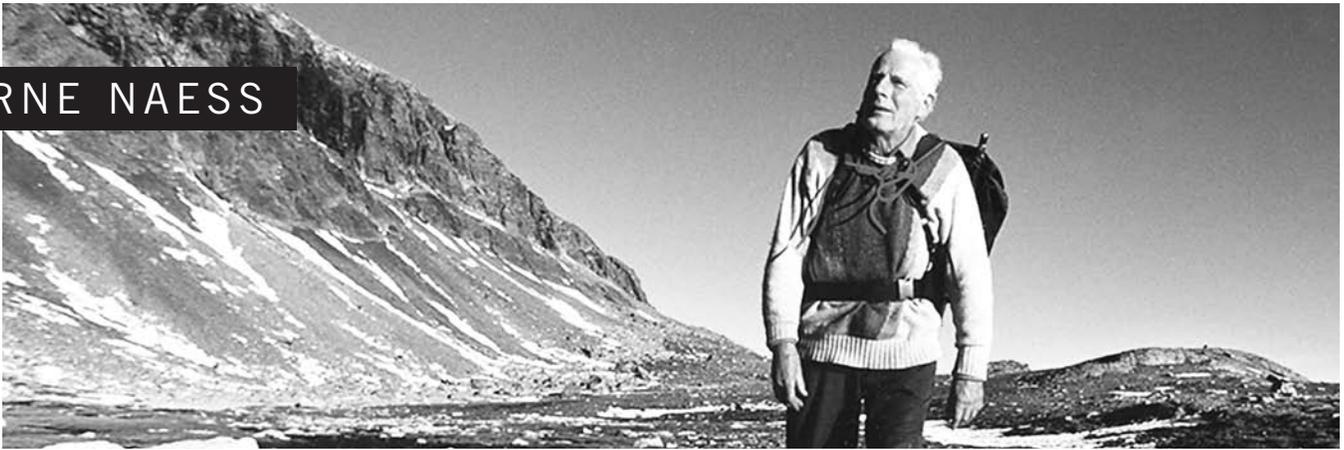


ARNE NAESS



*The smaller one comes to feel compared to the mountain, the nearer one comes to sharing in its greatness. I don't know why this is so.*

—Arne Naess

## Biography of Arne Naess

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**A**rne Dekke Eide Naess is widely regarded as the foremost Norwegian philosopher and one of the most influential intellectuals of the twentieth century. Internationally he was an important and inspirational figure within the environmental movement of the late twentieth century. Within the field of environmental philosophy, he is perhaps most known as the person who coined the term “deep ecology,” an approach to environmental problems that looks for its roots deep in the structure of our western society and the worldviews that guide it.

Arne Naess was born in Slemdal in 1912 and grew up as the youngest of four siblings in a wealthy home in Christiania (the name at the time for the city of Oslo). His father died before Arne filled one year and his mother Christine was alone with parental responsibility.

Already at age sixteen, Arne Naess began to attend

lectures at the university. After graduation from school in 1930, he enrolled at the university, and three years later, only twenty-one years old, he finished his Master of Philosophy with mathematics and astronomy as subsidiary subjects. After a period of study in Paris, Vienna, and Berkeley, he became the University of Oslo's youngest professor at age twenty-seven. At that time, he was Norway's only professor of philosophy.

Naess was also a keen and distinguished mountaineer. When he was only a schoolboy he had his first climbs together with Peter Wessel Zapffe, who later became his friend and mentor. Already at age seventeen, Naess had ascended the 106 highest mountains in Norway. He introduced climbing with bolts in Norway. Later in his life, in 1950, he successfully led the famous expedition to the summit of Tirich Mir in Pakistan, a mountain giant of 7,705 meters high. (He

