.” Essentially, the viewpoint is associated with having philosophical
foundations and roots. However, even from the beginning of Deep Ecology's conceptions, Naess recognized that the existence of a movement of people whose concern for issues of pollution and resource conservation was based solely on the way that these phenomena impacted the interests of people in developed countries. He termed this way of thinking 'Shallow Ecology', for even though its followers want to help the environment, they want to do so only because of its extrinsic value and usefulness to humans. Therefore, even though this movement may be more influential politically, for it advocates economic growth and environmental protection with the aid of technological and scientific advances, it, unlike Deep Ecology, "avoids serious fundamental questions about our values and worldviews, and does not examine our socio-cultural institutions and our personal lifestyles."  

**Relations between Man and the Environment**

As it would be assumed to be for any environmentalist philosophy, man-environment relations are considered very important by Deep Ecologists. As man-environment relations are just as much two elements of the same global society, they are considered to be as important as man-man relations, man-state relations, and/or state-nation relations. As aforementioned, the environment that surrounds us should be treated as just as much an integral part of our identity as our family, community and our culture. Thus, it should not be a moral duty that drives the individual to protect the environment, but rather, he or she should be naturally inclined to do so, because a defence of nature should develop from a desire for self-defence. Deep Ecologists want to eliminate the division that exists between humans and nature, and instead encourage humans to accept that they are a part of nature, just like animals and plants. Rather individuals can only be set apart because of their potential for power that grants them more responsibility towards the Earth than other species have. Hence, humans are not more important than other parts of the Earth, and so individuals should not dominate over them. Nevertheless, even Deep Ecologists recognize that, for both humans and animals, the killing of some other living beings is sometimes necessary for survival. Supporters do not condemn such practices, if they are truly necessary, but Deep Ecologists do express the need for individuals to appreciate and acknowledge the gravity of such killings through rituals and/or ceremonies. Moreover, humans should strive for a minimization of interference with the natural world, and where humans only take from nature what is necessary in order to sustain a "culturally rich, materially simple" life.

**Nature of Man**

Deep Ecology refers to man most frequently, notably when discussing the concept of self. Because of the close association between Naess' "Ecosophy T" and Deep Ecology, many Deep Ecologists also believe in the importance of self-realization that Ecosophy advocates. Supporters believe in the importance of everything with which an individual identifies, whether it be his or her body, mind, family, friends, natural environment, nation and/or culture. The amount of relationships between the individual and his or her surrounding entities is endless. However, Deep Ecologists warn that humans are increasingly identifying themselves with human-built environments, such as corporations and cities.

As for the natural characteristics of the individual, Deep Ecology maintains that an individual is often cruel, as well as "careless, self-serving, destructive, hostile to and undermining of non-human nature." However, most Deep Ecologists do not believe that humans have to be this way, and claim that through self-realization, they can come to appreciate and respect non-human life for its intrinsic value, and learn to possess a non-anthropocentric stance. Therefore, Deep Ecologists believe that the individual has fundamental choices, which, through self-realization, enable he or she to strive towards attaining venerable characteristics.

Finally, just as Deep Ecology emphasizes the value of the natural world, it also equally acknowledges the value of the individual in the global society. Although it never claims humans are more
valuable than other elements of society, such as animals and plant life, as aforesaid, the viewpoint does recognize that humans hold more responsibility towards the upholding of a just social order, because of their potential for power.28

Nature of State

Deep Ecology recognizes that the nature of the state, and its relationship to man, as well as to all other living things, is very important in determining whether or not practices compatible with the worldview's principles will flourish. It advocates a state system that differs greatly from the systems in place around the world today. To gain a better understanding of what type of system Deep Ecology encourages, it is helpful to remember that the belief-system originated with anarchical influences. Essentially, it promotes a decentralization of the current systems, and a creation of non-hierarchical structures.29 The idea of a few powerful people dominating over the majority of the population is contradictory to Deep Ecology's beliefs, since, just as it disapproves of man dominating over nature, it equally disapproves of man dominating over man. To achieve this decentralization, Deep Ecology recommends the implementation of local autonomy in small-scale communities, while taking into account the broader definition of communities, which would include all living beings.30 These small-scale communities would allow for a greater degree of self-responsibility and self-regulation, which ideally would lead to the realization of an effective direct democracy.31 Within a system of local communities practicing direct democracy, a division between classes could be reduced, and each individual could have a more significant say on how to run the state. Overall, this would emphasize the intrinsic value of each individual and his or her opinion.

