

# Arne Naess

## Deep Ecology

Arne Naess is a Norwegian philosopher. His deeply spiritual environmentalist concepts ignited the Deep Ecology movement that began in the 1970's and continued thereafter. The following are excerpts from an interview by W. David Kubiak. For more see:

<http://www.nancho.net/advisors/anaes.html> and  
<http://www.sum.uio.no/staff/arnena>.



**Nancho: Let's start at ground zero. What is your personal definition of "Deep Ecology"?**

**Arne Naess:** Deep Ecology - I could also call it "Green" - the Green Movement is a movement where you not only do good for the planet for the sake of humans but also for the sake of the planet itself. That's to say that you start from the whole of the globe and talk about the ecosystems, trying to keep them healthy as a value in itself. That is to say, for their own sake, like you do things for your own children or for your own dog, not only thinking of the dog as an instrument for your pleasure. So, deep ecology starts from a philosophical or religious view that all living beings have value in themselves and therefore need protection against the destruction from billions of humans. That's one basic point. Otherwise I would say that deep ecology or the green movement is a movement of activists or being active amongst one's own friends and where one works and, if one has the time, one takes part in demonstrations; one should try to not break any laws, but if it is absolutely necessary and everything has been with no result, then we also must break some laws. So, we have a total view; that is to say, a view of nature and man's relation to nature such that we combine a fundamental attitude and rejoice in nature for nature with practice in society.

**Well, as this develops not just as a philosophical idea but as an actual movement in society, how do you see it expressing itself most importantly?**

**AN:** Its expressions are very different, of very different character, and therefore it is difficult for all people who really belong to this movement to find each other and go together making an impact on politics and so we have difficult years to come together enough and agree on fairly practical problems, what should be the first priority today...what's left of different countries and our planet as a whole.

**In Japan you particularly hear news about greens and politics in West Germany and in Sweden. What is their agenda like?**

**AN:** Well, in West Germany where the term "green" was first used in politics, practically every alternative movement called itself green. So, it's a mixture of many different kinds. In Sweden, it's more really what I would call green or nearer the deep ecology movement. First to say they find it...we have to hurry up to stop the increase of destruction and try to get into a position where we decrease the total impact of the total volume of destruction on the planet. So, the

Swedish greens are in my view very justly called green because their ecological basis is so sharp. But there is still, we must not be too rigid and too radical in green parties. We have the fundamental views for ourselves in our philosophy and our general attitude and then we must make a program for green political parties which is not too far away from how people think in general, and that is one of our tactical or practical problems we have in green politics. So, we have a difficult time ahead but in the 1990s the devastation, the bad things happening on the planet have such a tremendous scope that I think the political influence will be much greater than today, in the 1990s.

**Well, you've seen a big upsurge just in the last couple of years, is that because of the green movement, do you think, or is the green movement growing out of that?**

**AN:** This rather sudden upsurge is mysterious in the sense that we don't really know what made it. We had an upsurge from 1963 to 1970 and then there was nothing practically later in the so-called "Ronald Reagan" period. Then all of a sudden there is an upsurge and hundreds of people will come and listen to really radical views that we must live otherwise, we must have a different policy. And I don't know why but I am lecturing in many countries now because all over I find people who are eager to listen and what I try to do is to make them feel that there are now millions and millions of people who would have a different policy, a different government, different ways of treating nature even if it costs, and it would cost a lot, especially for rich countries like Norway and Japan. We have to help the poor nations ecologically and that is a great, great task to do, a joyful task because we can get back the full richness and diversity of life forms on earth.

**What brought you to Japan at this time?**

**AN:** Well, I meet Japanese people in California and many other places and they complain about Japanese politics, they complain about what Japanese do in foreign countries - in Brazil and other places and they suggest that I should come to Japan. They told me it may be all important for the green movement in Japan that I can tell about things in all parts of the world - bad things going on, just as bad as in Japan and good things. So, I'm now one month going from place to place and partaking in tiny discussions or big discussions and trying to point out certain things that we have in common, the greens or what they call those who support the deep ecology movement and not only fragments like ozone layer or acid rain or oil on the coasts and so on. We have to be, we are, we in the deep green movement are concerned with the total ecosystems and the total planet and we wish to interfere much less than now. And also we wish that the human population should eventually be much smaller than now. And this maybe sounds a little strange but obviously we could reach the aim of life easier with less people.

**That sounds like a fairly politically sensitive point.**

**AN:** It's politically sensitive, therefore I talk a lot about it because I am old and established and nobody will think that I am fascist or Hitler, and nobody will think that I am not fond of children. What I am just saying is that, for instance, people with only one or no children, they should get less tax because they are doing something very good for our society.