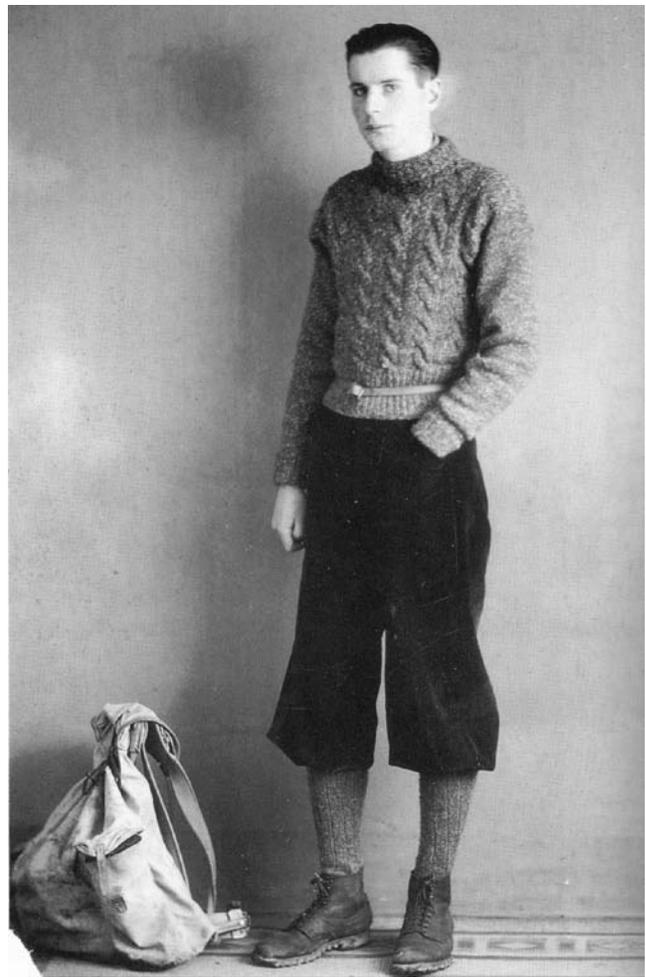
led a second Norwegian expedition up the mountain in 1964.)

In 1938, he finished building an isolated wooden hut high on a slope of Mt. Hallingskarvet, where he would spend, altogether, close to fourteen years of his life. He called the hut Tvergastein and he used to be here about three months per year. It was here that he developed and further elaborated the concept of deep ecology, and his lifelong commitment to the environmental movement.

After he had earned his master's degree in 1933 at the University of Oslo, Naess ventured to Vienna where he studied for two years and collaborated closely with the most influential school of philosophers in the early part of the twentieth century: the Vienna Circle. Inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein, they developed the philosophical movement of logical empiricism (or logical positivism) which asserted that only statements verifiable through empirical observation are cognitively meaningful.

After finishing his Ph.D. at age 24 in 1936, Naess was awarded a postdoctoral research position at the University of California for the years 1938-39. When he had completed Tvergastein's main room, he left for Berkeley where he worked with the pioneer of empirical psychology, Professor E.C. Tolman. Together with his associates, Tolman was doing experimental research on learning theory using laboratory rats. Here, Naess eventually went from studying how rats responded to interventions by the scientists to studying the behavior of the scientists themselves, as they were studying the rats.

Arne Naess returned to Norway in 1939, when he was offered a professor's position. He then became the head of the Philosophy Department at the University of Oslo. Naess's ideas have influenced several generations of Norwegian students through his textbooks on logic, argumentation theory, the philosophy of science and the history of philosophy. As the "father" of the *Examen Philosophicum* that all Norwegian students had to take as part of their university education, he had an immeasurable impact on political debate and social developments in general. His reputation as a phi-



A young Arne Naess in Vienna, 1933. PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION

osopher stems originally from his work in semantics, but he has also worked and published in such apparently diverse areas as scepticism, Spinozian ethics, and Gandhian ethics of non-violence. Naess had a unique ability to reach beyond the academic community; he gave Norwegian philosophy a voice through popularized versions of his books and articles and by his public presentations and presence in the media.

