

Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality (Part I): From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism

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Earth and nature-based spirituality is proliferating globally. In Part I of this study, I argue that although participants in countercultural movements often eschew the label religion, these are religious movements, in which these persons find ultimate meaning and transformative power in nature. Focusing on the deep ecology movement, I further argue that (1) experiences of nature spirituality are evoked by practices as diverse as mountaineering, neo-shamanic ritualising and states of consciousness induced by hallucinogens; (2) earthen spiritualities are often contested and may be viewed as inauthentic or dangerous by practitioners of other forms of nature spirituality; and (3) despite significant diversity, a sense of connection and belonging to nature (sometimes personified as a transforming, if not transcendent power) unites these cross-fertilising and sometimes competing spiritualities. Part II examines additional forms of nature-oriented religion, searching further for continuities, discontinuities and ironies among its diverse forms. © 2001 Academic Press

Question: 'What are your spiritual beliefs?'

Answer: 'Well, I believe in the cosmos. All of us are linked to the cosmos. Look at the sun. If there is no sun, then we cannot exist. So nature is my god. To me, nature is sacred. Trees are my temples and forests are my cathedrals'

Mikhail Gorbachev (1997)

Monkeywrenching or 'ecotage' is 'a form of worship toward the earth. It's really a very spiritual thing to go out and do . . . Keep a pure heart and mind . . . You are a religious warrior for the Earth.'

Dave Foreman, co-founder of Earth First!,
discussing the spirituality of direct action resistance
(Shuman and Desseaux 1993)

The closer you get to real matter, rock, air, firewood, boy, the more spiritual the world is.

from *Dharma Bums*

Spirituality in Contemporary Parlance

In contemporary parlance people increasingly substitute the term 'religion' for 'spirituality' when trying to express what moves them most deeply. This usage has drawn the increasing attention of scholars, who seek to define the various meanings of spirituality and understand the perceptions and experiences that have led to the increasing popularity of this term. I seek to illuminate the way 'spirituality' is used and contested among those *self-consciously* engaged in 'earth-based' or 'nature-based' spirituality and thereby to understand contemporary earth-based religion.

A number of scholars have recently drawn a distinction between spirituality and religion. Wade Clark Roof, for example, explains that a common perception today is that 'to be religious conveys an institutional connotation [while] to be spiritual . . . is more personal and empowering and has to do with the deepest motivations in life' (Roof 1993, pp. 76–7, cf. 76–9, 129–30). Testing Roof's findings, a recent study

confirmed that ‘religiousness is increasingly characterized as “narrow and institutional,” and spirituality . . . as “personal and subjective”’ (Zinnbauer 1997, p. 563).¹ Moreover, the researchers found that nineteen percent of their sample viewed themselves as spiritual but not religious.

This distinction—between *religion* as ‘organized’ and *spirituality* as involving one’s deepest moral values and most profound religious experiences—is probably the most often cited difference between the terms. But there are additional bundles of ideas that are more often associated with spirituality than religion. Peter van Ness and Anna King eloquently address the idea-complexes usually associated with spirituality. Van Ness, for example, highlights the putative relationship between personal growth and a proper understanding of one’s place in the cosmos:

The spiritual aspect of human existence [has both] an outer and inner complexion. Facing outward, human existence is spiritual insofar as it intentionally engages reality as a maximally inclusive whole and makes the cosmos an international object of thought and feeling. Facing inward, life has a spiritual dimension to the extent that it is experienced as the project of one’s most vital and enduring self, and it is structured by experiences of sudden transformation and subsequent slow development. An integration of these inner and outer characteristics is achieved by equating the spiritual dimension with the existential task of discovering one’s truest self in the context of reality and cosmic totality. (van Ness 1992, pp. 13–4)

Van Ness provides a superb general characterisation of contemporary spirituality, focusing especially on its psychological dimensions. Anna King moves the distinction between religion and spirituality towards greater specificity. She summarises well the idea of spirituality as it has evolved within the countercultures of many western societies:

If ‘religion’ is seen in terms of inherited structures and institutional externals . . . spirituality has become a term that firmly engages with the feminine, with green issues, with ideas of wholeness, creativity, and interdependence, with the interfusion of the spiritual, the aesthetic and the moral. (King 1996, p. 345)

