

## Why deep ecology?

Joanna Macy sees our current turbulent time as a possible turning point with profound potential for the benefit of all, an opportunity for a 'Great Turning' when we can choose sanity and life over the madness and destruction of unsustainable human expansion. Her approach provides an opportunity for people to share their concerns for planetary issues and to explore creative and co-operative ways to take positive action. This is what she has to say about the deep ecology approach to our crisis.

Our interdependence with all life of Earth has profound implications for our attitudes and actions. To clarify these implications and free us from behaviours based on outmoded notions of our separateness from nature, deep ecology arose, both as a philosophy and a movement. The term was coined in the 1970s by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, a mountain climber and scholar of Gandhi.

In contrast to reform environmentalism, which treats the *symptoms* of ecological degradation – clean up a river here or a dump there for human well-being – deep ecology questions fundamental premises of the Industrial Growth Society. It challenges the assumptions, embedded in much Judeo-Christian and Marxist thought, that humans are the crown of creation and the ultimate measure of value. It offers us a broader and more sustainable sense of our own worth as viable members of the great evolving community of Earth. It holds that we can break free from the species arrogance which threatens not only ourselves but all complex life-forms within reach.

We cannot genuinely experience our interrelatedness with all life if we are blind to our own human-centeredness, and how deeply embedded it is in our culture and consciousness. Deep ecologist John Seed, an Australian rainforest activist, describes both the ways it constricts us and the rewards we find in moving beyond it:

'Anthropocentrism means human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute "human race" for man and "all other species" for woman...

'When humans investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric self-cherishing, a most profound change in consciousness begins to take place. Alienation subsides. The human is no longer a stranger apart...'

Arne Naess has a term for the wider sense of identity that John Seed describes. He calls it the *ecological self*, and presents it as the fruit of a natural maturation process. We underestimate ourselves, he says, when we identify self with the narrow, competitive ego. "With sufficient all-sided maturity" we not only move on from ego to a social self and a metaphysical self, but an ecological self as well. Through widening circles of identification, we vastly extend the boundaries of our self-interest, and enhance our joy and meaning in life.

A welcome and significant feature of this concept is the way it transcends the need to sermonize about our moral responsibilities to other beings. When we assumed that we were essentially separate, we preached altruism – the Latin *alter* being the opposite of *ego*. This is not only philosophically unsound, from the perspective of deep ecology and other nondualistic teachings, but also ineffective. ...[T]he requisite care flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves.

... Of an essentially exploratory nature, [deep ecology] seeks to motivate people to ask, as Naess puts it, "deeper questions" about their *real* wants and needs, about their relation to life on Earth and their vision for the future.

Reconnection is a key theme in deep ecology: healing the illusory split and moving from the loneliness of 'me' and 'other' to the experience of inter-being. Interdependence, a translation of the Buddhist Sanskrit term *pratityasamutpada* (so beautifully expressed by Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh's term 'inter-being'), is not just an interesting concept but becomes a transformative insight to be experienced and lived. Not only do we appreciate our kinship with all beings, the planet is no longer perceived as a separate inanimate environment but loved as our home, Gaia, Mother Earth, in a relationship of reciprocal nurturing and cherishing. Humans and Nature are no longer viewed as separate entities, the one to be exploited by the other; non-human beings are no longer seen as things to be used by humans for human convenience; rather, we are all sentient beings at home in a living world, all interconnected strands in the web of life.

As part of the process of change, we learn to trust our emotions to do what emotions are meant to do – to be in motion, to flow through us and amongst us. We appreciate our sensitivity to others' emotions, and to the pain and joy of Gaia and the web of inter-being – the forests and oceans, the whales and birds, the humans and horses.

## And why horses?

The horses play a major part in the workshops. Being outside in the open with horses moves us humans out of the tendency to theorize in our heads, into the direct experience of our hearts. The horses contribute their straightforwardness and honesty, their therapeutic abilities, their good nature and warm friendliness. As non-human beings they can represent the animals whose sentience and spirit has been denied by the hubris of human domination, all those beings depersonalised as 'others' (including those 'others' within the human race – the poor, the disenfranchised, the indigenous peoples, women, people of colour, the meek and the marginalised). As spiritual beings, the horses bring their mythic and shamanic abilities to transport travellers to other realms of experience, combining their grounded, earthy physicality with the capacity for spirit flight as portrayed by the winged horse, Pegasus. Of all animals, horses have a particularly close link with humans: throughout human history, we have harnessed their physical power, exploiting their strength and speed to cultivate fields, hunt other animals, create civilisation, fight wars, and travel all over the world. Now we are asking the horses to help bring us home to Gaia.

Linda Kohanov, speaking of the horse-human bond, says that a student sensitive enough to develop a true connection with her horse will activate a 'bigger brain loop' (echoes of deep ecology's wider identity). She will find the creativity arising from this process overflowing into other areas of her life and she 'will feel a forgotten part of herself resurfacing, like Persephone emerging from the underworld to mark the arrival of spring.' She explains further:

Horses have long been known to activate this process, as numerous cross-cultural myths attest. Pegasus spirited the heroes of ancient Greece to the stars of immortality, and the magical waters that nourished poets sprang up where his hoof struck the ground on Helicon, the mountain of the Muses. Mohammed received his sacred visions astride Alborak, the white winged mare who not only took him to heaven but also brought him safely back to earth again. These myths associate equestrian pursuits with images of divine inspiration, but they point to a truth all riders have the potential to experience for themselves. Even mortal horses can lead people to secret springs of lost knowledge, and they're fully

capable of carrying the living dead, those lobotomized by the current paradigm, to a hidden realm of emotional and creative vitality, a kingdom that is indeed within us all.

[Linda Kohavov, Tao of Equus p166]

In some of these workshops the horses are simply present, bringing an enriching quality to the practice, while in some sessions the horses and humans interact together in more structured ways (there is no riding in any of the workshops); in both cases the opportunity is there for the horses to facilitate change and insight in the humans – and for everyone to enjoy the reciprocal benefits of the encounter. Intensely emotional beings and great communicators, horses have both the wish and the ability to encourage humans to move towards authenticity. Perhaps there are elements of 'horse-whispering' in what we're doing, but the whispering goes both ways, and it's less about our talking and more about our learning to listen.

*Further information:*

Linda Kohanov: *The Tao of Equus*

[www.taofequus.com](http://www.taofequus.com)

Joanna Macy: *Coming back to Life*

[www.joannamacy.net](http://www.joannamacy.net)