

*In Praise of Wildness* and *In Search of Harmony* With Everything That Moves

by John McClellan

Boulder, Colorado

## Introduction and Summary

### Nondual Ecology

Liberal thinkers today admit most animals and plants, even microbes to the select company of sentient beings. Even rocks & clouds are beginning to be accepted too as part of the "natural living world", i.e. that world that existed before mankind brought civilization out of his brain and spread it across the landscape. But recognizing this prized quality of aliveness in technology, in human-machine social behaviors, and in the activity of abstract symbolic systems is something else again. Buddhanature, in nuclear bombs? in the computer systems of our urban networks? in the workings of pure mathematics? No one in the environmental world seems willing to go that far-only cyberpunks and techno-futurists have such thoughts, and they are generally dismissed as frivolous by us serious, 'nature' loving deep ecologists. Us Buddhists, and Muirists, and Thoreauists.

Today's Deep Ecology seems to regard technology as an evil force, something alien to the natural world, loosed almost by divine mistake on this planet. These new energies are not regarded as legitimate expressions of sentience, universal lifeforce, or granted the respect we accord to "natural processes", but rather as something wrong, something to be controlled and repressed. Deep ecologists seem to have the same fear and loathing toward today's out of control technology as humans have had until just recently toward uncontrolled Nature, with her savage, untamed wastelands. They call technology inhuman, cruel, and heartless, using the same words we once used to describe cruele wildernesses-and like humans of the 19th century waging war on wild nature, environmentalists today long only to conquer technology, to subdue

and control it, as we have nature herself.

Such a dualistic view of our world, neatly partitioned into good, pure nature, and bad aggressive technology, does not lead to a complete relationship with everything that is. It perpetuates the same kind of good guy bad guy scenarios that we have always been prone to indulge in, and leaves a bad taste. Specially as the bad guys seem to be winning everywhere you look. Why not take deep ecology all the way to the heart of what is really wild on this planet: why not include, in the roster of the wild and sacred, Everything That Moves? Since everything that exists moves, we'd be done with all this picking and choosing, and all the worry and strife that go with that. We'd have a complete, ready made, flawless sacred outlook. A nondual ecology.

### **The Deep Ecology Establishment**

The ambivalence of deep ecologists toward technology is clearly expressed in the recent book, *Gaia's Hidden Life*, by Nicholson and Rosen. This contains some of the best recent thinking in deep ecology-wonderful arguments for the recognition of living being in the natural world, even among the rocks and stars, etc. But almost every one of the 27 authors, from James Lovelock to Thomas Berry, unequivocally rejects technology as an invalid, unnatural, even wicked form of existence. Meanwhile, they idealize the vanishing dream of free, wild biological systems. They seem to want to restore them to their erstwhile splendor-as though evolution ever moved backwards! This is wishful thinking, like when we imagined the earth was the center of the universe, or that humans represented the culmination, and hence the end, of evolution.

This point of view is called biocentrism, and is proudly opposed to anthropocentrism, which is supposed to be outmoded and provincial, a naive and self-serving 'humanist' outlook. But to me biocentrism is little better. It is based on the assumption that evolution reached its pinnacle not with Man, but with Biology. But evolution isn't like that. She never reaches a pinnacle. She never rests, and she never ever turns back.

A contemplative biologist would not want to be 'centric' about any stage of the evolutionary process. Evolution unfolds continually and mysteriously out of itself: She has no goal, claims no

achievements, and is uninterested in any past or future states. Just this mysterious present moment unfolding, in which there is most definitely and certainly *nothing to cling to*. Sound familiar, dharma students? Where have we heard about this before? All we see in the world around us, just as with what we find in our own minds is good, or at least authentic, valid, workable. There is nothing to reject, nothing to protect, nothing to be centric about. Why can't we be as wise in our understanding of the evolution of this planet as we are gradually becoming about the evolution of our own states of mind?