To understand Naess's interest in Gandhian non-violence more fully it may be instructive to move back in time once more. In 1930 reports reached Norway about a remarkable political action carried out by a 61 year old lawyer in India. Mohandas Gandhi had led a quarter million Indians on a march of 400 kilometers, from Ahmadabad to Dandi, a small village

on India's west coast. There he harvested salt from the sea, which was unlawful from the point of view of the British colonial regime, as it had the monopoly on the exploitation of salt. Gandhi called upon all Indians to struggle for freedom through non-violent means. All this made a strong impression on the young Naess. He found this form of activism very inspirational, even more so after meeting some young Indian students in Ustaoset, the small village south of his hut Tvergastein. Naess became persuaded of the strength of Gandhi's notion of *satyāgraha* (active nonviolent resistance) and his premise that any human conflict can be justifiably resolved through nonviolence. The rest of his life he would remain a Gandhian (or *gandhist*, as it is called in Norwegian), and be committed to nonviolent com-

munication and direct active resistance. A key principle for him was that whenever one would be attacked for one's views, one—like Gandhi—first of all ought to seek understanding of the attacker's views.

During World War II, the German Army occupied Norway for five years. Naess wanted to be part of the underground resistance, but friends convinced him to remain on the faculty of the University of Oslo. One advantage he had was that he understood German. His adherence to non-violence didn't mean that he would remain passive. For him it didn't mean being pacifist, but moving oneself into the center of conflict. Naess actually worked undercover for the Norwegian Intelligence Agency XU during the occupation. He was in close contact with members of the Resistance, and a few

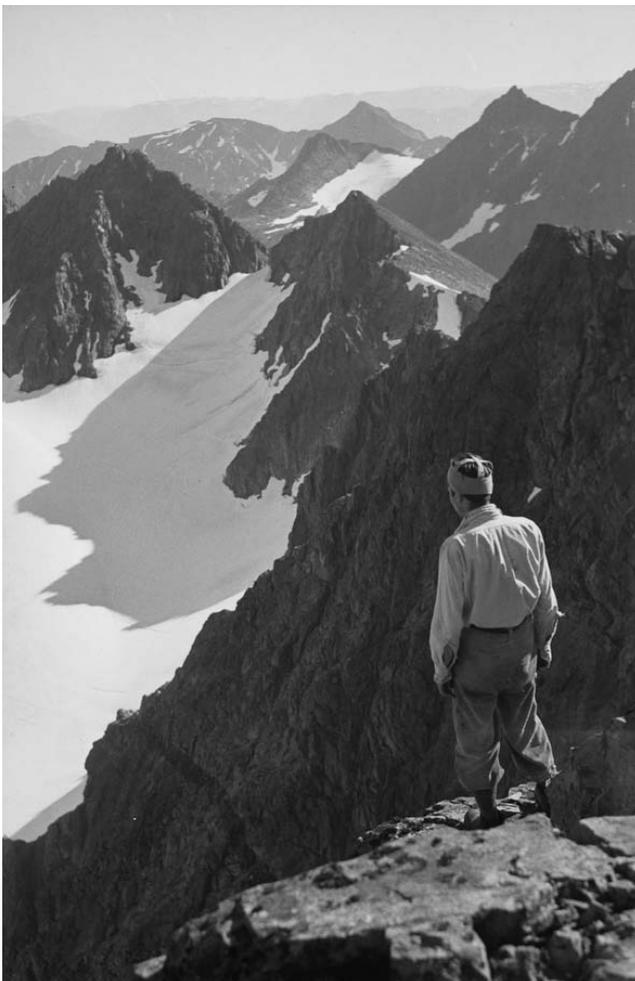
Early climbers, possibly including Naess, on a high ridge of Stetind in 1936.  
PHOTO: ARCHIVE OF PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY



times arms passed through his office at the university.

Directly after the war, Naess led a project which involved bringing together suspected torturers and the families of torture victims to gain a sense of closure on the fate of the latter—and to avoid having the “traitors” subjected to equally horrid persecution. Through its investigations his organization was able to uncover what had happened in several cases, and often this meant providing family relatives the certainty about the death of their disappeared loved ones.

