

Conference: The Name and Nature of Ecocriticism - paper submission

Dave Storey ~ Auroville, December 2010

The Ecosophical Tree: a metaphor for converting ideas into action

Abstract

This paper is in two parts. The first presents the metaphor of the Ecosophical tree as a potential aid to deeper questioning and in turn, to deeper commitment and actions.

Deep Ecology is a process of deep questioning:

- Of fundamental beliefs;
- of society and personal lifestyle choices;
- and experience through actions.

Bearing these processes in mind, how can we consistently delve deeper and at the same time avoid neglecting either our rational or emotional capacities?

The second part of the paper gives an example of the application of the tree, based on instances from the authors own life experiences, from the mundane to the revelatory.

Keywords: Ecosophical Tree, Deep Ecology, questioning, actions.

Part I

Introduction

In what way can the Deep Ecological approach be made more accessible to non-academics, without compromising its qualities as a significant philosophical contribution to the environmental agenda? In a modest manner, Part I of this paper will attempt to indicate some signposts to help us on our way, through:

- a modification in the way the Deep Ecological framework is presented and;
- an expansion in the ways that Deep Ecology is apprehended.

Both of these aims are intended to assist the reader to go deeper, in order to act with greater conviction and immediacy.

Over the years Deep Ecology has come to mean many things for many people. Since the seminal paper (Naess 1973) in 1973, when Arne Naess presented the term Deep Ecology for the first time, multiple interpretations, claims and counterclaims have sprung up over what exactly deep ecology represents. To some extent this was to be expected as Naess never claimed a monopoly on the truth and through his own example and in the interests of ownership, actively encouraged other to engage and seek out their own processes of deep philosophical questioning.

How can the Deep Ecology movement become increasingly relevant and accessible to individuals and groups from as many diverse backgrounds and worldviews of the world as possible? This question takes on greater significance as we accelerate closer and closer to multiple economic, social, and ecological tipping points.

What tools and methodologies can be applied to reinforce the momentum behind Deep Ecology and inspire more people to see themselves as a part of nature and not apart from it?

The Basis for the Ecosophical tree

Building on the work of Naess (Naess 1986), and others¹ (Rothenberg 1987, Harding 2006), the following section seeks to explore the utility of the Ecosophical tree as a metaphor for converting ideas into action.

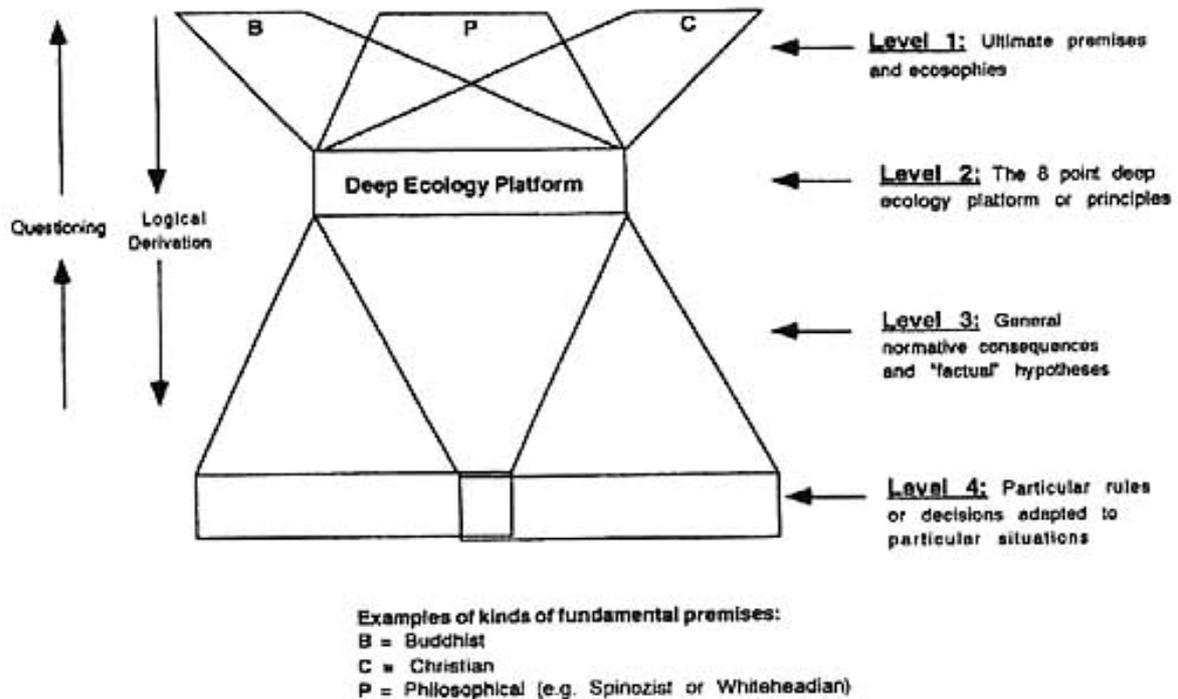
While many scholars in the field of environmental thought and in particular Deep Ecology, are familiar with the 'apron diagram' (Ibid.), for many less specialised in philosophy, it's adoption and usage will likely be limited as a result of its overtly technical nature. Naess (Ibid) had this to say about his approach to explaining Deep Ecology:

¹ Earliest references to the eco-sophical tree, or at least branches and roots that this author found are in Naess 1986, expanded upon in Rothenberg 1987 and again in Harding 2006 who credits Per Ingvar Haukeland, the Norwegian Eco-philosopher and activist with the idea of a tree to help explain the concept and approach of Deep Ecology.

“Perhaps what I say about it is expressed in a way that is not natural for many of its warm supporters. But we cannot expect, or even wish, to have a single way of expressing ourselves. I have mine....

The Apron diagram is of a rather abstract nature.”

Figure 1 - The Apron Diagram as originally presented²:



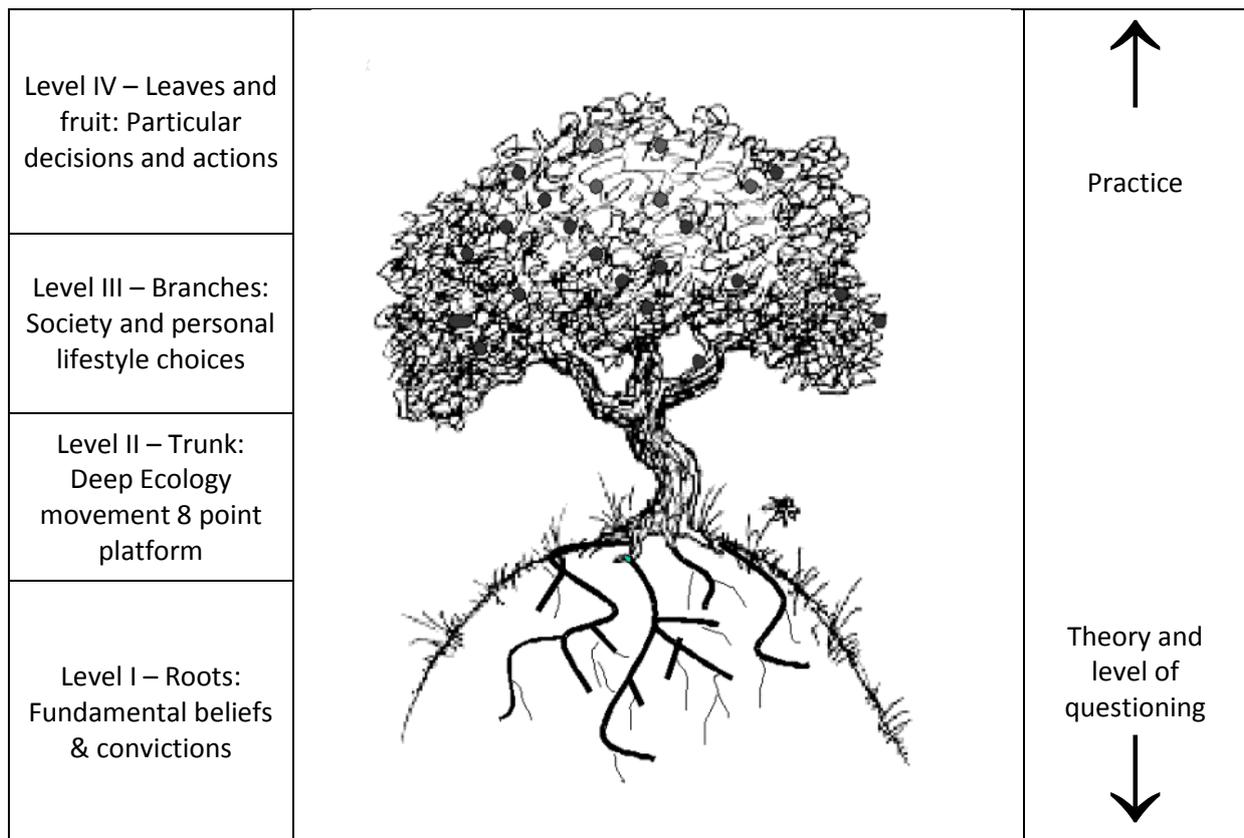
Naess again:

“The direction of derivation proceeds down the page, as is usual, and convenient. But some may prefer the opposite: having the roots on the deepest level at the bottom of the page and letting the other levels develop like the branches of a tree.

So with the approval of Arne Naess himself, here is the Apron Diagram inverted and graphically presented as a tree.

² Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution/Share-Alike License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/);

Figure 2 – The Ecosophical Tree



A metaphor is the concept of understanding one thing in terms of another. In this case the image of a tree is being used as a way of graphically illustrating logical relations between, at the roots, fundamental beliefs and convictions, to the tips of the leaves, cumulating in particular decisions and actions.

Taking the imagery further, the leaves and fruits of our daily actions eventually drop down to nourish the roots of our fundamental beliefs and convictions. In this way the Ecosophical tree can be recognised as an ongoing cycle of action and reflection. The tree can be approached from any level and be examined up or down, or for that matter, from any perspective whatsoever that the observer chooses.

Apart from providing a more easily identifiable framework, the tree illustrates the inclusiveness of Deep Ecology as a movement and not as an ideology. Apart from the common trunk the roots and branches may spread in many ways both deep and wide, high and broad. As Naess famously said (Ibid) “the frontier is wide and there is room for everyone”.

The significance of the deep ecological approach rests on its concern for practical decision-making; not in the correctness of the approach, but in its ability to help structure and focus our thinking about decision-making. The tree may be and indeed should be, used as a tool for sense-making and for constantly reformulating, testing, expressing and looking for connections between roots and branches in the past, present and future.

As with the Apron diagram, it is important to make the Ecosophical tree your own and indeed see it as a metaphor for your internal and external ecology.

Logic, feelings and other senses in a deeper world

The Ecosophical tree very clearly demonstrates that Deep Ecology is a process of deep questioning:

- At the deepest levels of fundamental beliefs (level I);
- of society and personal lifestyle choices (level II & III);
- and experience through actions (level IV).

Bearing these processes in mind, how can we consistently delve deeper and at the same time avoid neglecting either our rational or emotional capacities?

The heading of this section is an adaption of the title of the book 'life's philosophy: reason and feeling in a deeper world', (Naess 2002) one of the last books written by Arne Naess. Following from, and inspired by this book, this section seeks to examine the different senses as a way of accessing Deep Ecology at deeper and more diverse ways for more people.

In the book Naess surprises readers who are familiar with him as a philosopher of logic, by firmly putting the intellect in its place relative to feelings and emotions. In this instance, Naess focuses on the importance of feelings in order to 'go deeper'. For example, when considering level I statements the question may be asked 'is it reasonable?' implying, does it make 'sense' or is it sensible on the level of feelings as well as logic? Reason in this context is necessarily a combination of considered, mature feelings and clearly articulated logic.