Biology is a series of provisional sketches for negentropic systems. These systems are built out of and on top of and into each other in endless shells of interdependent co-arising fields, just as the microbial world is built out of and on top of and into the material world of the four elements, just as the multi-celled (i.e. multi-microbe) animals and plants and insects are built out of and into the microbes, and we humans ourselves are built out of and onto the animals and plants. The world of technology, cultural behaviors and abstract & concrete symbolic structures are likewise built out of, on top of, and into human brains, emotional drives and bodies. This is planetary symbiosis at work. Perfectly natural. All this creative activity is blowing in the restless wind of change, of Impermanence, like the thought forms that flow through our minds. Many humans, particularly in the contemplative traditions, have come to understand the working of our mind, the theory and also to some degree the practice-but we still seem to hold primitive beliefs about the workings of planetary evolution and life systems.

The leading thinkers I've met in deep ecology today all seem to have this biocentric attitude, Gary Snyder, Arne Naess, Bill Duvall, John Seed, Dolores Lachapelle.... Many or most of them have good dharma teachers too, but they don't listen to them carefully enough, in my opinion. They talk about surrender to what is natural, following the Tao, and so on, but are not willing to stretch their arms all the way wide open, and let Everything in. Everything That Moves. They would like to *exclude* certain things, exploitive technology, warfare, social injustice, famine, urban landscape, television, the extinction of non competitive species, the collapse of planetary life support systems for higher species....

You have to go to Walt Whitman and William Blake to find a real grasp of these elementary subjects, biology and evolution, a view in which all of Life is honored impartially, devils and angels together, on their own scary terms. Zen teachers give clear expression to this, as do Tibetan teachers at times. American Indians know it, Rumi says it clearly again and again, all the contemplatives are clear on this understanding. It's time for deep ecologists to get up to speed here. I think the limited, overly precious view of deep ecology today exists because deep ecologists are not serious contemplative mystics. They specialized too early in a limited professional expertise on the 'natural environment'. Serious ecologists must learn to let go of personal or social agendas, and embrace everything that arises, the good the bad and the ugly. Only after this painful surrender can one go deep.

Technology seems to play the role of the devil for us in this outlook. There's nothing wrong with having a devil or two or ten million around, but devils should not be insulted, and no attempts to banish or vanquish them have ever been successful to my knowledge. Like wicked fairies, if you do not invite devils to the feast, honor and feed them, they make worse mischief. Those who would worship the angels of pure 'unspoiled' biologies, must allow the devils of technology their due. This means recognizing them as independent evolutionary forces, in symbiosis, like the microbes, with biological systems.

I am proposing a Nondual Ecology, in which all forms of life are honored equally. This would include anything that displays negentropic activity, i.e. the self-organizing, information encoding, entropy defying activity of dissipative structures, as described by Ilya Pirogogine and others in the field of Complexity.

### Evolution

In the long history of life on our planet, four billion years of DNA driven evolution went peacefully by, age after age of dreamy biologies. Then finally one of the morphs, or body types (humans) develops a brain capable *itself* of independently storing and manipulating information structures complex enough to generate morphs or bodies of their own. At last, the first new copying system in the history of life! The world of technology and culture was born. With the tremendous symbolic activity which our incomprehensibly large brains allowed, information codes had jumped out of their ancient amino acid cradle, and began to pursue 'their' own evolutionary destiny. Immediately a torrent of new morphologies and behaviors were loosed on our innocent and unsuspecting planet. Such things as language, alphabets, mathematics, engineering, arts and crafts, religions, belief systems, social customs, the stuff of technobiotic civilization, new tools, new hunting, farming and herding behaviors, new buildings, new forms of social organization. In a blinding flash, from an evolutionary time frame, the planet has been transformed. A new form of evolution is at last unfolding here. Information codes are free, free to replicate in any way they wish or are able. The rate of evolutionary change undergoes a blinding, heart-stopping degree of acceleration, as compared with biological evolution.

