



SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

# Jumping Into the Stream of Things

BY PETER REED AND DAVID ROTHENBERG

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Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng has been called, with no exaggeration, Norway's leading environmentalist.<sup>[1]</sup> For the past twenty-five years there have been few ecological maelstroms he was not somehow mixed up in, and the ideas, protests, and organizations he initiated have permanently changed the face of Norwegian ecopolitics. Determined to integrate philosophical thought and political action, Kvaløy confounds those who would make a neat distinction between the theory and practice of ecophilosophy.

Kvaløy's involvement with ecophilosophy and ecopolitics began shortly after taking his philosophy degree with a dissertation on communication theory and electronic music. Shortly thereafter, encounters with the concrete canyons of New York City (where he had

been offered a fellowship in the philosophy of music) and the parasol-ridden, pollution strewn beaches of the Mediterranean (where he was vacationing) woke him up to the eco-social crisis that was bred and revealed in such environments. He returned to Norway and took a position as a researcher first at the University of Oslo's Institute of Philosophy and later at the Zoological Institute. There he began working on the philosophical and ecological ideas that were to form a basis of his ecophilosophy.

Despite this academic coloring, Kvaløy's philosophical style, liberally sprinkled with personal anecdotes, reveals a more piebald background. His childhood on a rural farm gave him glimpses of the satisfying cultural life that could be built around nature's rhythms. But

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1. *Ecologist*, Sept.–Oct. 1978, p. 146.

more than the peaks of the surrounding mountains, Kvaløy's heart was in the rivers that flowed between them. And saving them from imprisonment by hydro-projects has been the focus of his eco-activism. "What I have been convinced of," he writes, "is that running water in the landscape seizes human society and the minds of its individual members in a more decisive, creative manner than is generally recognized ... down there, on the river, our existence begins."<sup>[2]</sup>

On the opposite extreme, Kvaløy's military service as an aircraft mechanic gave him firsthand experience of hierarchical organizations trying to render man and nature static and controllable. The difference between those two environments was for Kvaløy a good example of the distinction between "complexity" and "complication." While complexity is a characteristic of organic, qualitatively changing systems, complication is a result of mechanistic systems that try to stop time. A society in harmony with nature would be complex, while our modern Western society is dangerously complicated. This distinction is found in all his thought.

Kvaløy's colleague Nils Faarlund has called Sigmund a "Buddho-Marxist," and it is not hard to see why. Kvaløy has traveled many times to a particular valley in the central Himalaya, and his experience living with the villagers comes out in the priority he places on a Buddhist sense of time and of the self. His (and

E.F. Schumacher's) concept of "meaningful work," on the other hand, has obvious roots in Marxist thought. Moreover, Kvaløy resembles his dialectical forerunner in his conviction that the modern West's social and political patterns are recipes for ecocatastrophe—a self-contradiction that will not resolve itself except through conflict. There is no use trying to hide this; compromises only too often serve the very social structures one is trying to replace. And like Marx, Kvaløy believes that academic descriptions of the problem are useless unless translated into action.

Action itself, in fact, can be the best teacher of what society is really all about. The kind of experience gained through just trying something, Kvaløy believes, is worth a month of Sundays in a seminar. Thoughtful analyses and careful planning are still prerequisites for successful actions. But his suggestion that we "jump into the stream" of things to see where it leads is a healthy antidote to an academic reluctance to move until one is sure one has all the answers.

Kvaløy takes an admitted delight in throwing himself into the fray—a vestige, perhaps of the Viking berserker. During his "fireside chats" on Norwegian radio he will unabashedly say things that are certain to provoke representatives of opposing worldviews. The resulting discussion, he believes, can prove fruitful. He has not, however, stopped at discussion. He took the initiative in

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2. Sigmund Kvaløy (1984). *Kraftrom mot elvetid: To kulturer på norsk jord* ("Power-space versus river-time: Two cultures on Norwegian soil"), in Kjell Haagenen and Atle Midttun (Eds.) *Energi og samfunn: Kraftutbygging, konflikt, og aksjoner* ("Energy and Society: Hydropower, Conflict, and Actions") (pp. 150–151). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

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Peter Reed died at the age of 24 in a climbing accident in the Jotunheimen Mountains in Norway. When he died, he was a PhD student in Norway, studying deep ecology. Among his many accomplishments, Peter co-edited the book *Wisdom in the Open Air: the Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology*, which was published posthumously in 1993.