I choose to expand the ways of going deeper as widely as possible, through multiple senses. In this context sensing is taken to mean the Jungian archetypes, including thought and feelings but also intuition and sensations³.

Another way of presenting the senses is as follows:

³ Inspiration for this approach came obliquely from watching a talk from Schumacher Collage in England given by Stephan Harding on what he understood as holistic science.

Figure 3 – The Senses

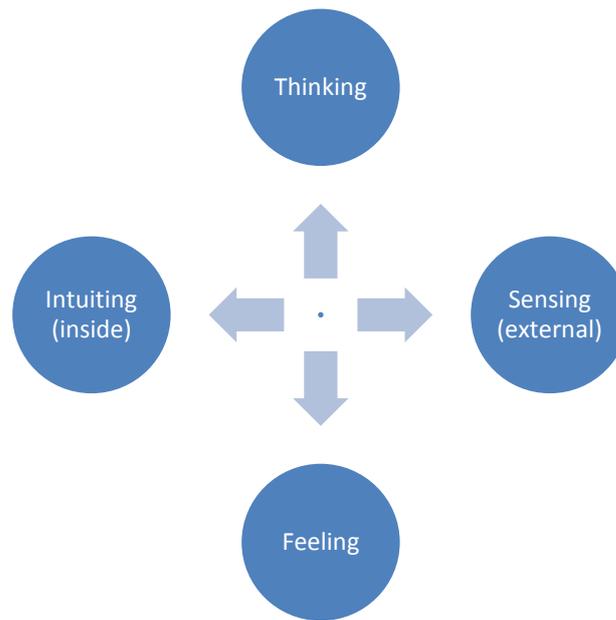


Table 1 – Aspects of the senses

Sense	Intellectually	Emotionally	Physically	Profoundly
Physical location in the body	The mind / head	The heart	Eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin.	The gut
Jungian equivalent	Thinking	Feeling	Sensation	Intuition
The elements	Air	Water	Fire	Earth

By presenting the senses in this way as broadly as possible, the intention is to demonstrate that anyone has the potential to approach Deep Ecology at the roots (level I) if they are able to consistently ‘sense’ more deeply in whichever way matches with their own capacities and ways of engaging with the world. In this endeavour, socio-cultural differences are certainly no barrier.

To date, and especially during the seventies and early eighties, deep ecology was primarily associated with philosophy and especially logic and empiricism. This partly explains the resistance that the movement initially encountered from eco-feminists who primarily saw Deep Ecology as yet another masculine attempt at domination through a Cartesian rationalisation of nature.

However, beginning during the mid-eighties, John Seed and Joanna Macy began to popularise other ways of accessing deep ecology through the experiential ‘Council of all Beings’ and other exercises. These rituals were particularly appreciated by ‘alternative’ communities living in the ‘minority tradition’⁴ and directly engaged participant’s feelings in often very powerful ways.

⁴ The term minority tradition is used in one of the original deep ecology books authored by Devall and Sessions (Devall and Sessions 1985)

With regards to intuitive sensing, in another oft quoted example, Aldo Leopold (Leopold 1949) describes an experience with a wolf which can only be described as deeply intuitive. In a similar way, how many people are not spontaneously disturbed by images of the forest burning in the Amazon? Why is that, could it be to do with intuition? How can these types of intuitive experiences be cultivated further and the connections made more clearly to deep ecology?

Over the years in environmental thought, phenomenology has been proposed as an alternative epistemology to mainstream Cartesian science. Phenomenology could be described as a science of the senses, the world experienced through authentic human experiencing. A number of attempts to compare and seek common ground between phenomenology and deep ecology have been made (See Brown and Toadvine 2003, Antolick 2002, and Schlottmann 2002 for instance) over recent years and this collaboration holds real potential for synergy from both points of view.

How can we facilitate more people to sense, think, feel, intuit and recognise that they are indeed a part of nature and not apart from it? That nature has a value quite aside from its utility to human beings? How can these same people then feel deeply empowered and motivated to act...NOW?