No longer forced to be made of either meat or cellulose or chitin, (the animals, plants & insects), you could make a body now out of anything you liked. A wood or rock club (arm), wool & leather clothes, a dirt or log or steel & glass house (skin), metal shovels & swords (claws), ceramics, rubber, plastic, silicon, etc etc. Many vibrant morphs are nothing but pure behaviors, like social customs, languages, music, government, and so on. Many more, among the most evolutionarily

potent in fact, are completely abstract in morphological character-most notably ideas, the pure and applied sciences, music, dreams, etc. All of these are bodies, or life processes, in the scary new meaning of the word. All are active, hungry, exciting, and dangerous. If you back off ten thousand miles into space and squint your eyes, as a biologist from another planet might do, you would see that this planet had gone through an evolutionary phase change, from a pure 'climax' biology to early techno-biology.

Now then, if there is in fact a new kind of evolution happening on this planet, and the stupendous changes in the last ten thousand years suggest clearly that there is, we cannot afford to ignore it, to dismiss it as dangerous, ahuman, or unpleasant. Above all, we must not think we humans, just because we "hosted" it, can control or even understand this new form of life very well, any more than we do nature herself. This is where deep ecology can be of help: the attitude we should have toward this new life process could be one based on respect, on awe and wonder, rather than on likes and dislikes. We should, in fact, have the same attitude toward techno-biotic evolution that we are finally learning to have toward good old biological nature herself. These are mysteries, divine (that is to say natural) in origin. We should not seek to accept or reject, nor even to control them, but rather to learn how to coexist among them, and accept their inherent wildness, to appreciate this dangerous quality, to honor and respect, even revere it, even when it's dangerous or life threatening to us.

### *New Life*

A new form of Life has arisen on this planet, which could be called the Technobia. Its power and speed of evolution lead instantly off every scale on which we are accustomed to measure living systems. It is young, but terrifyingly, thrillingly, overwhelmingly vigorous. It is feeding on us humans, just as we feed on the plant and animal kingdoms, and just as they feed on the microbial kingdoms, who rest in turn on the material universe. We are not in control of this process, we are merely a part of it. It is happening *to us*, and *in spite of us*, as well as because of us. In this case we are the host organism, the medium in which technobiotic lifeforces are finding their fertile soil. We humans, with our obsolete bodies, easily exploitable emotional drives, and our fabulous brains, are the primeval soup our symbiotic technology partners have come to live in.

What this means is that purely biological evolution is no longer the main focus of life on this planet. It's become a subplot, relegated in its wild forms to out of the way corners, to empty lots, roadsides, and cracks in the sidewalk of civilization. It's been built over on top of, subsumed, in the best evolutionary style, by the techno-biotia.

So in any discussion of ecology, whenever one refers to rocks, clouds, rivers and mountains, microbes animals and plants, one should include kitchen tables, cars and computers, stuffed animals and nuclear reactors, as well as abstract symbolic systems such as mathematics and music, and belief or behavioral morphologies, including social systems, religions, culture. etc. These are all valid forms of life, if we or rocks and clouds are.

### *Everything That Moves-Primordial Purity*

The way I see it, anything that arises on this planet is completely natural, pristine, and pure. Created by God's spontaneous, self-arising nature, sacred. God itself. Deep ecologists reserve this level of honor for wilderness areas, asking that they be untouched by outside forces, meaning generally man or machines. But is this entire planet not a pristine, sacred wilderness? Has it ever been touched by 'outside forces'? Is not all this Gaia's own doing?

### *Really Deep Ecology*

The deepest ecology might not seem to be specially 'environmental', because it doesn't cling to any version of reality; it surrenders continually to whatever situations occur. This viewpoint doesn't directly advance the work of saving the planet or preserving local landscapes, but it could be helpful for environmentalists nonetheless. Because unless we enter into the heart of that Wildness where life itself is continually born, we remain outsiders in our own world, and outsiders never really know what's going on. Outsiders can't help sentient beings-they don't know what to do.