In 1948 Naess was invited by UNESCO to be the scientific leader on a project which had as its aim to explore ideological controversies between the East and the West regarding use of the terms *democracy* and *freedom*.



Naess overlooking the mountains.

PHOTO: ARCHIVE OF PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY

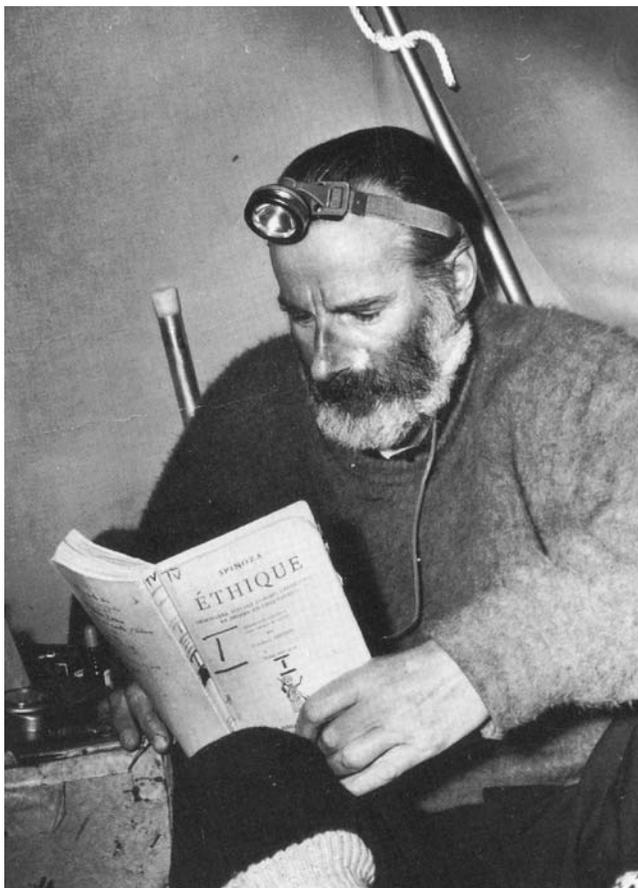
Naess was not only strongly influenced by Gandhi's teachings on non-violence but also by the writings of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). There is a famous photograph of Naess reading Spinoza's *Ethica* (Ethics) in 1964, in his tent high up in the Hindu Kush Mountains. Spinoza wrote that the more we know our own connections to the world, the more we know of that world itself. With Spinoza, Naess held that Nature (with a capital N) is not the passive dead, value-neutral nature of mechanistic science, but akin to Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura* (“God or Nature”), it is all-inclusive, creative, infinitely diverse and alive. To Naess and Spinoza, Nature is perfect “in itself.” From his philosophical mentor, Naess also took the key concept of “self-realization.” In his *Ethics*, Spinoza had written that reason demands that everyone “strives to obtain all which really leads man to greater perfection.” Through a process of what he called “wide identification” Naess directed his concern both to humankind's relationship to life in general and to the self-realization of all life-forms for their own sake. The influence of Spinoza can also be traced in the value that Naess attributed to “deep questioning.” When we begin to seek deeper clarification of our ultimate values, Naess held, we are involved in deep questioning that leads us to state our ultimate norms and views about the nature of the world. Through this, we are able to articulate a total view of life which can guide our lifestyle.

Naess was also pivotal to the development of modern social research in Norway. After the war he was part of a group of people who, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent struggle in India, felt obliged to initiate systematic efforts to achieve peace, and to do this on basis of scientific grounds. They were particularly keen to direct a critical eye toward the Cold War policies of the time and they argued for a so-called “third position.” They would defend underprivileged groups, conduct action research; and develop more theory-oriented research on the theme of democracy. Together with Johan Galtung and others, Naess helped establish the Institute for Social Research (ISF) in Oslo in 1950.

When Naess published *Interpretation and Precise-*

ness in 1951—according to the University of Oslo his key work—he had worked for a long time within the field of empirical semantics, and now he had developed an empirical method for conducting language analysis. In the book he presents methods for interpretation and clarification which allow for achieving a better grasp of the depth and intention in claims of people that are expressed through their statements. In 1958, Naess was co-founder of *Inquiry*, an interdisciplinary philosophical journal.