Deep ecology is applicable across personality types, cultures and economic backgrounds. These examples have been given in order to briefly illustrate the various ways in which deep ecology can and is becoming increasingly pertinent for more people in more ways. It is critical for the movement to remain relevant and in fact increasingly gain momentum. Deep Ecology can and will continue to re-invent itself and seek to utilise as many of the senses as possible.

Part II

As a way of illustrating the points given above, Part II presents the process of deeper questioning and sensing from the writer's own personal experiences.

The Apron diagram and its equivalent

For a number of years now, the author has been using the Ecosophical tree as a way of illustrating the 'logical framework' of Deep Ecology. The four levels also provide a very useful outline for designing a programme of study for Deep Ecology by going deep and yet connecting with life experience, both in a general way as well as for here and now.

While explaining Deep Ecology using the Ecosophical tree, people from all walks of life have expressed a number of 'aha' experiences. With practice and with less and less hesitation the tree has become a more and more useful way of organising thoughts and actions as well as a means of improving communications within a group of practitioners.

A key innovation across very divergent academic disciplines was the recognition of the similarity between the structure of the Apron and a tool used in the professions of project planning, commonly referred to as the logical framework. The essential structure, not withstanding many variations in terminology, is as follows.

Table 2 – An example of the logical framework

Intervention Logic (Apron equivalent)	Intervention logic for writing this paper
Overall Objectives (Level I – Fundamentals)	The Deep Ecology movement as a means for fundamental change in the way human beings live in nature.
Specific Project Purpose (Level II The 8 point platform)	The importance and relevance of applying deeper sensing and questioning conveyed to conference participants.
Results (Level III Lifestyle / policy choices)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A clear and applicable explanation of the Ecosophical tree provided. 2. The potential of widening and deepening the senses illustrated. 3. Examples of the application of the Ecosophical tree through one person’s life experiences given.
Activities (Level IV Daily decisions and actions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Introduce and discuss the Apron diagram. 1.2 Present and discuss the Ecosophical tree. 1.3 Etc 2.1 Explain the meaning of reason from the point of view of Naess. 2.2 Etc

The left column of the table presents the headings of the first column of the logical framework approach with the equivalent levels from the Apron diagram. The right column gives an example of a logical framework which was used while developing this paper.

The logical framework has been around in project planning in different guises since the early 1970’s. For all major donors since the late nineties, it has become a critical requirement in Results Based Management (RBM See for example European Commission 2004).

Recent revisions / innovations of the concept have included:

- The importance of the specific project purpose (level II) being exactly that: specific as well as being common for all the levels above and below. On the other hand the overall objective and results may be broad and numerous.

Parallels can be easily drawn with the purpose of the 8-point platform in the Apron diagram.

- The recognition of the importance of ‘qualitative’ aspects of the objectives and the indicators of these objectives. Many donors now insist on the inclusion of subjective, less tangible aspects such as the feelings of beneficiaries or clients in the framework so as to make it more inclusive and applicable to as many as possible.

As presented above, the centrality of feelings as well as logic maybe noted, in the idea of reason.

- The importance of feedback and revision of the logical framework based on real life experiences. Adaptive and dynamic management as opposed to the ‘blueprint’ approach.

The parallels between the Apron diagram and the logical framework are striking. It seems that Naess was once again way ahead of his time. Despite often intense criticism from many angles, the logical framework is now perhaps the most widely acknowledged project management tool in use today. Its use by as a “reasonable framework” by the Deep Ecology movement is still in its infancy but the Apron in the guise of the Ecosophical tree would seem hold great potential for galvanising deep inquiry and focussed actions in a similar time proven way as the logical framework.

Sensing deeply and gaining meaning

Another connection between deep ecology and other modes of inquiry includes the meta-discipline of systems thinking. Joana Macy in particular has been at the forefront of drawing parallels between Deep Ecology, systems thinking and Buddhism. In many ways, for those who have even a superficial understanding of the three disciplines the associations are clear. All 3 approaches place humanity within nature and are concerned with relationship and wholeness. Each embrace theory and practice, thinking and feeling, unity and diversity.