Spirituality need not be seen as opposing religious traditions. It is often seen as the inner truth to which they all point. Spirituality can be viewed as a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions. It is, moreover, a term that consecrates otherwise secular endeavours such as psychotherapy, political activism, and one’s vocational choices and the corresponding work. As King puts it,

The term spirituality as currently used, indicates both the unity at the heart of religious traditions and the transformative inner depth or meaning of those traditions. . . . It supplies a term which transcends particular religions and it suggests a non-reductionist understanding of human life. It is more firmly associated than religion with creativity and imagination, with change, and with relationship. It is less associated in the popular mind with hierarchies of gender, race or culture. It indicates an engagement with, or valuing of human experience and expression through art and music, through a response to nature and to ethical ideals as well as through the great religious traditions. It can embrace secular therapies and cosmologies as well as concerns with the environment. Thus it seems to include both sacred and secular, and to enable a fundamental rethinking of religious boundaries. Its very ambiguity and flexibility suggests a richness and texture which allows traditional religious maps to be redrawn and minorities to find a voice [and this also] makes it a more flexible concept than religion and encourages the user to reflect and to challenge institutionalized thought.

... The search for the 'spiritual' takes place not only through the renewal or rediscovery of religious traditions but also ... through psychotherapy, social concern, involvement in movements for justice and peace or through careers in science or the arts. [Thus] the term spirituality reflects a search for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of religion which is itself part of a preoccupation to create a more tolerant pluralist society. (King 1996, p. 346)

The preceding definitions introduce the diverse ideas conjured up in the popular mind by the term 'spirituality.' These definitions also illuminate many of the meanings and perceptions about spirituality found among practitioners of earth-based religions at the grass roots of American religious life. Consequently, they provide a useful template for examining the continuities and discontinuities, the common themes and various tensions, among nature-focused individuals and groups in North America.²

Theoretical Considerations in the Study of Earth-Based Spiritualities

Defining Terms: Religion and Earth-Based Spirituality

In this examination of earth-based (or nature-based) spirituality, my focus is narrower than that of Catherine Albanese in her *Nature Religion in America* (1990). Her discussion includes religions that take nature as a 'symbolic center,' whereas I examine only the subset of such groups that perceive nature itself to be sacred. This, of course, raises the question: How are we to understand 'sacred'—a term that is intertwined with spirituality within 'green' subcultures? In turn, this raises a prior question: What counts as religion? This question is especially difficult in cases where persons speak liberally of spirituality and the sacred, yet do not believe in superhuman beings or supernatural realities.

Of course, some would insist that belief in divine beings and supernatural realities are essential to religion. *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* recently claimed, for example, that religion is best defined as 'a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to *superhuman* beings' (in Smith 1995, p. 893, my emphasis; cf. Lawson and McCauley 1990, p. 7). The author insisted upon this restrictive definition because it 'moves away from defining religion as some special kind of experience or worldview' and excludes 'quasi-religious religious movements' (in Smith 1995, pp. 893–4). But such definitions are unduly restrictive. They would eliminate as religion some forms of Buddhism (see Chidester 1996a, p. 254). They would also exclude as religious those who see themselves as deeply spiritual and who regularly rely on terms like the sacred or its opposite (defilement or desecration) to describe their understanding of the universe. As we shall soon see, many persons believe that the earth and its living systems are sacred and consider the earth's destruction to be a defiling act.

To help alert us to such religiosity I borrow from David Chidester, who defines religion as 'that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms' (1987, p. 4). Some will argue that such definitions are circular or vague, but vagueness is an asset when we try to apprehend the plural forms that religion assumes, and as Chidester has concluded, 'A descriptive approach to the study of religion *requires* a circular definition of the sacred: Whatever someone holds to be sacred is sacred.' He argues that the task of religious studies 'is to describe and interpret sacred norms that are actually held by individuals, communities, and historical traditions' (Chidester 1987, p. 4). Such a flexible understanding of religion provides a good starting point for the present endeavour to understand earth-based religion and spirituality.³

Earthen Spirituality and Contemporary Environmentalism

Who are the individuals and groups that perceive nature *itself* to be sacred? King's suggestion that scholars look for spirituality not only in small, marginalised religious sects but also in 'movements such as Amnesty International [and] Greenpeace' (1996, p. 347) points in the right direction.⁴

I begin this analysis of the spirituality of earth-based religions with the 'radical environmental' movement, a movement that numbers in the tens of thousands of participants in the United States and that has had an influence significantly greater than even these numbers suggest.⁵ This movement can aptly be labelled 'pagan environmentalism' to convey the countercultural spiritualities, especially those based in mystical experiences, including pantheistic and animistic perceptions, that motivate most of its supporters.⁶

By examining the forms of spirituality present within radical environmental groups, we can see the process by which varied earth-based spiritualities and social movements influence one other, engaging in reciprocal religious production. This exploration will illuminate continuities and convergences among diverse earth-based religions. I will also identify disagreements and fault lines that promise to keep distinct many of the earth-focused religious groups.