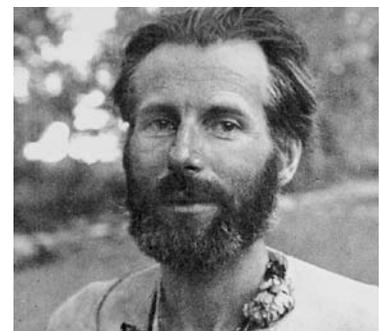
In the preface to the book *Hva er filosofi?* (“What is Philosophy?,” 1965) Naess declared that he had come to embrace views that were deviant from the ones he had earlier in life. He had now developed a philosophical skepticism that was based on different stands, such as “possibilism” (the feeling one may have that anything can happen at any time), pluralism, and a general attitude of openness and trust, rather than doubt.



In his books *Scepticism* (1968) and *Hvilken verden er den virkelige* (“Which World is the Real?,” 1969), he expressed a strong awareness of human fallibility.

Following thirty years of professorship, Naess opted for early retirement in 1969, exactly ten years before the official retirement age. He wanted to devote himself more fully to his environmental commitment and to the development of environmental philosophy. But perhaps most importantly, he wanted to *live*, instead of just functioning. Most of his time he would now use to provide support for the emergence of so-called “green politics” in Europe. In Norway, he became especially known through his participation in actions against the hydroelectric development of Mardøla (1970) and Alta (1979–1981). In 1970, together with a large number of demonstrators (amongst whom Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng), he chained himself to rocks in front of Mardalsfossen, a waterfall in a Norwegian fjord, and refused to descend until plans to build a dam were dropped. Though the demonstrators were carried away by police and the dam was eventually built, the demonstration launched a more activist phase of Norwegian environmentalism.

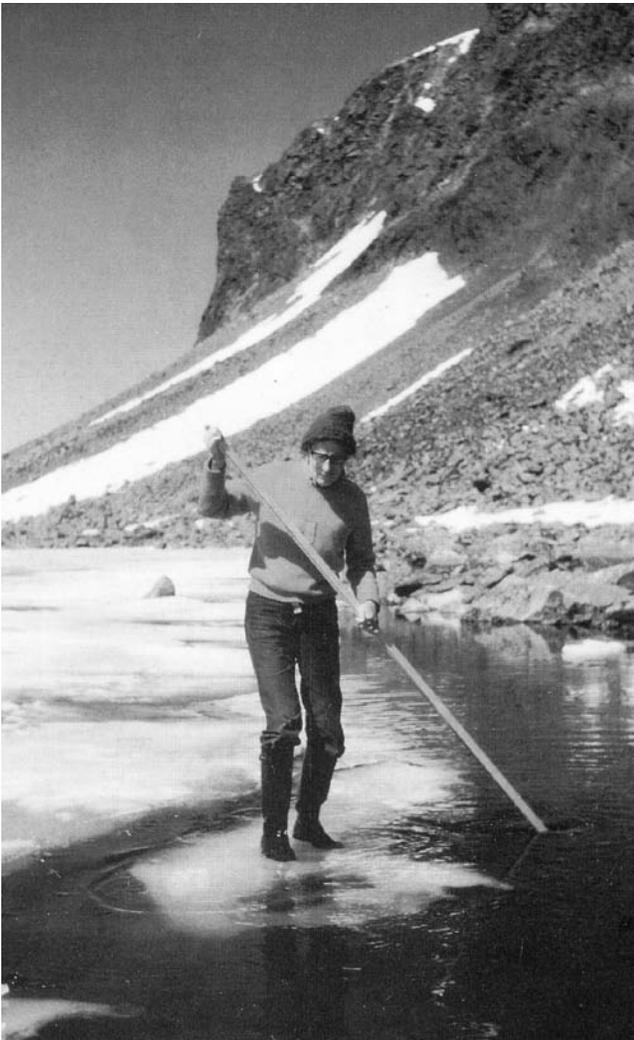
In his seminal book *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (“*Økologi, samfunn og livsstil*,” 1974; translated into English in 1989 by David Rothenberg), Naess presents his view on nature’s intrinsic value, and on the relationship between humans and nature. For him, the view that “all living beings are part of the same whole” is neither a norm nor a description. Foremost, it is an intuitive reaction.