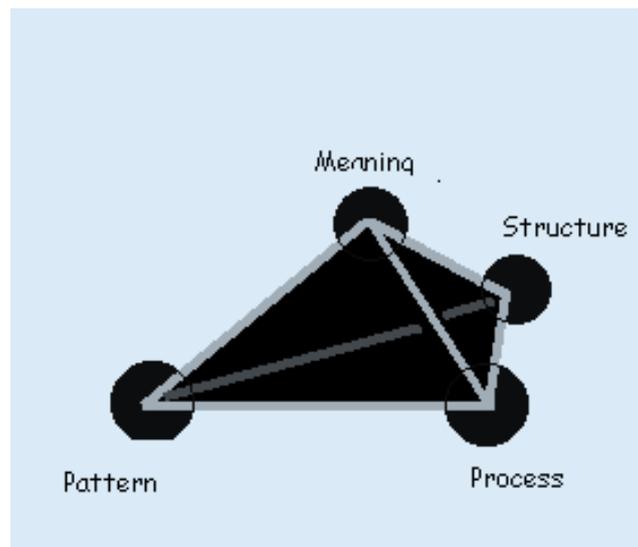
In the author’s own work with a project in Auroville, south India, called Convergence⁵ the synergies became especially apparent not in an obvious intellectual way but through deeper reflection during the development of systems thinking curricula alongside the insights of deep ecology. Initially the Convergence systems thinking course was structured around the aspects of structure (physical matter), pattern (in time and place) and process (complexity and non-linear feedback loops). While the concepts struck a chord with participants, for the facilitator an element related to the ‘lived experience of systems’ or praxis still seemed missing. In systems thinking terms this is often related to the study of ‘second order cybernetics’, double-loop learning or the observation of the observer.

In systems thinking, social constructivism, often closely related to post-modernism, is a common theme summed up in an expression “nothing is certain, not even that”. While the concept is useful in illustrating the importance of pluralism, something close to the heart of deep ecology, it may indeed be unhelpful when proposing action and change and can in fact lead to apathy and disillusion. In the authors experience the concept eventually led to a kind of ‘existential angst’ with a sense of increasing indifference, exactly the opposite of where deep ecology is meant to lead in one’s.

The way out of this philosophical cul-de-sac appeared one day in a video clip of Naess, with the words “Deep Ecology will not help you to explain the meaning of life, but it may help you to discover more meaning in your life.” This was a revelation in more ways than one. The systems thinking curricula was adjusted and summed up with another metaphor, a labelled tetrahedron as follows:

⁵ <http://www.thepointofconvergence.org/index.html>

Figure 4 – Three dimensional Systems Thinking



With the addition of 'meaning' a third dimension was added, much more closely resembling 'real life'. What is any system without meaning and with that the opportunity to communicate a shared perception of reality? For the author the addition of meaning was intuitively obvious, representing a level I experience in the deepest sense.

From this level I experience began a process of re-evaluating, with questions such as 'what really does have meaning in my life, regardless of whether it is a construction or not?' At level III the author was already leading a rather alternative lifestyle living in a forest in the community of Auroville in south India. On the other hand spending more time in nature on a regular weekly basis as well as taking time away to camp in the Himalayas became a priority. Simply spending more time alone or with immediate family without being overtly busy, either internally or externally, became undeniably meaningful. All of this stemmed from the process of asking deeper questions, using a wider range of the senses.

Through personal experience, the process can be thoroughly recommended to anyone at any stage in their development.

Conclusion

While the approach of deep ecology appears to be becoming increasingly applicable in today's world on the one hand, on the other, it's true potential remains unexploited.

In recent years a number of the movement's key spokespersons have passed away including most notably Arne Naess in January 2009. In which way can the legacy of this inspiring philosopher and activist be most appropriately harnessed? This paper suggests the Ecosophical tree and the importance of widening one's senses as two methodologies with potential application. In addition examples are given from the authors own life, demonstrating the utility of applying deep ecology in creative ways across disciplines and in real life situations.

Deep ecology is literally a philosophy which can and is intended change one's life. If this paper has aroused deeper questions in your own mind, then it has served its purpose.

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