Musician and philosopher David Rothenberg wrote *Why Birds Sing*, *Bug Music*, *Survival of the Beautiful* and many other books, published in at least eleven languages. His first books were the English translation of Naess's *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* and *Is It Painful to Think? Conversations with Arne Naess*. He has 16 CDs out, including *One Dark Night I Left My Silent House* which came out on ECM, and most recently *Berlin Bülbul* and *Cool Spring*. He has performed or recorded with Pauline Oliveros, Peter Gabriel, Ray Phiri, Suzanne Vega, Scanner, Elliot Sharp, Markus Reuter, and the Karnataka College of Percussion. He also worked on the films *SONG FROM THE FOREST* and the upcoming *NIGHTINGALES IN BERLIN* is based on his next book. Rothenberg is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Music at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. For more see: [www.davidrothenberg.net](http://www.davidrothenberg.net).

1969 to form the activist group (snm), which was one of the most active and influential environmental organizations over the next decade. He was central in planning the Mardøla demonstration, which was of deciding significance for the course of Norwegian ecopolitics.

But the Mardøla waterfall was lost to hydropower. And the picture of policemen bearing Kvaløy away from the protest shows a man much more disgruntled than the cheerful snapshot of Arne Naess. Although he is an adherent of Gandhian nonviolence, Kvaløy does get frustrated. He has gone so far as to advocate the use of dynamite against construction machinery, something in the spirit of the American Earth First! movement:

People's will to defend themselves doesn't concern only their country, but also their living environment.... One has to defend what one feels close to.... We must get away from the idea that the dividing line between violence and nonviolence lies at the use of dynamite. *Yet no living thing should be harmed*—not even a blade of grass. If dynamite helps life to flow again where it has been stopped, this would be a truly nonviolent use of explosives, really a peace-promoting use of Alfred Nobel!<sup>[3]</sup>

In fact, it was partly in solidarity with an Icelandic group who blew up a dam (and saved their river) that Kvaløy and several others sailed two small Viking-style fishing boats from Norway to Iceland in 1974. The close communication required among the crew to handle these boats also inspired Kvaløy to model the individual as a bundle of diversely talented personalities, separated from themselves and from other individuals only by a “semipermeable membrane.”

Encouraging not only others to cultivate their inner diversity, Kvaløy himself lives in two worlds: in 1981 he took up residence on his mother's family farm in mid-Norway, close to a river and close, in spirit, to his childhood. He took the last name “Setreng” (meadow home) after the farm, and tries his best to shift between the life of a farmer concerned about his potatoes (“a fantastic plant!”) and the life of an ecophilosopher concerned with the world. “To be able to do this,” he says:

I have to build a bridge between the farmer and the urban-educated activist. I have hit upon some tricks to facilitate this, like turning on the radio and listening to London or Moscow or New York, pouring myself a dram of imported bourbon instead of the local

3. Sigmund Kvaløy, interviewed together with Oddmund Hollas by Jan Borring, På tide med aksjoner mot demninger og maskiner (“Time for action against dams and machines”), *Miljømagasinet*, no. 4 (1981), p. 5.



Setreng carried away by police during the Mardøla actions in 1979.

PHOTO: LEIF MAGNE FLEMMEN

beer—these are pleasant things, so they move me softly onto the bridge. Piece by piece, my other personality falls into place.<sup>[4]</sup>

The ability to swim in very different currents, he maintains, is proof against being drowned by the opposition. To have ready to hand a wealth of talents, to be a “super-amateur,” is the best method to win against a standardized, specialized society that seems bound willy-nilly toward collapse.

Kvaløy emphasizes the *conflicts* involved in staying this course more than other deep ecologists do. But in spite of his occasional frustration, Kvaløy describes the environmental struggle in Norway as a qualified success. Because, while actions are the best way to “learn environmentalism,” the success of an action is not measured only by its short-term results. Rather, “it is the direction in which the action sets out, and pulls other actions along with it, the power to create such actions, and this direction stands in clear contrast to the destructive processes in the world we want to overcome.”<sup>[5]</sup>

4. Personal communication Reed and Rothenberg.

5. Sigmund Kvaløy (1986), En ‘karmabuddhisme’ for Vesten og vår tid (“A ‘Karma-Buddhism’ for the West and for our time”), unpublished manuscript, p. 23.