We have much to lose by entering the world of real wildness that surrounds us today. We are losing a nice local version of reality we've been basking in for several million years, the lovely landscapes, the fauna and flora of the late Cenozoic, the Age of Flowering Plants and of Mammals. These have been sweet indeed, and it is sad to see them go. Difficult goodbyes must be said. But we won't miss them for long-there's plenty more where they came from. The unbridled, fecund wildness that lies at the heart of co-arising emptiness-luminosity will not disappoint us. A really deep ecologist has understanding of this, and faith in it. This fertile, dangerous, healthy and real wildness is where we should be resting our hopes and our hearts and our minds. We have nothing to lose.

### *Saving Sentient Being*

The saving of sentient beings is perhaps the most confusing issue in contemplative work. All are in agreement, this must be done, but *who* are the sentient beings, *how* are they to be saved, and on what scale? What about those who are out of reach, or worse, who dwell in past and future times?

I've sometimes thought the greatest single clarification that could be brought to this subject might be to drop the *s* from "beings". The project suddenly becomes the vaster but in many ways simpler one of saving Sentient Being. Immediately we stop worrying how to handle the crowd of particular individual beings, more or less accessible to today's saving methods—each of whom must have passed a qualifying exam for sentience (no rocks, dust clouds, or empty space, no computers, shovels, or car tires, etc), has demonstrated clear and present need of saving, is in fact a separate, individual ego entity, has not been previously saved by others (it's getting hard to find unsaved beings anymore), and so on.

Simply drop the bothersome *s*, and Sentient Being itself looms up, vast, inconceivable, glowing and humming, in all ages and all spaces—obviously indestructible, beyond all confusing particulars. This vast presence of aliveness, of sentient Isness, filling the time-space cosmos from beginning to end, dwarfs all bodhisattvas, all saints, revolutionaries, and liberal reformists—it silences the poets, and overflows even the hearts of mothers. It is inexhaustible, self-sufficient, needing nothing, wanting nothing. Suffering is as natural and organic a process to it as breathing. The tides of life and death are its diastolic rhythm.

Who would dare try to "save" this vast Presence? Save it from what? Who would wish to "alleviate" the suffering/breathing, living/dying of Sentient Being? Any who approach this Being with a "saving mind" would have to have the greatest humility, the greatest respect, the greatest hesitation, and the greatest boldness. The lack of an *s* might even cause some investigators to question the need for the qualifier "sentient"... Are there any boundaries to sentience? Can the universe be divided up into sentient and non-sentient regions or beings? Is the whole universe not completely sentient, *one being*? This great Presence is often referred to by the mystics as That.

Try saving «THAT» by ordinary methods.

As for the innumerable creatures on our planet who are undoubtedly suffering and in need of assistance, including very much and most especially our own personal selves, what kind of saving do we really need? I suspect this saving has more to do with the ability to see and share the true nature of these beings than it does with trying to increase their good health and large numbers. Perhaps we should concentrate more on seeing them clearly, on feeling what they feel, knowing and caring about them, than on setting up biopreserves and housing projects to save them in. Thinking in this way, one comes to feel that the saving of sentient beings has more to do with knowing and feeling and suffering and caring with them, than with preventing their extinction or raising their minimum income level or wiping a bit of pollution off their brow. Sentient beings can take care of themselves, just as we like to think we can do. Considering them in this way is a mark of respect, it honors them.

This deep frame of reference may seem chilling to some, but it is not. On the contrary, it warms the heart and lightens the step, and it should help to save the earth and advance the agenda of conservation biology too, along with any other worthy projects. The buddhas and patriarchs may seem to play rough, but this roughness is good for us. It is the roughness of real wildness, real wilderness. There's no reason in the world that environmentalists shouldn't be able to hold a deep view and still be energetic and effective, good people to have around when things are tough. We aren't babies. We can look at Reality along with the rest of sentient beings. We do not need to tell ourselves children's stories about how unique and precious we are, to make ourselves go out and help the world. We are precious and worthless at the same time. We are neither precious nor worthless. It's not like that.

This is nondual ecology.