The 'Cultic Milieu' and Countercultural Bricolage

In this endeavour to understand the varied phenomena of nature spirituality, an article by Colin Campbell is helpful. He asserts that a 'cultic milieu' exists as a 'constant feature of [western] society' representing 'the cultural underground', including 'all deviant belief-systems and their associated practices [including] unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion [and] deviant medicine' (1972, p. 122). Cultic groups 'rarely engage in criticism of each other [and] display a marked tolerance and receptivity towards each others' beliefs,' Campbell suggests, especially because they share a 'mystical tradition emphasiz[ing] that . . . unity with the divine can be attained by a diversity of paths' (1972, pp. 122–3). He also claims that mysticism is 'the most prominent part of the deviant religious component of the cultic world' and that consequently, cults tend 'to be ecumenical, . . . syncretistic, and tolerant in outlook' (1972, p. 124). Moreover, he concludes that the fragmentation of ideas and groups that characterises the cultic milieu is 'more than counteracted by *the continuing pressure of syncretization*' (1972, pp. 122–3).⁷

Campbell's theory provides a useful template upon which to overlay diverse, earth-based spiritualities. His characterisation of a 'cultic milieu' fails to recognise the extent to which ideas and priorities unfolding under the counterculture's cultic tent are in tension and contested,⁸ but the 'cultic milieu' idea is illuminating if care is taken to notice the tensions within it.

Many Americans express affinity for nature spirituality, and not only those involved groups such as Earth First!, the Sierra Club, or Friends of the Earth (see *Kempton et al.*, 1995; *Minteer and Manning* 1999).⁹ In addition, the syncretistic, tolerant and 'pastiche-style spirituality' that Roof found among baby boomers certainly applies, in general terms, to the religious processes involved in contemporary nature-based spiritualities (*Roof* 1993, p. 245).

To understand contemporary earth-based and nature-based spirituality, we must explore countercultural syncretism. However, within green countercultures¹⁰ *bricolage* (amalgamations of many bits and pieces of diverse cultural systems) is a more apt term than syncretism (the blending of elements of two traditions). It captures better the reciprocal and ever-evolving processes of religious production.¹¹ Whatever the name,

an analysis of ‘the cultural process of stealing back and forth sacred symbols’ (Chidester 1988, p. 137)¹² is crucial for understanding both the religious and the political dimensions of contemporary earth-based spiritualities.

Clearly, radical environmental subcultures carry one key marker of the cultic milieu observed by Campbell: its mysticism (see Taylor 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995). I emphasise the importance of political bricolage because Campbell finds that the mysticism of the cultic milieu has led ‘to a depreciation of [and] a general indifference to all secular affairs except the most personal’ (1972, p. 125). Perhaps this stance was true twenty-five years ago, but when exploring green spiritualities today, it is clear that *the mystical is also political because the earth is sacred*. The present task is to illuminate earth-based spirituality movements, so I will not focus on their political dimensions here. Nevertheless, to assess fully the worldviews of earth religions, it is critical to analyse fully the ways in which deviant *political* ideas and ideologies—especially leftist, ‘green anarchist’ and anti-modernist ones—are grafted onto these worldviews in the full bricolage that is countercultural spirituality.

Earth-Based Spirituality’s Roots—Deep Ecology and Radical Environmentalism (1955–79)

In America, radical environmentalism and deep ecology are intersecting movements. They contend that there are many spiritual and philosophical paths to a proper spiritual perception of the earth as sacred, and towards actions congruent with this belief. Participants in these movements arrive at moral sentiments in plural ways. Most have had some kind of mystical experience in nature. The majority of them also draw on affinities with religions originating in the Far East, among Native Americans, with other nature-oriented religions in America such as neo-paganism and Wicca, or with a variety of practices most commonly associated with ‘New Age’ spirituality. Radical environmentalism is a countercultural pond with many tributaries. By examining the views of some of its earliest proponents and its more recent manifestations, we can move towards understanding the unity and diversity of earth-based spirituality in the United States.