Beyond stressing the importance of the state, as a means for humans to be locally organized and autonomous, Naess insists on the necessary existence of political activity, in order to enforce and realize the proper valuation of non-human life.32 He believes that it is through the policies of the state that some principles of the Deep Ecology platform can be achieved. For example, the state can create regulations that would restrain human interference with the natural world, and the state can influentially encourage and take measures to impose a decrease in birth rate. In addition, it is the state that can implement changes in policies that would improve economic and technological structures, making them less capitalistic, materialistic, and less focused on creating increasingly higher standards of living through modernization, industrialization and urbanization.33 Instead, these changes would encourage more simplistic lives, based on acquiring only those material items that satisfy an individual's needs, rather than all of his or her wants. Nonetheless, Naess also acknowledges, that "the influence of democratic institutions in our time is gradually decreasing because of powerful pressure groups taking over much of the influence of the decisions."34 Consequently, although he maintains that the state is important, and necessary, Naess is aware of the economical and social power that is increasingly being demonstrated by multinational corporations, and other non-democratic organizations.35

Nature of International Society

Given that the global community, for Deep Ecologists, consists not only of human beings, but also of animals, plants and all other living entities, even this worldview's belief on what constitutes international society is fundamentally different from that of human-centric worldviews. Unlike human-centric views that focus solely on the relations in our global society between humans, whether they be in a regional, national or international context, the eco-centric view of Deep Ecology examines internations, inter-species, inter-genera and inter-kingsoms relations. Deep Ecologists promote the idea that all living things have the right to live, and to interact with each other. Supporters also believe that through self-realization and identification,unities between people, communities, races, humanity, and all life in the global society can be increased.36
Another significant contribution of Deep Ecology philosophy to international relations theory is its emphasis on the previously discussed local community. The worldview promotes a shift from a focus on national identity, to one on local identity. This corresponds to the aforementioned idea of self-regulation and local autonomy of relatively small communities. Consequently, relations between human beings would be largely centred on inter-local communications, rather than inter-nations communications. To accomplish this shift, Deep Ecologists advocate replacing the present excessive role of national and international structures with local participatory arrangements. Supporters believe that strengthening local communities is ultimately what fortifies a strong international society. The benefits of having a strong local community, even translated onto a global scale, are numerous. Some of these benefits include increased support of small units in the economy, enhanced cultural diversity and independence, and more effective practices of direct democracy. In addition, Deep Ecologists believe that obtaining a high level of economic self-reliance can establish smaller differences in income and wealth.

Nevertheless, Naess concedes that there are obstacles to creating a strong international society through the formation of autarkic local communities. Economic difficulties may arise from both the lethargy of heavily centralized national economic policies and because of the uncompetitive potential of self-reliant technology in the international market.

Furthermore, even if a local community can successfully decrease differences in income and wealth among its population, this decrease will not automatically exist worldwide. Yet, an important goal of Deep Ecologists is the elimination of classes regionally, nationally and globally. To achieve this goal, Naess has stated that inhabitants of developed countries should avoid the pressures to have increasingly higher standards of living. Rather, he articulates the need for "an appreciation of lifestyles that are universalizable, which are not blatantly impossible to sustain without injustice towards fellow humans or other species." In addition, it is also the responsibility of richer industrial societies to help poorer societies, while still avoiding undue exploitation of threatened species, populations and ecosystems. Thus, the decentralization and conversion to local power that Deep Ecology advocates does not mean a lesser degree of global cooperation.

Considering Deep Ecology's focus on self-autonomy and self-regulation, international law and organization is not a major focus for the philosophy. Supporters believe that international politics should be organized in such a way that the system is decentralized, non-hierarchical and non-polarized. This kind of organization, as outlined earlier, would be predominantly local. Naess does recognize the power of the countless non-governmental organizations, rather than viewing these entities solely as a threat, he asserts that NGOs can be used to facilitate inter-local contact, by working at a more local level. Therefore, Deep Ecology does not wish to eradicate worldwide institutions, but instead desires that they become organized in a more egalitarian and less hierarchical manner.

International trade and investment is another subject matter that Deep Ecology does not condemn. Instead, the worldview deplores the manner in which global trade and investment is organized and carried out. Deep Ecologists are against pursuing economic growth in the national and international market, because of the tendency of such growth to support resource consumption and global pollution. In fact, Naess also claims that such economic growth has only negative influences on the contemporary quality of life. Therefore, rather than focusing on Gross National Product, Deep Ecology promotes "Economic Welfare Theory": A theory concerned primarily with satisfying needs versus satisfying wants and profitability goals. Simply put, the focus on consumption, and quantity of production, rather than the contribution of economic growth to life quality, that is so frequently practiced in international trade and investment practices, is unecological. Such a focus also impedes any appreciation of the intrinsic value of life on Earth, and the practice of voluntary simplicity.
The idea of principally satisfying needs, when managing international trade, is supported through the practice of inter-local trade. Deep Ecologists promote trading choices to be based on nearness, where ideal trading partners are defined by their geographic proximity and vitality, and everyone’s essential needs, human and non-human, are met before non-essential ones. Basic needs should not be met with international trade, if they can be met adequately using local resources and enterprise. Additionally, meeting the vital interests of a community as a whole, including all life within this community, should take priority over satisfying the vital interests of the individual. Thus, Deep Ecologists do not completely rule out international trade. In fact, Naess acknowledges that foreign trade can contribute to enhancing cultural diversity, but he also claims that such trade adversely affects a society’s lifestyle and entertainment. These costs come when a community, whether it is found at the local, regional and/or national level, becomes dependent upon imports, and, as a result, becomes dependent upon international economic fluctuations, which leads to “uniformity, passivity, more consumption and less creativity.” Therefore, in appropriate and non-exploitative situations, Deep Ecologists do not denounce international trade, within an international society, but they do criticize dependence and discourage an unrestrained world market.

Deep Ecologists are very passionate about issues concerning war and peace. Supporters believe that anti-violence is an essential factor for the achievement of a successful global society. The philosophy advocates never to use violence on your opponent, not even as a means to an end. To achieve this, cooperation is stressed, as well as the elimination of both secrecy and the provocation of an opponent. Perhaps, most importantly, Deep Ecology emphasizes the need for trust between players, if peace is to be assured. Additionally, militarization is seen as a threat because it represents further domination of centralization. Once again, though, it is imperative to recognize that war is not only possible between human beings, but between humans and all other species and living entities on Earth. To illustrate this idea, Naess points out that although nuclear war would be an ecological catastrophe, millions of animals already die or are tortured, as they are constantly being used in nuclear radiation experiments. Consequently then, Deep Ecology emphasizes not only the need to avoid war, but to avoid any causing of unnecessary harm and suffering, for doing so contradicts appreciating every entity for its intrinsic value, and respecting its right to live.

Conclusion

Seeing as Deep Ecology is still a relatively modern and recently formulated philosophy, it is still evolving, and gaining followers. Originally an “alternative metaphysical paradigm,” the worldview did not gain followers in North America until the mid-1980s. It was in this period that Deep Ecology changed its focus to a primarily non-anthropocentric stance, seeing every living entity as having an intrinsic value in life. It has been argued that this shift in underlying principles was created to widen the support base of the philosophy, to accommodate what was increasingly becoming an activist movement for eco-political change. This movement included the conception of the Green Party, a political party that exists worldwide, and whose platforms correlate with those of Deep Ecology.

Deep Ecology philosophy has proven to be relevant to contemporary global society. Christopher Belshaw reasons that the theory has “succeeded in changing both government policy and wider public consciousness on a range of environmental issues,” including the biochemical industry, nuclear weapons and power. In addition, supporters have pushed for the gradual introduction of anti-nuclear and pro-non-violent proposals within NATO, as well as helped shape resistance to institutions deemed to be anti-environmental, like the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Finally, Deep Ecology has helped spawn countless activist groups, including Greenpeace International. Surely, these accomplishments are at least partly due to the issues that the worldview directly attacks, and continues to expand on, which are the issues that today’s society deals with firsthand. Ultimately, the eco-centric basis of the worldview has made its conceptions on the nature
of man-environment relations, man, the state, and international society applicable to the environment: An entity that will always be a part of our global society, and an integral factor on how local, national and international communities are managed. Therefore, environmentalist theories, whether they be in the form of Deep Ecology or not, are here to stay, and to be heard.

Notes

5. Ibid, 256.
23. Ibid, 221.
29. Ibid, 279.
30. Ibid, 279.
31. Ibid, 182.
34. Ibid, 131.
37. Ibid, 137.
38. Ibid, 141.

Glendon Papers
39 Ibid, 142-144.
40 Ibid, 145.
41 Ibid, 138.
48 Ibid, 111.
50 Ibid, 104, 109, 112.
51 Ibid, 109, 112.
56 Ibid, 143.
57 Ibid, 149.
62 Ibid, 224.
64 Ibid, 182.

**Works Cited**


