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Essay

Green Man

We are all interwoven threads in the fabric of the natural world, and it's only when we acknowledge our ecological selves that we can tackle our environmental plight. So said Arne Naess, founder of the deep ecology movement. Professor Tom Oliver explains the ideas behind his philosophy

ARNE NAESS WAS Norway's most famous philosopher and environmentalist, and he lived to the impressive old age of 96. Despite a colourful life, including marrying twice – the second time to a Chinese student four decades his junior – he never wrote an autobiography. One of his key philosophical principles was that the boundaries of human beings extend beyond our skin to encompass the whole world, so perhaps he didn't really know where to start.

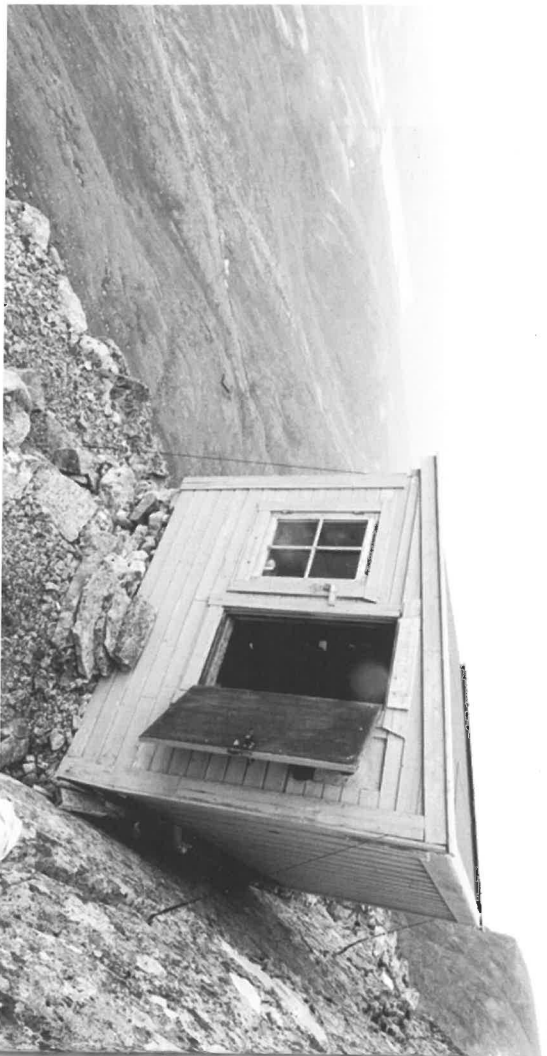
Naess was an avid mountaineer with an abiding interest in the ideas of Gandhi and Buddha. He combined these passions by building a cabin 1,500 metres up on the slopes of the Hallingskarvet mountain range in Norway, where he found ample quiet time for deep reflection. He was also taken by the writings of the Dutch philosopher Spinoza, prompted, according to one account, by meeting a Norwegian judge on a long mountain trek who advised him to read more of the 17th-century Jewish philosopher. A less romantic account suggests Naess was forced to read Spinoza's *Ethics* in the original Latin as a schoolboy. If this is true it certainly didn't put him off.

Spinoza advised in his writings: "The more clearly you understand yourself and your emotions, the more you become a lover of what is." Naess took this message to heart and developed a motivation for introspection. He spent many years in total (weeks at a time) alone in his mountain cabin, and in between dealing with the essentials of survival – food, warmth, shelter – he also found plenty of time for deep contemplation. He'd built the cabin himself, taking 62 trips with a horse to carry the timbers and roof shingles, and called it Tvergastein. So important was the cabin that he even referenced it in the name he gave to his personal philosophy, Ecosophy-T, which ultimately became one of the cornerstones of the deep ecology movement worldwide.



Portrait of Arne Naess by Tore Jewell (courtesy of artist)

According to Naess, the failed attempts by many Western nations to stem the destruction of the environment through technological fixes constitutes a "shallow ecology". In contrast, what is needed is a deeper questioning of worldviews and attitudes toward life. He believed that only through self-realisation – truly understanding what it means to be human – can we tackle the root cause of our environmental plight.



High concentration: perched 1.5km up a mountainside, Naess's cabin provided the perfect space for deep contemplation

Naess's meditations led him to conclude that it is a mistake to think we are all isolated individuals striving against each other in a competitive world. That leads to loneliness and anxiety which, in the modern world, is becoming ever more prevalent. I looked up some statistics to check this and found that a worrying 13 per cent of Americans over 12 years old, and 16 per cent of English adults, take antidepressants. Naess clearly didn't suffer from loneliness himself. By all accounts he was very jovial, despite his frugal, mountain-goat-like existence.

Stepping away from the furious pace of modern life, Naess saw a path to dissolving the ego

Stepping away from the furious pace of modern life (as busy as Norway ever gets, that is) and taking time for deep thought on the mountainside, Naess saw a path to dissolving the ego. He believed that the idea of an independent self was not only illusory, but also the source of many of our worries and the world's environmental problems. He wrote: "The smaller we come to feel ourselves compared to the mountain, the nearer we come to participating in its greatness." These sentiments are the core of what he felt was our true self – our "ecological self": that we are deeply interconnected to the natural world.

