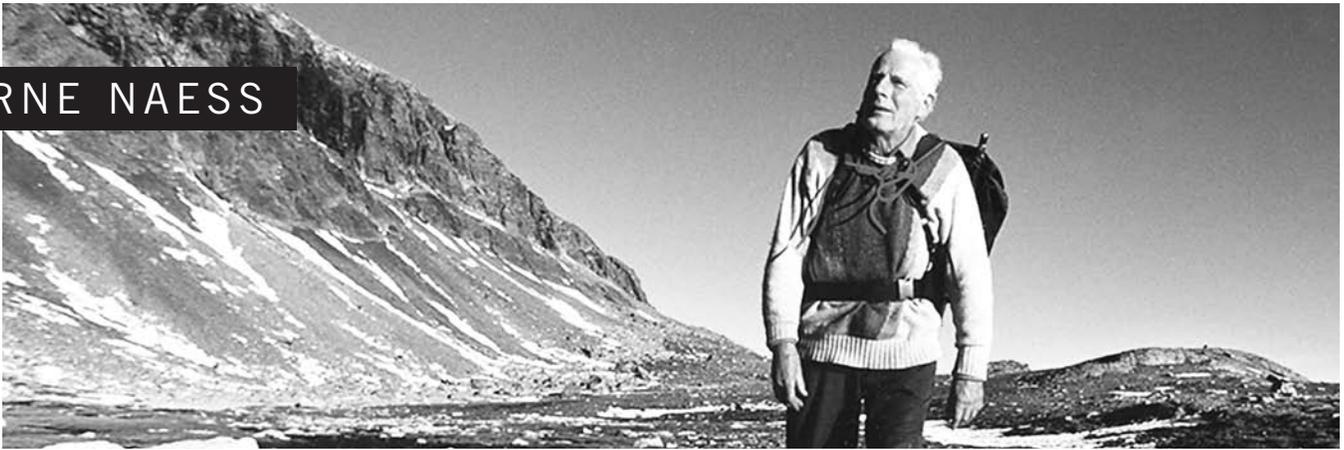


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# A Note on the Prehistory and History of the Deep Ecology Movement

BY ARNE NAESS

The expression originally used for the deep ecology movement was a somewhat longer one: the long-range international deep ecology movement. It was later argued that *long-range* and *international* might be defined so as to be included in the deepness. The original expression makes it not only convenient but factually well founded to start this brief history with the publication of Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* in 1963 and the resulting controversies elicited by the cooperation between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the chemical industry. The controversies revealed political, economic, and technological forces that could engender future silent springs. Rachel Carson went deep and questioned the premises of her society—an essential difference from the argumentation pattern of the shallow ecology movement.

Before 1963, attitudes and opinions corresponding to some of those characteristic of the deep ecology movement are found in many, perhaps practically every culture, and as far back as we have written materials. The deep ecology movement was, soon after *The Silent Spring*, made the object of studies, mostly from special viewpoints. It seems useful, however, to retain a conception that covers all aspects of the kind of achievement Rachel Carson was known for: primarily the warnings about man-made ecological disasters magnified through the involvement of industry and agriculture; secondarily the effort to implement new policies and personal activism; thirdly the philosophical and religious view of life and what makes life meaningful, especially as the basis for an environmentally alert ethics.

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The third aspect, the ecophilosophical aspect of the movement, has motivated the use of the term *deep ecology* for a kind of philosophy and the use of *deep ecologists* as a name of a small group of writers and theorists who use the term and support the movement. The movement is, however, a very broad social phenomenon, essentially comprising all three aspects. It asks for changes in all facets of human life.

The history of the forerunners of the global deep ecology movement and its literary supporters in the United States has been the object of a large group of studies

by George Sessions (see, e.g., 1981). Of others contributing to this history, the work by the historian Stephen Fox (1981) and the philosopher Warwick Fox (1990) deserves special mention, but there are also other historical studies on a high level of interest and competence.

The complex European trend of Romanticism from the time of Goethe to the present furnishes rich materials. The history of the cleavage between attitudes and opinions characteristic of those of the deep, socially and politically committed, ecology movement and the reform or shallow ecology movement is closely



*Stetind i take* (Stetind in the mist).  
PAINTING BY PEDER BALKE, 1864

connected with the history of the interaction between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, especially the background of anthropocentrism in relation to ecocentrism. The Romantic painters were more ecocentric in at least one interpretation of the term. Those terms did convey some information when they were introduced, but very little is left now because of widely different interpretations.

