

Environmentalism – Mindsets and Implications

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The impact of human-related activities – i.e. human footprint – on our environment has become a subject of much attention in the past 2-3 decades. Some notorious examples include the ozone layer depletion, an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, large-scale deforestation, depletion of our fisheries, and increasing air and water pollution, to name but a few. There is overwhelming consensus among scientists today that the compound effect of the first three factors gives rise to the phenomenon of global warming,¹ an issue that remains hotly contested amidst our increasing energy and material consumption and reliance on fossil fuel.² The detrimental impact of human-related activities on the environment is directly related to our relentless quest of economic development, and is locked in certain assumptions concerning the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Since human footprint may have either irreversible effects on the environment (eg. decrease in biodiversity) and effects that will take several generations to be remedied *if actions are taken now* (eg. replenishing the ozone layer and fisheries or preventing soil erosion and salinity by reforestation), the idea of unrestrained economic growth has been questioned by various groups. These include predominantly concerned citizens, scientists, NGOs (non-profit making organisations), and to a much lesser extent policy makers and private businesses. The persons forming these groups are called environmentalists, who believe that human beings ought to live according to certain environmental principles or ethics in order to minimise our footprint on nature. These sets of guiding principles or ethics are collectively known as environmentalism.

Environmentalism has become a popular word, which, at times, may have been generalised to the extent of trivialising its meaning. In this context, many persons experience difficulty in fully grasping what environmentalism is really all about, despite the fact that an environmental ethic to direct individual action is largely overdue.³ The fuzziness about environmentalism is understandable predominantly because it comes in many guises. The aim of this article is to provide the reader with an overview of the different shades of environmentalism in the hope that it will help them better situate themselves within the bigger environmental debate or to start such a debate where it is as yet not on the agenda. The various shades of environmentalism can be grouped under three broad categories, namely *the conservation, the social justice, and the deep ecology mind-sets*.⁴ Although these shades of environmentalism are all concerned about the current state of the environment, they are based on different assumptions. Their applications lead to vastly different outcomes, especially in their views on how human beings relate to their natural environment and other fellow beings.

The *conservationists*, who form the majority of environmentalists, are mostly concerned about the conservation of the earth's resources for the future use. There is here the recognition that the natural resources necessary for human survival are indeed scarce (and dwindling fast!), and need to be properly managed. The wise and efficient use of natural resources is

¹ P. Brown, *Global Warming – can civilization survive?* (Blandford, London, 1996).

² Issue 357 (June 2003) of the *New Internationalist* (www.newint.org) provides a background on six leading figures who sternly deny the reality of global warming-related climatic changes.

³ This is especially true in developing countries where economic growth is often pursued at the expense of environmental concerns, and where debate about the state of the environment may be lacking.

⁴ R.E. Freeman, J. Pierce, and R.H. Dodd, *Environmentalism and the new logic of business* (Oxford, New York, 2000), Chapter 4.

encouraged through appropriate management policies and scientific principles. This anthropocentric (i.e. human-centred) mind-set regards nature as being important only to the extent that it satisfies the needs of human beings. In addition, the conservationist mind-set is closely associated with the utilitarian philosophy,⁵ as it promotes the use of natural resources for the greatest good of the largest number of people and for the longest time. As long as natural resources are put to efficient use, the conservationist mind-set is consistent with the ideals of economic growth. The moral dilemma that confronts this mind-set is not about how we treat the earth *per se*, but is rather about our relationships with other human beings – i.e. scarce natural resources ought to be preserved for future generations of human beings. In brief, the conservationist mind-set is deeply rooted in a “*human being–nature*” duality, in which human beings are self-centred, and, as controlling agents separate from nature, only draw from nature to meet their needs. There is also the deep belief that technological progress will allow human beings to adequately solve their myriad of environmental problems, especially regarding the efficient use of existing natural resources, or rather what remain of these resources, and the discovery of substitutes for those resources that may potentially become depleted.