Deep Ecology and Perennial Mysticism

In 1972 the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the term ‘deep ecology’ to express the idea that nature has intrinsic value and to criticise anthropocentric, ‘shallow’ environmentalism, which he criticised for its instrumental view towards nature.¹³ This catchy term rapidly gained acceptance among a variety of figures and movements that had been or would soon be advancing their own criticisms of anthropocentric environmental ethics. Especially enthusiastic were the leaders of the radical environmental organisation Earth First!, which embraced deep ecology immediately upon hearing about it.

Naess and other promoters of deep ecology argue that there is a cross-cultural, ‘perennial philosophy’—a metaphysic that recognises the sacrality and interdependence of all life. They borrow the idea from the 1945 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*, in which Aldous Huxley asserts that:

Philosophia Perennis—the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing—the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and

universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. (Huxley 1945, p. vii)

The existence of this perennial philosophy—a global religion of primal, ancient lineage, encompassing diverse, nature-beneficent cultures and lifeways, surviving especially among the world’s remaining indigenous peoples, and still expressed in religions originating in the Far East and in Jewish, Christian and Muslim mysticism—was an important assertion in the 1985 book *Deep Ecology*, edited by Bill Devall and George Sessions, that helped launch the movement. Although Naess, Devall and Sessions insisted that persons can arrive at the central convictions of deep ecology apart from any particular religious orientation, their own deep ecological ethics are clearly based on spiritual experiences in nature.¹⁴

Mountain Epiphanies

Naess himself traces his own deep feeling of identification with nature and his caring for all other life forms to a sense of estrangement from humans, possibly from the death of his father when he was one-year old, and to profound childhood experiences in nature:

From when I was about four years old until puberty I could stand or sit for hours, days, weeks, in shallow water on the coast, inspecting and marveling at the overwhelming diversity and richness of life in the sea. The tiny beautiful forms which ‘nobody’ cared for, or were even unable to see, was part of a seemingly infinite world, but nevertheless my world. Feeling apart in many human relationships, I identified with nature. (Naess, quoted in Fox 1992b, p. 69)

But it was especially in the mountains that Naess developed his strongest attachments with nature. A particular, Norwegian mountain had become

a symbol of a benevolent, equiminded, strong father, or of an ideal human nature . . . These characteristics were there in spite of the obvious fact that the mountain, with its slippery stones, icy fog and dangerous precipices, did not protect me or care for me in any trivial sense. It required me to show respect and take care. The mountain loved me in a way similar to that of my ten and eleven year old brothers who were eager to toughen me up. (Naess, quoted in Fox 1992b, p. 69)

Naess would eventually name his personal philosophy ‘ecosophy T’ after his mountain hut. He coined the term ‘ecosophy’ as shorthand for environmental philosophy. In his major work Naess wrote about the possibility of identification with mountains:

But what about identification with mountains? The more usual terms are here ‘personalizing’, ‘animism’, ‘anthropomorphism’. For thousands of years, and in various cultures, mountains have been venerated for their equanimity, greatness, aloofness, and majesty. The process of identification is the prerequisite for feeling the *lack* of greatness. (Naess 1989, p. 172)

Naess elsewhere wrote approvingly of the animistic spiritualities that he believed are prevalent among tribal societies,¹⁵ mountain peoples and children who have access to nature:

‘Green philosophy or the philosophy of the deep ecology movement is largely an articulation of the implicit philosophy of 5 year old children who have access to at least a minimum of animals, plants, and natural places. These children experience animals as

beings like themselves in basic respects. They have joys and sorrows, interests, needs, loves and hates. Even flowers and places are alive to them, thriving or having a bad time. The personal identity of the small child has environmental factors. They are a part of himself or herself, the personal, social and natural self being one and indivisible. Philosophers of the deep ecology movement . . . have never found . . . arguments to undermine those attitudes implicit in childhood'. (Naess 1984, p. 180)