Naess wrote a lot of philosophy about the structure of language but, from my own perspective as an environmental scientist, his most valuable idea

was that if we can truly acknowledge our ecological self, then environmental protection will not be an act of altruism – helping others at the expense of yourself – but an act of self-care. The care we give to ourselves, our family and loved ones, delivered through a sense of shared identity, can be extended to embrace the whole planet. Naess wrote: "Having an extended sense of identification leads us to say that we defend our homelace as part of ourselves. . . . We care for our place and others, we come to identify with their needs and well-being, and we have a greatly enhanced and larger sense of community and interdependence. Our well-being and that of our community are closely aligned. Thus, we naturally and spontaneously care for our place and seek to protect it."

His ideas were contentious because we humans are tribal beasts who protect the ingroup at the expense of the outgroup

Not everyone agreed with this. The American anarchist and environmentalist Murray Bookchin accused the deep ecology movement of being "quasi-religious quietism" and inconsistent "eco-la-la" (which actually sounds quite pleasant to me). But Naess wasn't up for arguing about abstract semantics. Being deeply pragmatic, he sought a practical environmental philosophy. He retired from his academic professorship relatively young at 58, keen to get on with more exciting things – like chaining himself to a waterfall. . . .

In a picturesque valley in western Norway, the Mardøla River surges round bends and over boulders, creating tiny whirlpools. These are how Naess might describe a human being – unique patterns, yet transient and always connected to a greater body. The river eventually leaps over a crest and plunges more than 650 metres into a lake below. The height and force of the waterfall attracted the attention of energy companies keen to harness it for hydroelectric power. But Naess and 300 other green activists objected to what they saw as irreversible damage to the wild beauty of the landscape and formed a human chain to try to prevent the dam being built. They sang songs and refused to leave until the plans were dropped.

Ultimately the protesters weren't successful – they were carried away by the police – but the protest did usher in a new era of environmental activism in Norway and led to Naess becoming the first chairperson of Greenpeace Norway in 1988.

Rather than his protest actions though, it's probably Arne Naess's ideas that have had the biggest impact on the environmental movement worldwide.

Despite people such as Bookchin having reservations about his philosophy being too mystical and not grounded in rational thought, Naess's conclusions became increasingly supported. His ideas had been contentious because we humans are tribal beasts who protect the ingroup (be it our extended family, football team or country) at the expense of the outgroup. Hence, as much as we co-operate, there is also antagonism between groups, as attested by football hooliganism, nationalistic fervour and long-running feuds between families.

He wrote teasingly on how environmentalists who succumb to a joyless life are undermining the ecological movement

The idealistic vision of Arne Naess was that our ingroup might expand to include the whole planet. He hoped we could get the benefits of this without any outgroup (unless of course we were teaming up against a war-of-the-worlds-type alien invasion). Many psychologists think, however, that we can only look after people in our ingroup because we have an outgroup to conflict with. As the distinguished American neurologist Robert Sapolsky argues, "Ingroup parochialism is often more concerned about Us beating Them than with Us simply doing well".

Yet recent research seems to be proving Naess right. Though he developed his theories about the ecological self and its attendant environmental benefits in the absence of strong empirical evidence, before he died in 2009 he was probably gratified to hear about the growing number of scientific studies supporting his philosophy.

As someone who works in the biology department of a university, I often hear people discussing surreal experiments exploring how pheromones (smell chemicals) from other people affect our behaviours. Just across the campus, colleagues in the food and microbiology department are investigating how our diet transforms our gut microbiome – it turns out half our bodies are bacteria by cell count, which in turn influences our moods and the structure of our thoughts. And in the social sciences building, researchers are showing how our minds are porous and the actions of other people in our social networks, many of whom we may never actually meet, can influence how we vote, our preference in music and even our risk of obesity.

So can all this knowledge about our interconnectedness with other people and the natural world change our worldview and the likelihood that we carry out environmentally sustainable behaviours? In other words, was Naess right that if our sense of self dissolves and we see ourselves simply

as threads interwoven in the tapestry of life, we become more empathetic and caring?

Stroll over now to the environmental psychology department to find out. Over the last decade, they've been industriously churning out research surveying people's sense of connection to nature – the degree to which their "self-schema" overlaps with other people and the natural world; essentially testing Naess's concept of ecological self and its benefits. It turns out that Naess was correct in saying that when people feel more connected to life on our planet – when they have a more global identity – they tend to protect the

Taking ample time for peace and quiet allows a truer, more satisfying understanding of the world

environment and are more likely to carry out behaviours such as recycling, reducing their carbon footprint, and volunteering for environmental causes. Incidentally, they tend to be happier and less anxious too. Which might explain why Naess was a very jovial character. He sought out what he described as "a more joyful experience of the connectedness of all things" and wrote teasingly on how environmentalists who succumb to a joyless life are undermining the ecological movement.

So, as many idlers will likely vouch, it turns out that taking ample time for peace and quiet allows a truer, more satisfying understanding of the world. And a bit of introspective idling on a mountainside, merging ancient philosophy with modern ecological thought, can be very productive. The theories of Naess, derived through introspection, have so far held up to empirical challenge.

His legacy is that there has been a profound shift in ecological thought. He achieved something hugely significant in his life's work. Yet he remained humble and jovial to the end. When someone asked how he'd like to be thought of he replied: "I want to be remembered as a professor who said a lot of stupid things to his students." I think Arne probably secretly knew that when the whole world has gone mad and is rife with excessive individualism, then wisdom might seem like stupidity. ☺

Tom Oliver is the author of 'The Self-Delusion: The Surprising Science of our Connection to Each Other and the Natural World.'