*Happiness and Good Health? For the Whole Planet? Forever?*

Today's deep ecology and environmental movements seem to have fixated on the goal of a healthy flourishing biologically active planet-attaining this is supposed to be the purpose of human and nonhuman social actions and personal aspirations. Once attained, I presume, then everyone will enjoy happy, healthy lives forever or at least for a very long happy time, as long as Total Planetary Control can be maintained over the inherently wild, naturally unstable, and dangerous evolutionary process.

But this is rampant materialism! I think deep ecologists have overlooked a few important points, to wit: This is God's world, not ours. (God: Suchness, What Is, Reality, etc) We just live here, we don't own it. Maybe God doesn't care about biology anymore. Maybe it's none of our business what He cares or doesn't care about. Maybe we should spend more time trying to find out what God's Will (i.e. His World) is, and paying attention properly to That. (God's will, incidentally, is no mystery. Just look at the world in this moment, everything included. That is God's will. What is.)

I doubt the Buddhas and Patriarchs are bothered much by our confusion, but I know it doesn't do *us* any good, or those sentient beings we'd like to help either. If we ever can relax our own obsessive social and personal agendas enough to get a glimpse into Nature's Way, maybe we'll like it and maybe we won't. Liking or not liking doesn't have anything to do with surrender, and is not the point. This is the way a contemplative deep ecologist thinks.

Fighting the outside world or the laws of nature is a bit like fighting death. It's OK to fight, you *have* to fight to live, and fight to die well too-but you must remember to bow. The outcome may already be standing right in front of you, watching to see if you recognize it, so it would be foolish not to bow.

### **An Ecology based on Dynamic Evolution, not Fixed Ecosystems.**

Deep ecology is good, but not always useful in everyday life. We need a working ecology, something tough and flexible, that you can use to save the world with. A practical ecology might come in two parts, view and practice, as follows:

*The View.* Reality is as perfect today as it has ever been. The world in this moment, along with one's mind in this same moment, is the Great Perfection spoken of in the teachings. It must be enjoyed just as it is, pollution, warfare, famine & poverty, confusion and materialistic greed and all, no matter how unlikely, unhappy or sorry a specimen it may seem to be (world or mind). Ecosystems like minds are always in perfect balance, even when they're neurotic, ill, confused or going extinct, miserably and unnecessarily.

*The Practice.* A dynamic ecology has got to work in a world which is changing from one moment to the next. Ecology cannot be based on trying to preserve ecosystems at some particular stage of their evolution, no matter how beautiful that stage may have been. This is like trying to prevent our children from growing up, or our old people from dying. It is a form of materialism to be overly attached to a special set of God's Works, and is doomed to failure in any case.

We will never "get" our dream of attractive, healthy ecosystems-they will always be collapsing around our ears. This is what ecosystems do! They have a natural lifespan, which in addition to being short, is frequently terminated 'unnecessarily' early by accident or misfortune. Just like our own lives. Wanting to freeze ecosystems at a certain charming stage of their existence is like our other foolish dream of always being young, attractive and healthy ourselves. Good luck!

The only ease lies with the process of evolution itself. Sound ecology must be based on respect for God's creative/destructive working process, not on a childish clinging to pretty toys He may have made. Then we can live in this world, help it out a bit, and go with, *lean into* its mysterious unfolding.

### *Everything That Moves*

To combine this challenging view with the challenging practice, one simply regards everything that moves as a form of sacred activity. The mad materialist technoblic frenzy gripping the planet is nothing other than this. There is only One Thing happening, not some things that are good and others that are bad. This includes fragrant ecosystems, fresh and unsullied in wilderness areas on spring mornings, and it includes urban industrial megagrid, ghettos & famine zones, materialist mind greed, the extinction of wild animal species and the slavery and torture of 'domesticated' ones. Life and death. Even television.

Everything we love will die, and everything we hate will live, and vice versa, and we will never be rid of such problems. No contemplative would want the buddhas and patriarchs to catch him trying to escape death, much less get rid of it. Death is sacred activity. What is happening on this planet today is the sacred activity of life and death, which we sometimes call evolution, Ed Abbey and his friends to the contrary notwithstanding. It is perfect as it stands, flawless, without blemish. *But* as Suzuki Roshi said, there is always room for improvement too.