Naess believes that this identification is available to anyone lucky enough or willing to pursue a life in 'free' nature: 'There is fortunately a way of life in free nature that is highly efficient in stimulating the sense of oneness, wholeness and in deepening identification' (Naess 1989, p. 177). But one who wishes to arrive at a proper spiritual perception must first get away from the city's artifice and distractions because

it takes time for the new milieu to work *in depth*. It is quite normal that several weeks must pass before the *sensitivity* for nature is so developed that it fills the mind. If a great deal of technique and apparatus are placed between oneself and nature, nature cannot possibly be reached. (Naess 1989, p. 179)

Naess even expresses appreciation for those who are better than him at promoting such sensitivity through their writings: 'It is impossible for me with my dry style to contribute verbally to this increase of sensitivity.' Nevertheless, he concludes, 'What I sometimes am able to do is to lead people into the mountains in such a way that their awareness increases' (Naess, quoted in LaChapelle 1992, p. 66).

Not surprisingly, Naess' earliest environmental philosophy resonated especially among mountain climber-intellectuals who had had similar experiences in the world's wild mountain regions.¹⁶ Naess himself was an accomplished climber, known for the first ascent of Tirich Mir (7,690 meters; 25,230 feet), the highest peak in the Hindu Kush, in 1950 (see Fox 1992a, p. 46). Born in 1912, Naess continued to hike in the Himalayas into his 70s. Although he is approaching his ninth decade, he continues to have great strength and stamina. In a special issue devoted to Naess in *The Trumpeter*, the Canadian 'Journal of Ecosophy', editor Alan Drengson underscored the epistemological significance of the mountains for many drawn to deep ecology:

In strange ways so many of our lives run in parallel paths. This is shown in the writings which gather in this issue. . . . Consider some common themes: turning to wild nature and the mountains for solace, for wisdom, for strength, for maturation, for spiritual comradeship, for lessons in devotion and humility; reading books by Spinoza and being inspired by his grand vision of the unity of all beings as radiant forms of an infinitely divine one, and so coming to appreciate the sacredness of diverse beings while marveling at each's (sic) unique inherent value. (Drengson 1992, p. 43)¹⁷

Some deep ecology proponents worry that identifying their movement too closely with religion or spirituality is counterproductive to their political aims. Bill Devall, for example, once objected when the term 'mysticism' was applied to deep ecology. Yet he argued elsewhere that greens must develop a 'deep ecological consciousness' and 'humans-in-nature spirituality' as a basis for environmental action (Devall 1980, p. 302; 1991, p. 256).¹⁸ Interestingly, his co-editor of *Deep Ecology*, George Sessions, once expressed a similar concern about the spiritualities expressed by Devall and ecopsychology theorist Warwick Fox (1991, 1996), who believe that deep ecology should help persons develop an 'ecological consciousness' and 'expansive self' that 'embraces outward all life.' Sessions feared that these notions might themselves be counterproductive, fostering a New Age spirituality unduly optimistic about the human species.

Naess himself, however, explicitly endorsed the nature mysticism rubric, calling it 'a genuine aspect of Western culture' (1989, p. 173). Indeed, if the attraction of many deep ecologists to Spinoza's philosophical pantheism is to be comprehensible, we must understand the importance of Naess's personification and 'identification' with nature to his version of deep ecology. Despite his worries that New Age religion could misguide persons, Sessions approves of earthen spirituality and insists that 'a Spinoza- and/or Muir-like consciousness is essential' to deep ecology. Interestingly, like Naess and many of those initially drawn to deep ecology, Sessions was an accomplished mountain climber who had been drawn to Spinozian pantheism, presumably as a result of religious experiences gained through mountaineering.¹⁹

Naess's translator, who has become an important environmental philosopher in his own right, is David Rothenberg. Rothenberg locates the sacred in the mountains, signing his letters 'always, the Mountains.' Michael Cohen, an English professor and author of *The Pathless Way*, describes John Muir's various oceanic and animistic experiences, including an important one on top of Cathedral Peak in Yosemite National Park. Writing of his own experiences scaling and perching on this same peak, Cohen confesses that it is also his sacred mountain. On this peak, he writes,

one feels not so much above the landscape as truly in it. I have been there perhaps twenty times, once on the centennial of Muir's ascent, when the clouds sailed through the mountains, riding the west wind. Each day on Cathedral Peak that I remember seems sacred. The world seems to flow about that granite altar in all its wholeness. (Cohen 1984, p. 359)

These examples indicate that for Naess, Cohen and many other deep ecologists, mountains are of central epistemological significance, perhaps uniquely effective at evoking a proper spiritual perception of human insignificance and of the goodness and wholeness of earth's wider webs of life.