Left: Naess, reading Spinoza’s Ethics, in the Hindu Kush Mountains.

Right: Naess in 1950.

PHOTOS: PRIVATE COLLECTION



Above: Arne leaving his hut Tvergastein for a mountain hike.  
PHOTO: JØRN MOEN

Below: Naess holding his balance on a chunk of floating ice.  
PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION

Naess first coined the terms deep ecology movement and ecosophy in 1973 in the article “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary.” He contrasted the mainstream “shallow” ecology movement with the “deep” ecology movement. The latter stresses the need for extensive changes in values and practices, especially in industrial nations. Naess cited Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring* as a key influence in his vision of deep ecology. From the early 1970s through the 1990s, he constantly sought to develop and clarify his thoughts on this new concept. As has often been misrepresented, for Naess, the adjective “deep” pertained, first and foremost, to a way of questioning, and not to whether a person would be either “deep” or “shallow.” While camping together with George Sessions in Death Valley, California in 1984, he wrote the Deep Ecology Eight Point Platform which can be regarded as a listing of the basic principles of the deep ecology movement. Together with Australian rainforest activist John Seed, American eco-philosopher and Buddhist Joanna Macy and the activist Pat Flemming, Naess published the book *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* in 1988. (The idea of thinking like a mountain was first expressed by American ecologist Aldo Leopold in *Sand Country Almanac* which came out in 1949. In this book, Leopold recounts a gripping personal story. When working as a forester in New Mexico he had shot a female wolf on a mountainside and watched it die. This experience led him to view humans as intrinsically part of the natural world. To think like a mountain means being aware of the environment and how our actions can cause harm.)

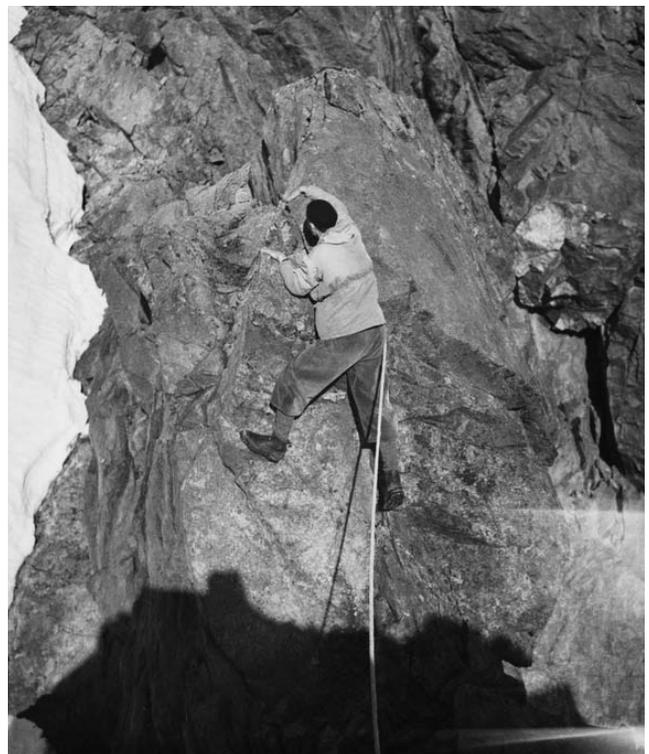
Naess often asserted that he didn’t consider himself to be an academic philosopher. His aim was to try to *live* his philosophy. The thought of simply being an academic philosopher—that is, to live a life of the mind—made him restless and uneasy. In the course of many years he developed his own *ecosophy* while living in Tvergastein. An ecosophy is a wisdom grounded in attention to the earth. He called his philosophy *Ecoso-*