The *social-justice mind-set* is more complex to articulate because it is an agglomeration of several strands of philosophies. Environmentalists with the social-justice mind-set draw a direct relationship between the global state of the environment and other forms of human-engineered societal ills or oppressions, such as sexism, racism, speciesism, classism, etc. The social-justice mind-set proposes that these ills, including the way we treat the environment, are mutually reinforcing. Consequently, solutions to our environmental problems cannot be found unless there is a global effort to also stamp out exploitations based on differences between the sexes, races, classes and species. Environmentalists with the social-justice mind-set argue that a world that will be ecologically nurturing will also be one in which these societal ills will no longer exist. Two well-known movements promulgating the social-justice philosophy are ecofeminism and animal welfare activism. The former relates environmental degradation with the oppressive way in which women are treated, while the latter does the same by observing human cruelty toward animals. The social-justice environmentalists denounce the “human being–nature” or “mind–nature” dualism that underlies the conservationist mind-set. Ecofeminists do so by highlighting the fact that, in Western thought, the element of mind or rationality has traditionally been associated with men, whereas nature or earth (also, emotion and fertility) has been associated with women. The rational (i.e. men) having felt threatened by the emotive (i.e. women) could only fare by maintaining control over it. On the other hand, speciesism is rooted in the assumption that only human beings matter morally because only humans have the capacity to reason, to use language, to make a free choice, and to be self-conscious. Using his “principle of equal consideration of interests”, Peter Singer has demonstrated convincingly why we ought to protest against cruelty of animals, including eating and experimenting on them.⁶ Indeed, it is not hard to see that all the forms of societal ills mentioned earlier are mere mental constructs, which have been legitimised through careful rational formulations. In summary, the social-justice mind-set highlights that human beings treat the environment in ways analogous to how we treat other fellow beings.

The *deep ecology mind-set* is for many of us the most challenging shade of environmentalism. It encourages us to redefine our place in nature as it proposes that human

⁵ This philosophy is associated with the 19th century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham.

⁶ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1993), Chapter 2.

beings are an integral part of nature, rather than being agents who control and engineer the environment to their whim. Deep ecology is opposed to the anthropocentric view that the world revolves around the human species. The basic ethical tenet of this biocentric approach is that all that exists in nature has intrinsic value and hence has the right to exist and flourish on its own accord. Even though these values may not always be obvious to us, human beings should respect all of the elements of nature. Deep ecology, therefore, invites us to look at the web of life and foremost to concentrate on the relationships that exist between the elements, including human beings, of all ecosystems. While recognising that human beings have to draw from their natural habitat for survival, the deep ecology mind-set differentiates between *vital and peripheral needs*. It proposes that we should take from nature only what we require to satisfy our basic needs, while outright rejecting any actions that lead to the fulfilment of our peripheral needs – i.e. needs upon which we do not depend for our existence. There is within the deep ecology mind-set a sense of community, wherein human beings live in harmony or in symbiosis with nature's ecosystems. In other words, *deep ecology transcends the "human being-nature" duality to bring human beings in union with their natural environment*. Deep ecology, therefore, begs us to rediscover our spirituality and connection with nature, and invites us to question our current attitudes and value systems that are predominantly rooted in duality.

It is timely here to show by way of an example the implications of the three mind-sets discussed above. Genetic engineering (GE), which routinely makes the headlines as an environmental issue, is used as an example. Within the *conservationist mind-set*, GE is seen as a technology that offers the potential to (1) alleviate the future demands on food supply to feed an increasing population,⁷ (2) reduce the use of chemicals, (3) increase the nutritional content of crops, (4) increase the storage life of food, amongst other benefits. The conservationists see GE as a way forward to continuing economic growth, and as another way for human beings to exercise their will over nature. Hence, GE is supported by the conservationist mind-set. However, it should be noted that, despite the fact that the conservation mind-set is concerned with the conservation of the earth's resources for the future use, the serious question concerning any unforeseen repercussions of GE on future generations has remained largely unattended. On the other hand, the *social-justice mind-set* rejects GE on the basis that it is merely another way for the large multi-national corporations to increase their control over the economies of developing countries. Much has to be said in favour of the social-justice mind-set concerning its stand on GE for powerful multinational corporations are effectively patenting the livelihood of the poorest communities on earth, thereby increasing the reliance of poor countries on external forces. Transgenic crops are seen as a way to further the economic imperialism favoured by free market liberals.⁸ The social-justice mind-set would also argue that the world produces more than enough food today to feed the entire world's population, but the real problem is one of equitable redistribution of this food. The *deep ecology mind-set* reaches the same conclusion as the social-justice mind-set but for different reasons. The deep ecologist would suggest that rather than engineering our natural environment as GE proposes, human beings should re-establish a deep connection with their natural environment. It is only through our change in attitudes and by opening to and recognising our intrinsic oneness or interconnectedness with nature and each other that

⁷ The world's population will double in the next forty years. To meet human needs over the next 40 years, global agriculture will have to supply as much food as has been produced during all of human history. (M. J. Cetron and O. Davies, "Trends shaping the future: Economic, societal, and environmental trends", The Futurist; Jan/Feb 2003, pg. 27).

⁸ "The politics of food and farming: Peasants' revolt", New Internationalist, Issue 353, Jan/Feb 2003.

human beings could effectively solve their current environmental problems. Reclaiming our connection with nature should take care of problems of food redistribution, and therefore lead to social justice, as well as providing us with the insight that our current population growth and economic activities are unsustainable. The deep ecology mindset, therefore, tells us that no magnitude of technology will save our environmental problems. Human beings should rather change their attitudes and the way they live and relate to each other and nature!