Desert Epiphanies

Certainly many of the earliest advocates of deep ecology were mountain men, but for the godfather of the radical environmentalism, the late Edward Abbey, the desert was the most sacred place. Abbey's writings, including *The Monkeywrench Gang*, helped launch the militant front of deep ecology.²⁰ The austerity of the desert 'distinguishes it, in spiritual appeal, from other forms of landscape,' Abbey wrote, arguing that the desert was especially effective, even more than mountains, at overturning human arrogance (Abbey 1968, pp. 209–10).²¹

Abbey was 'very much a pantheist', according to best friend Jack Loeffler, who recalled his saying things like 'Do not call me an atheist, call me an earth-ist'. 'Abbey really saw the spirit in all things', Loeffler says. Abbey also resonated, as do many deep ecologists, with Taosim, a religious tradition that is arguably an ancient form of nature-based spirituality.²² Loeffler recalls Abbey stating, with typical irony, that 'the Tao te' Ching is the best goddamned book ever written'.²³

Hallucinogenic Epiphanies

Loeffler himself provides a typical, if early, example of radical environmentalist, earth-based spirituality. Disenchanted with the American military industrial society after viewing atomic bomb blasts as a young soldier, he dropped out of mainstream society. In 1957, he read Aldous Huxley's book dealing with hallucinogenic experiences, and in

1960 he ate peyote during a Native American Church ceremony to which he was invited. He gravitated to Northern California's 'bohemian society' and for a time in the early 1960s worked at Esalen, an influential centre for the study of Eastern religious mysticism and the epicentre of the unfolding human potential and humanistic psychology movement.²⁴ There, Loeffler met a number of the countercultural spiritual leaders of the time, including Alan Watts, Henry Miller, John Barda, Allan Ginzberg, Gary Snyder and eventually Huxley himself.

Loeffler's experience of the decisive impact of hallucinogens on his spirituality and environmental activism foreshadows that of many younger radical environmentalists who would follow. When one gets past the peyote-induced nausea, Loeffler says, and can 'see through those eyes, it sets one up spirituality to understand the sacred quality of this planet. . . . It puts one in direct contact with another wavelength with the universe and one immediately intuits that the entire planet is the living organism in which we are members'. Only extended, solo camping provided Loeffler with experiences capable of inducing in him spiritual perceptiveness.

Although peyote, 'magic' mushrooms, and some other drugs have fostered earthen spirituality for some radical environmentalists, most believe that aids are unnecessary. Through extended time in undefiled wilderness, anyone can learn to discern the earth's sacredness.

For Gary Snyder, it was not only a sacred earth that the observant heart could discern. It was even possible to hear its sacred voices. Through his poetry and prose, Snyder expresses an idea that has become increasingly widespread among radical environmentalists: the belief that animistic trans-species communication is possible and can even help foster proper nature-human relationships. Although he is inspired by cross-cultural expressions of shamanism as well as animistic and pantheistic religious experiences, as is Loeffler, Snyder's primary spiritual home remains Zen Buddhism. Beginning in 1955, Snyder studied its ancient traditions intensively for twelve years. Today he believes that Zen expresses deep ecological ethics with unsurpassed philosophical sophistication. Although he considers himself a deep ecologist, Snyder prefers to call himself a 'Buddhist-Animist'.²⁵

Perhaps Snyder's most lasting influence has been his effectiveness in promoting the increasingly popular green social philosophy known as 'bioregionalism'—an anarchistic, decentralist ideology that envisions 'participatory democracy' within political units redrawn along the contours of differing ecosystem types. Although bioregionalism is now having influence far beyond the counterculture,²⁶ it remains an earth-based spirituality based on various pagan perceptions and ritual forms, whose participants sometimes trace their awakenings to hallucinogenic experiences.²⁷

Like their more politically militant kin in Earth First!, bioregionalists are animated by earth-based spiritual perceptions of the sacredness of earth and of the possibility of communication with the myriad of earthly life forms. Its proponents believe that when political loyalties are regional, it will be possible for people to listen to and revere the land.²⁸