A young Arne Naess (center) hiking on Kolsås with friends, 1928.  
PHOTO: ARCHIVE OF PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY



*phy T*, whereby the T stands for the place where he developed much of his thinking: Tvergastein. Naess averred that while western environmental groups had raised public awareness of the environmental issues of the time, they had largely failed to have insight into and address what he argued were the underlying cultural and philosophical background to these problems. Naess believed that the environmental crisis of the twentieth century had arisen due to certain unspoken philosophical presuppositions (such as the value dualism of spirit/matter and soul/body) and attitudes within modern western developed societies which remained unacknowledged.

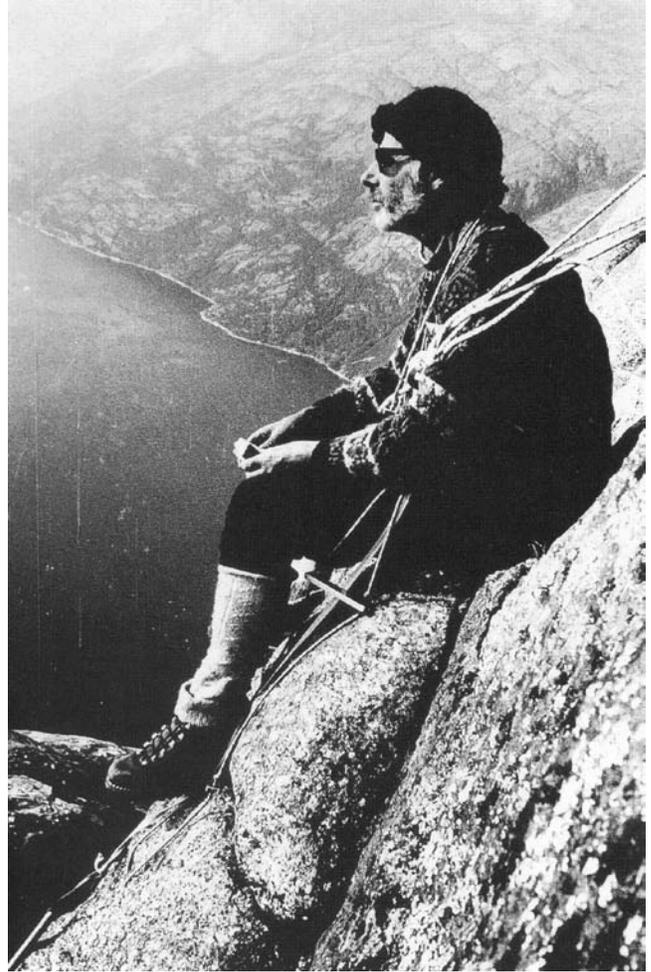
Naess traveled the world encouraging other people to develop their own ecosophies because diversity and deep questioning were major aspects of his teaching. Through the 1990s, he continued his talks and travels. His involvement in the environmental movement ranged from grassroots protest to his candidacy for political office with the Green Party and being the first



Naess, climbing near Zapffe's cabin at Jægervatnet.  
PHOTO: ARCHIVE OF PETER WESSEL ZAPFFE, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NORWAY

chairman of Greenpeace Norway (in 1988).

Arne Naess's achievements as a philosopher, ecologist and activist were widely recognized during his lifetime. Renowned Indian environmental activist Vandana Shiva knew him well. What had always impressed her very deeply about her good friend, she recounts in the film *The Call of the Mountain*, is the combination of innocence with extreme brilliance of the mind: "Usually you get intelligent people becoming partly arrogant, partly self-centered; they just lose the spirit of freedom in themselves, as a person. Arne has always maintained his enjoyment of *every* moment of life." In 2005 Arne Naess was knighted and made a Commander with Star of the Royal Norwegian order of St. Olav First Class. Three weeks before his 97th birthday, Arne Naess passed away in Oslo, on January 12, 2009.



Naess overlooking the fjord from mount Stetind.

PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION