

FREE NATURE

BILL DEVALL

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*Interview by
Jan van Boeckel*

RIGHT HERE, we are sitting in the Presidio, a former military base, in San Francisco. What kind of place is this to you?

Well, we are sitting in a very humanized landscape. All the trees we see were planted in the latter part of the nineteenth century, by the military. They are all lined up in rows, there are only three species of tree here. The native landscape of the San Francisco Peninsula did not have forest like this. It had rolling, low vegetation, certain native plants. But there is a kind of wildness still here. We hear birds singing; there are flows of fog that come from the Golden Gate; storms come through; and there is the quietness that one has, at least in the middle of the night, in a place like this.

A city park like this is a place that is set aside for recreation: a patch of green, a few trees, a few flowering plants. That is a very diminished landscape. It lacks complexity. It lacks diversity. It lacks ability to continue the evolutionary processes on its own, as a self-organizing system. But the attraction of city parks, to so many millions of people, is that they are closer to the trees. People feel better when they are sitting under trees, rather than sitting in their apartments. That may be part of our own evolutionary path as a species, sitting under trees and looking out on a semi-open savannah. It is important for the psychological



Oak seedling PHOTOGRAPH: LAURIE CAMPBELL/NHPA

health of human beings to have access, and to be in, even a very small patch of green in a city park, if that is all they can have access to.

In your writings you often refer to the concept of “the ecological self”. What is it?

The “ecological self” is an intimate, personal, sensuous, erotic connection that we have with a specific place. So that we can say: “I am a citizen, a dweller of [in my case] Humboldt Bay bioregion and the coastal mountains of Cascadia on the Pacific Rim.” It is our sense of being part of the mountains and rivers of our homeland. We develop and cultivate broader identifications: beyond our family, our friends, to the non-human world, which includes sentient beings, plants and animals, and includes the mountains, rivers, the seashores, the deserts; that we are “dwelling within”.

A great deal of focus of modern civilization is on our human identities, our gender identities, our ethnic group identities, our nationalistic identities, our identities as members of corporations or as a military unit or as citizens of a city. The ecological self returns us to our primordial human experiences in a natural world.

The ecological crisis, in part, is a result of the way we have cut ourselves off from nature. In the words of the famous American utilitarian Gifford Pinchot, “there is only people and natural resources”. In the view of utilitarians, all of nature is open for exploitation. If we do not have a sense of an ecological self, then we treat the forest, the mountains, as commodities.

You have come to know the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess quite well, the person who first coined

the phrase "deep ecology".

I met Arne Naess for the first time in the early 1980s at the Zen Center of Los Angeles. This was an appropriate setting for discussions with Arne, because I think his work has a kind of Buddhist overtone to it; there is almost a Zen feeling in the way he presents deep ecology. It is beyond the logic of the words; it is in the authenticity of his statements. When you meet Arne in person, there is a kind of playfulness, which I also see in a lot of Zen teachers. And he is playing with language, he is playing with words, he has this ability to engage in a kind of *dance* with deep ecology. He is playing with the trees, with flowers, and with ideas. There is a kind of serious lightness in the way he presents his being.

An important contribution Arne Naess has made is to extend the meaning of community. For him community means a broader community with which we identify: the mountains and rivers and plants and animals. We are not detached at all, but very much attached to the processes that are happening. Playfulness is an inherent part of that, an inherent part of value.

How would you characterize the deep ecology movement?

First of all, it is a social movement. It is not an ideology. "Social" meaning: people working together in community. It is based upon ecology, the relationship between organisms and their habitat. It is "long range", because it does not discount the future. And it is "deep" in that it encourages participants to ask *why* am I here? What is meaning? So we are searching for meaning in a world of fact.

A humanist would argue that the essence of human beings is to distinguish themselves from nature, to evolve culture by separating from nature.

To say that humans are separate from nature is to deny the laws of ecology. The deep ecology movement sees humans as having some unique and special qualities. There is nothing in the movement that is anti-human, that denigrates humans, either as individuals, communities or as a species.

The critique of modernism and of humanism in the deep ecology movement is that humanism has

confused "bigness" with "greatness". Humanists attempt to develop bigger societies, bigger technology, and claim that with bigger technology humans are becoming greater. Greatness, in deep ecology, is cultivated through understanding of humility. Humans are, in the words of ecologist Aldo Leopold, "plain citizens" of natural systems.

You have been a strong advocate of the establishment of designated wilderness areas, where human activities are severely restricted.

Fifty per cent of the total land and water areas of the Earth should be designated as wilderness areas to maintain the integrity of the wild processes. Endemic species need those types of habitat for their continued evolution. You cannot have a species that is evolving without its habitat. A species in a zoo is not a species that is evolving. I think it was the Californian writer Nancy Newhall who said it best: "Wilderness has answers to questions we have not yet begun to ask."

One of the great forest ecologists here in America, Chris Maser, has advised us that we have greatly confused the forest with the trees. A forest is an expression of soil, of climate, of time and of place. The *gestalt* of a forest is not in a tree or in a specific species of animal; it is an expression of a self-organizing system.

Nature doesn't always have a friendly face. Earthquakes, floods and fires are also part of nature.

Many people have a romantic idea of nature. They see nature as scenery. I would certainly agree that there is a very important sense of aesthetics in our relationship to nature. But nature is not just a collection of scenery that is preserved, based upon a cultural definition of nature. Nature is a process of interacting events.

Many ecologists who look at a forest or a watershed, look at periodic events. Certain kinds of event tend to occur every decade or every fifty or hundred years. These events are going to occur. Here in San Francisco, recently, some of the geologists have estimated that a 1906 type of earthquake, hitting the San Francisco area, probably will occur once every 200 to 250 years.

Fire is a natural part of the land-

scape of California and it has helped to shape it. Different regions have had fire regimes of maybe one fire once every ten years to maybe once every 200 years, depending on the region. The conservation movement has based itself on integrating human activities with free nature. "Free nature" means: the play of nature without intensive human intervention. So, throughout the western part of North America we are now in a process of changing regulations concerning forest fires, to "play with fire" in the forest. The health of the forest is partially dependent on the play of forest fires. So, instead of fearing forest fires or fighting forest fires, we are beginning to recognize the importance of fire in the evolution of the landscape and to live *with* forest fires as part of our self.

Your world-view is fundamentally radical. What are the implications?

The practical implications of deep ecology are basically in every breath that we take. We are engaged in life processes. And the deep ecology movement is reclaiming authentic meaning. Much of the problem of modernity has been to confuse creations of the human mind, such as technology, with the reality of nature. To me, deep ecology is based on the knowledge that the natural system *does* exist, that we are part of that system, and that we are engaged with it. I do not accept the postmodernist opinion that nature is just a construction of the human intellect and that all opinions are entirely subjective and relativistic and basically all equal to each other. In its extreme form, this leads to such statements as: "There is no difference between Disneyland and an old-growth Redwood forest. It is all social construction." Deep ecologists assert that there is an ontological realism, that humans are part of the natural system, the web of life, and that we can rediscover our authentic existence. ●

The above interview is an edited extract from the film *The Call of the Mountain*.

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