**As you travel around Japan and talk to people, how close or far do you think the society is from its own greening?**

AN: I think it will have to be much worse in Japan before it really, really will turn. But it will turn because of the thousand year background where people have had that near relation to nature or that you obviously think that nature is something good in itself. So, I'm sure there will be a turn and when the turn comes the solidarity of the Japanese people, they're feeling together very well compared to, let us say, Norwegians. When the turn comes there will be great solidarity and self-discipline in turning increase of destruction into decrease of destruction. Then I may have died, but I wish I could experience the turn of the tide in Japan.

**Some people have noted that a lot of green spiritual values have been inspired or at least augmented by Buddhist concepts. Do you think that is an important way to approach consciousness here?**

AN: It's much easier to come from Buddhism to green thinking than it is to come from Christianity. But even in Christianity at the moment there is a turn of the tide. The Christians talk about we have sinned against creation: God created the Earth not only for our sake but all the creations of God is perfect in a sense because it is created by God Himself, so we must behave very different than we have behaved. We must be much more careful but of course we also must think of the poor people, if the poor people cut down a forest in order to live we cannot say, "No. Don't." We must help them for a good life without cutting down the trees like they do in Brazil.

**Most of the places that the "greens" have had impact are in local politics or in specific national societies, but the environmental problems are inherently international. How do you see coalitions forming across national borders?**

AN: They are forming at the moment. There is a lot of communication between countries such as between Europe and the United States, and Canada is also very good. And we have started last year good relations with South American deep ecology and people who call themselves "social ecologists" because they are aware of the very difficult situation of the poor people and aware that many of the poor people in South America who are not coming from Europe, not Spaniards, not Portuguese, they have a lot of knowledge of ecology; they have a lot of knowledge of how to protect their localities and so we must use that and we must help them to find ways to stop the increase of population. But we must do it with, cooperating with the poor people. Internationally, for instance, the erosion problem, the problem of erosion is so big that in the year 2000 we will have to spend about 24 billion dollars a year to stop erosion and of those 24 billion dollars a year, Japan must pay quite a lot and Norway must pay quite a lot because we have well-administered and well-organized societies and we are rich and we must contribute to stop erosion in Nepal and many other places. So, internationally there will be a lot of cooperation. I would not say internationally, I would say globally, global cooperation in the 1990s will be very broad and universities and high schools of Japan and Norway and other places will turn out many students who are capable of working on the global problems of erosion, of disappearing forests, of disappearing animals or of the atmospheric or climatic difficulties we will have.

**There's one school of thought in Japan that says that the environmental movement, that says that the problems are not so much caused by human beings as they are caused by corporate bodies. That is essentially either governments or large corporations that are responsible for the majority of the things that are going wrong in the environment.**

**AN:** I agree completely and this means that it's not enough to be lovers of nature and "oh, how beautiful here and how beautiful there" and "we should protect this and we should protect that". As many as possible of the deep ecology supporters, as many as we can get, should be active in local politics, should try to make small insertions of articles in local papers, should try at least locally to get a foot inside politics. We have to go through the political process and therefore we are so grateful for every young man or woman who can tolerate politics and who can have a good time doing a political job. Most people who are very fond of nature, detest politics. They don't like to be political at all. So, we must be very grateful to those people who take up the political questions and who are writing or talking to politicians gratefully when they have the courage to say we must in our budget spend more money on this, spend money on ecological things, we must stop indirectly through our big firms to cut down our Brazilian and other rainforests, etc., etc. There is a need for more people who have a social and political consciousness.

Well, I will not repeat myself, only say that we are grateful for whatever young or old people do to change policies so that governments are able to fight the tremendously big firms transnational who have more power than nations. There are powerful international firms much more powerful than, for instance, the nation Norway or Sweden or Denmark. So, there is the thing that we should take notice of.

**What do you see, for example, at the millennium as a hopeful and yet realistic goal for people working today?**

**AN:** I see it as a realistic goal that about the year 2010 the main bulk of interference in the ecosystems of the globe is diminishing, so that the 21st century and the 22nd century, at least, we come down to development that is sustainable ecologically and maybe 23rd century we will start going down in population and having a technology that is very mild or soft toward the planet and where all children grow up in a natural environment, so that they have not only social relations but ecological relations with animal, plants and landscapes and we are then back in the direction of Paradise.

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## **The Deep Ecology Platform**

- The flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of non-human life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.
- Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth.
- Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
- Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
- The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease.
- Significant change of life conditions for the better requires change in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures.
- The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of intrinsic value) rather than adhering to a high standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
- Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.

Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge, 1989, CUP, p. 29.