

Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation

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Guha is an Indian historian who specifically researches environmental, social and political history, as well as cricket history. In this essay he explores the movement of New Ecologists/deep ecology which he describes as a militant philosophical and cultural revolution in how humans refer to nature. The stance he adopts is one of a 'sympathetic outsider' in his overall critique of deep ecology, mainly outlining the fact that even though India and America may have a similar ecological diversity, they don't have the same cultural and social history. This is one of the initial problems he outlines in the central philosophy of deep ecology; it presents itself as universalistic.

(Can we read India vs. America in this essay as a generalisation for Global South and the Global North?)

Two main arguments against deep ecology:

1. It is uniquely American.
2. Applied internationally, it's consequences would be severe and different.

Anthropocentric/Biocentric:

Deep ecology is the shift from the anthropocentric to the biocentric; looking about not what nature can do for us and more at humanity's place in the natural order. Mainly, it looks into the preservation of untouched wilderness for historical, moral and scientific reasons, of which include nature's right to exist with or without us.

Guha problematises this shift as he points out that neither the anthropocentric nor the biocentric are the key dynamics at play in environmental degradation. Instead, he sees two other fundamental ecological problems at play:

1. Overconsumption – within the industrialised world and the urban elites of the Third World
2. Growing militarisation – both short-term and long-term efforts

(With regards to long-term efforts and the nuclear race and even the space race, I'd recommend reading David Nye's writing on the technological sublime as a mastery of nature and how he reads it from specifically American terms of patriotism: contingency of the existence of humans and nature. To experience the natural sublime, there must be human weakness, limitation and comprehension.)

These are then a dialect between economic and political structures rather than between the anthropocentric and the biocentric. That, and the fact that ecological degradation isn't serving the best interests of humans anyway.

(Is the absence of an active dialect indicative of there not being a dialect at all – or is it just indirect? Is there just a simple disregard for nature in these political and economic efforts? David Nye talks about the domestication of nuclear weapons, becoming a symbol of human power over nature.)

Wilderness:

Guha points out that the emphasis on wilderness that is characteristic of deep ecology is harmful when applied in the Third World. For America, the preservationist movement is about a conflict between people and interests (nature being 'interests' – an aesthetic), but Guha points out that agrarian populations already have a balanced relationship with nature.

Isolating wilderness would be to take from the poor and give to the rich, emphasised further by the actual occurrences of physical displacement of these populations to build preserves. These movements are often encouraged by the urban elites – who are conservationists now, but often are ex-hunters – and are enacted by representatives of international agencies.

These environmental problems are directly detrimental to the lives of the poor.

Mainstream environmentalism regards wilderness as almost a sort of luxury, an escape from modern civilisation. Guha uses Hays to emphasise this point of wilderness being an integral part of modern living, feeding human aesthetic and desires. What he refers to as modern here is our consumer society and the state of economic expansion we live in. His example is of driving for miles to get to somewhere in the 'wilderness' for a holiday. All this emphasises the American coexistence of wilderness and civilisation; the ability to enjoy the material and the aesthetic.

Guha makes a point of not equating environmental problems with wilderness problems, and to further his point he uses the German Greens as an example. They acknowledge that economic growth in the West relied and relies on an economic and ecological exploitation of the Third World. Relating back to overconsumption, he points out that there is a disproportionate distribution of resources within these boundaries. The proposed solution here is a complete changing of the system and one's own cultural values (changing from expansionist ideas to self-limitation) that should help a no-growth, scaling down of the economy.

Eastern spiritual traditions:

Deep ecology invokes Eastern religion, which Guha theorises is part of the search for an authentic lineage in Western thought. This invocation is perhaps another attempt at emphasising the universal significance of its philosophy through the combining of the Eastern (codified as the 'ancient' and 'primal/primitive') and the Western (codified as the 'modern' and 'civilised').

The initial problem with this is obviously the lumping together of the differentiated Eastern religions into one thing. Guha calls this a violence to history. He points out again that agricultural communities have a much more active relationship with nature as well as a knowledge of nature that is virtually scientific – meanwhile, deep ecology sees the Eastern man as prescientific as through his spiritual dependencies. (There are definitely elements of Orientalism being raised here, painting the East as the 'Other', and a lifestyle based on 'essence' and irrationality).

Overall, Guha reminds us that the East has often been a vehicle for Western projections.

(The East is seen as more primitive, closer to nature, and therefore this invocation of Eastern religion and 'essence', it is only further proof of the erasure of the sublime, and an attempt to 'master' nature.)

Imperialism:

Guha cites what he calls an 'imperialistic yearning' which is culturally rooted in American conservation history, seen through the movement or elimination of human populations which by extension, can be found in deep ecology. Deep ecology converges with the climate of nationalism that is already embedded within the American wilderness movement.

Guha concludes his essay by drawing attention to the other movements coming from elsewhere, such as the 'Hug The Tree' movement stemming from the Himalayas. These

movements were about the survival of the inhabitants of the land, rather than an improvement on overall quality of life or aesthetic values. He also expresses support for peace movements, in an effort against militarisation as an ecological problem.