The philosophy of man-nature relations is one of the main features of the history of European philosophy and religion. Of the many works dealing with European background matters, Clarence J. Glacken's *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967) and John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (1974) deserve special mention for their influence in English-speaking countries.

The "discovery" of the mountain wilderness of the Alps was important for the appreciation of territories "of no use" and for the general effort to stop the increase of human territorial domination. A special branch of the general Romantic trend experienced and described Alpine areas as awe-inspiring, superbly beautiful, and, what is still more important, full of intrinsic meaning and value. The areas *communicated* meaning of their own. The landscapes did not need human beings and they did not need to be useful to humankind to justify their existence. The art of painting convincingly showed a turn from admiration of the gardens, the artful and artificial horticulture of Versailles, the useful and moderate landscapes with human activity and concern at the center, to the admiration of magnificent, self-sufficient landscapes with little or no trace of human purpose. Forests were painted with trees rotting, and life-forms shown that depend upon the presence of "dead" trees.

Wild nature was considered vitally useful for the realization of human potentials as soon as the worries of poverty were transcended. Analogous trends had occurred on a vaster scale outside Europe.<sup>[1]</sup> Recently,

the religious meaning of high mountain peaks for the Incas has been brought to light. The old Babylonian culture also made reference to the religious meaning of mountains. "In Mesopotamia, the 'mountain' is the place where the mysterious potency of the earth, and hence of all natural life, is concentrated."<sup>[2]</sup>

The art, philosophy, and religions of the East contained trends corresponding to those of European Romanticism. Because of the absence in the East of a uniquely strong rationalist tendency, these trends did not acquire labels like "romantic." The European Romantic trend in painting is now looked upon *as a form of realism*. It favors a realistic appreciation of human relations to nature. The dominant modern Western trend has been unrealistic and self-destructive.

There is a prevailing ahistorical notion that enthusiasm for and a spiritual cult of the "useless" and "barren" has only been present among the well-to-do. History, however, tells us that just as there always have been poor people traveling to Mecca, there have been poor people struggling to reach and enjoy "hostile" landscapes. Economically reckless feasts have always been a central feature of many cultures. They often left the poor considerably poorer for a long time afterward, but without loss of life quality. One should be careful not to underrate the feelings among the poor for the great and so-called useless. Such feelings may be stronger than among the industrial rich.

The widespread frustrations following the two world wars and the war in Vietnam undermined the arrogant Western notion of progress and its self-congratulatory application of the concept of "advanced society" to a very small part of humanity. A new cultural anthropology emerged with no presumptions of modern Western cultural preeminence.

A work like Marshall Sahlins's *Stone Age Economics* (1972) opened up visions of economic systems with

1. See, e.g., Rohrer (1920). For areas outside Europe, see several articles in Tobias (1985). There is, of course, nothing "Aryan" about the cult of mountains.

2. From Henri Frankfort's "The Birth of Civilization in the Near East" (1959), as quoted in Tobias and Drasdo (1979), p. 201.

less stress and the opportunity for deeper cultural activity than those afforded the average person in the richest industrial nations. The new cultural anthropology inspired belief in a future with a wealth of cultural differences proportional to the wealth of human cultural potentials, and compatible with full richness and diversity of nonhuman life-forms. Cultural anthropology and the study of human cultures show convincingly that gigantic administrations, populations, and technical machinery are not *necessary* as a basis for reaching fundamental human goals and purposes.

All these trends were of importance when the new emphasis on ecology made itself felt in the 1960s. The general prehistory of the deep ecology movement has yet to be written. There is no easy way to establish the roots of a movement, and the identity of the movement itself will always be questionable. The terminology will undergo variation. In any case, much remains to be done to make conscious which forces are operating.

The basically positive function of the ecological crisis is to renew a general concern for what human life is about. What are we here for? To spoil the planet? Why should we do that? Are there any fundamental purposes that make it necessary to endanger the richness and diversity of life? Must we have such a large population of human beings? The so-called shallow or reform ecology movement does not place such questions at the center of our attention. Its adherents do not do that partly because they think the ecological disturbances are few, fairly well known, and capable of elimination by clever management of resources. They also take this approach because they do not combine concern for the Earth with a deeply critical evaluation of the dominant trends in the rich countries. For example, the shallow movement fails to critically evaluate the persistent trend of economic growth and the persistent trend to look at less materially rich countries as “developing” toward the way of life of the rich, as if that would be an unquestionable good. In the deep argumentation pattern, all this is questioned.

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