So it's proper to fight and struggle with the situation, to take care of each other, and try to save a few suffering sentient beings. We must do this!, and we do, just as we struggle to improve the 'climate' , 'landscape' and evolutionary process in our own minds and hearts. The thing to be careful about is not to reject what is ugly and cruel, dangerous and poisonous, even the heartless machines, the computers & TV's, cars & highways, nuclear bombs, animal and plant slavery and torture, and money.

These are our sacred enemies. They might even be our sacred friends, one never knows for sure. We should not try to know for sure. It's none of our business. Friend and enemy are not distinguished on this level. It's disrespectful to try to do so. To the enemy, one offers a deep bow, as deep, and as filled with respect as one offers to one's friends and teachers. This bow is offered to everything without reservation. It is a form of protection. It saves us from attachment and illusion, and in the end, from the wrong sort of despair.

### **Only One Nature.**

We can chose to regard all of existence as «alive», or we can regard it as «not alive»; we can regard it as «both alive and not alive», or as «neither alive nor not alive». These are all valid ontological constructions. What we cannot do, is divide existence into two classes, and call one of them alive, and the other one not. One a 'natural', kind, pure and nice biological nature, and the other a raw, unnatural, alien, bad and ugly machine industrial nuclear warfare pollution starvation toxic materialist greed poverty and television urban nature. There's just one nature around here.

As environmentalists, we must learn this way too. Bowing to what is, working hard and politely to improve it on a local level at the same time. Not trying to change the larger design, but simply contributing some tidiness and sanity to our immediate surroundings. Keeping a nice camp in this great howling universal wilderness, a reasonably safe and comfortable place where the gods are honored, the children are cared for, and good fun is had.

Outside such a camp there is Great Wildness. Sacred beings roam out there, on the street, enjoying dangerous degrees of sacred freedom. The gods are in charge out there. What they choose to do and to leave undone is their business, not ours. No one tries to control what goes

down on the street, no one but gangs, drug lords, and cops. You don't want to be like that. You want to be a bodhisattva of compassion and awakensness, with sympathy for all forms of life. You want to tiptoe through the street in a state of reverence and awe, armed and able to defend yourself, as necessary, as in any wilderness area. But basically respectful of whatever you meet out there. *Whatever*. The street, regional ecosystem, or planet, should be considered a wilderness area, free to define itself, no matter what happens. This is basic Wilderness Ethic, and is the first and greatest rule of all deep ecology.

Reality does not need or want to be changed. It has gone to great trouble to establish itself as it is, and it's perfect. This very world of today, as it appears before us in all its glory and horror, this is God's will. What is. Our role is not to arrogantly critique this Great Perfection, picking and choosing in it according to the conventional wisdom of the day-our job is simply to join in with it. And there's no need to have a poverty mentality about the life in this world. It is not now, and has never been in any danger, no matter *what* happens on this planet. There will always be plenty of good life-filled world for us to join in with.

### *Don't Underestimate Any One*

Everything moves. This alone should be enough to demonstrate inherent aliveness. From mindless hydrogen clouds swirling purposelessly in interstellar spacetime, to clouds of thoughts swirling around in the brain, all cloud forms are the same. They move-they have buddhanature. None of these patterns from beginning to end have any greater or more distinct 'separate self' than any other. All are meaningless, empty of personal intent. All are falling into their own true nature, effortlessly, along with all other illusory phenomena.

*We must not underestimate them.* All are beautiful to behold, including the ugly ones, all are precious, including the worthless ones, all are friends & relatives, even the dangerous ones, even when they kill you! Their value cannot be conceived in ordinary ways. Some of these (not all) have a tendency to grow in complexity, energy, and information density, to blow off greater & greater clouds of waste heat, to become increasingly improbable, ephemeral and fragile. Others prefer to stay simple. They are all good, because complete. Even the rocks & clouds are like this, even the technobiotia. This good life stuff is the swirling of clouds-nothing more-it's what evolution does around here.