The Epistemology of Earthen Spirituality—Learning to Listen to the Land

The central epistemological premise shared by these early architects of radical environmentalism is that people can learn to 'listen to the land' and discern its sacred voices. This belief is expressed in many ways—for example, on bumper stickers distributed by environmental balladeer Walk'in Jim Stoltz, who travels the land weaving his songs into

photo presentations of undefiled wilderness areas, calling for their defence. The pantheistic and animistic spiritualities found among these earliest proponents of radical environmentalism parallel those of the most prominent environmentalists since the time of Emerson and Thoreau, including Bob Marshall and Aldo Leopold (see Taylor 1995; Cohen 1984; Fox 1981). The basic experiences that foster earth-based spirituality among environmentalists, and especially among the most radical ones, have changed little. Yet the sources upon which such activists draw inspiration have proliferated, and their willingness to engage in public expression of such spirituality has increased since the formation of Earth First! in 1980.

Throughout the 1960s earth-based spiritualities grew. This growth was facilitated by the drug culture, increasing Euro-American participation in the Native American Church, and by a host of other forms of ritualising such as sweat lodge ceremonies and other newly invented ritual practices unfolding within the neo-pagan communities. I turn now to focus on the reciprocal influences between deep ecology environmentalism (in both its politically militant Earth First! form and its more lifestyle-oriented bioregional forms), and a number of earth-based religions during the last two decades of the twentieth century. I will pay special attention to perceptions related to spirituality and religion. I will show that nature-based spirituality (or 'woo woo', in the musing parlance of the movement): (1) can mean many things but, in one form or another, it animates participants in these movements; (2) is a contested category, with certain expressions of it lampooned within the movement; and (3) despite ambivalence and criticism, it evinces significant tolerance and reciprocal influence among various earth-based spiritual beliefs and practices.²⁹

The Contested Nature of Earth-Based Spirituality

Woo, Woo, Rainbows, and a Crystal Free Rendezvous

Although the nature-based spirituality of radical environmentalism is apparent in books and journals, it is in the field that its diversity and contested nature become clear. At the national Earth First! Rendezvous in 1991, tensions emerged between radical environmentalists and several individuals from the 'Rainbow Family', largely over the question of the authenticity of their spirituality.

Approximately 500 activists attend a typical Earth First! wilderness rendezvous. By radical environmental standards the Rainbow Family is huge, drawing thousands to its annual 'love-in' style summer festival, usually held at remote, forested sites. Perhaps best known for their 'flower child' lifestyles, liberal drug use, and an ethos stressing community and love, Rainbows purport to live closely to the earth. In the 1980s a significant number began adding the Earth First! Rendezvous to their summer vagabonding. A number of Earth First! activists who thought that the Rainbow's countercultural style was counterproductive and their spirituality self-absorbed did not welcome them. Some of them felt that the rainbow emphasis on peace and love, to the neglect of the rage and the survival instinct, was severing persons from their true animal selves.

Many in the rainbow family are deeply influenced by New Age spirituality, a nature-based spirituality that tends to envision a peaceful evolution towards human harmony with the earth and cosmos. Participants sometimes symbolise this connection with the earth by wearing crystals, because of their powers to heal person and planet. Many Earth First! members, however, view crystal (and gold) wearing as sacrilege because these items depend on the 'mining' of Mother Earth. A campfire chant begun

in the late 1980s—‘Crystal free by ’93!’—expressed disgust with such spirituality and a desire to purge the movement of it. These chants are but one piece of movement rhetoric that ridicules forms of earth-based spirituality considered inconsistent with a reverence for the earth. Such slogans also convey a widespread belief about spirituality within Earth First!, that an authentic spirituality leads to environmental action. Put bluntly by one of Earth First!’s most ‘woo woo’ musicians—‘If you’re not doing everything you can to save Mother Earth, you ain’t shit!’—and neither is your spirituality.

Ambivalence Towards Pagan Spirituality and New Age Optimism

Ambivalence towards some forms of nature-based spirituality and ritualising permeates the radical environmental movement. Some early tensions focused on the decision to affix pagan names, based on the Celtic calendar, to the masthead of the *Earth First!* journal. This choice initially raised little controversy but it signaled a general openness to the countercultural spirituality of the hippies and other participants in the ‘back to the land’ movement who gravitated towards Earth First! in the early 1980s.

The rapid influx of hippies and their often overtly pagan style towards concerned two Earth First! co-founders. Howie Wolke, who criticised the pagan masthead names, did not consider himself to be pagan and viewed the names and the countercultural style to be politically counterproductive. He sent critical letters to *Earth First!*. Dave Foreman responded, stressing the importance of spiritual pluralism and toleration but also promoting ‘Earth Religion’ (see Foreman 1982d:2) and boldly declaring his own paganism: ‘I hold my personal religious views towards Mother Earth just as strongly and sincerely as any Christian.’ Moreover, he described himself as a ‘howling-at-the-moon pantheist’ (1982c:2). Shortly thereafter, he wrote, ‘Deep Ecology is the most important philosophical current of our time’ and promised to make *Earth First!* a forum for expressions of ‘earth religion in whatever guise.’ Then, in a dig at Wolke, he asserted that even those in the movement who are uncomfortable with overt or public expressions of spirituality, even those who consider themselves to be atheists, are motivated by their own forms of earthen spirituality: ‘All of us are religious, even atheists like Howie Wolke who defies grizzly bears and hopes to become one’ (Foreman 1982a:2).

In a 1994 interview, I checked Foreman’s perceptions with Wolke. Wolke confirmed that he and everyone deeply involved in wildlands conservation does so for deeply spiritual reasons, feeling the ‘wonderful vibes’ in nature that arouse a perception of the intrinsic value of all life.³⁰

Wolke went on to explain to me his efforts to stifle the countercultural style and public expression of pagan spirituality by movement activists (see Wolke 1989), lamenting how he was labelled a ‘hippie hater’ and anti-pagan. He explained that he is happy if pagan ritualising is helpful to persons and inspires activists, but he does not equate paganism or ‘woo woo’ ritualising with spirituality:

I think it is a mistake to link woo woo and spiritual feelings together. To me, every time I give a talk I’m publicly expressing deep spiritual feelings for wild places, I don’t have to . . . create a ritual [or provide] a Council of All Beings to do that. I can do that with ordinary words and gestures . . . and slides.

In Wolke’s view, and in the minds of many other ‘road show’ performers, music and photographs of pristine and desecrated wilderness landscapes are a form of evangelical outreach for the gospel of earth as a sacred place (see Taylor 1995). Wolke uses

‘whatever means I can to reach out to the non-converted, non-choir. If I’m going to reach people at the Hamilton Rotary Club, I’m not going to do it in a countercultural way’.

Although Foreman was responsible for the pagan names on the masthead, and for much discussion of pagan spirituality in *Earth First!*, he grew uncomfortable with the organised, overt and most countercultural manifestations of paganism. These he increasingly encountered as *Earth First!*’s influence and campaigns spread into the Northwestern United States. Writing under the pseudonym Chim Blea, by 1983, Foreman began criticising the preoccupation with spiritual enlightenment as detrimental to effective environmental action. He was articulating the ‘activism test’ to spiritual authenticity that I would discover in the movement some seven years later.

Despite such criticism, Foreman stressed the earth-based nature of his own spirituality: ‘I go alone into the wilderness in quest of visions. I sit in high windy places and listen to the powers of the earth’. At the same time he urged activists to resist delusions of self-importance that can make such quests more important than activism (see [Blea 1983a](#)). Soon Foreman directly challenged what he viewed as the optimistic naïveté of the spiritually inclined Northern Californians, some of whom called themselves ‘ecotopians’:

Ecotopia is not just around the bend. . . . We are rapidly devastating natural diversity and the basic life functions of Earth. There is not enough time to peacefully transform industrial, overpopulated human civilization into [one at] peace with the rest of nature. ([Blea 1983b:13](#))

Foreman continued his argument, expressing opinions widely if simplistically viewed as misanthropic. For example, he wrote that the collapse of human civilisation offers the best hope that ‘the rest of the biosphere and the living planet will recover from its dreadful bout with humanpox’ ([Blea 1983a:13](#)). This metaphor—humans as a disease plaguing the earth—has been expressed by many radical greens. On the face of it, the metaphor and the view it expresses seem inherently misanthropic. But the term is usually directed at industrial and corporate elites, not at ordinary folk or some presumed ‘essential’ human nature. Radical environmentalists do believe that some humans are able to live on earth without destroying ecosystems. There would be little basis for activism, were this impossible. This does not mean that radical greens are optimistic. On the contrary, they share an expectation of imminent ecological and societal collapse. Ironically, they usually take hope from this scenario, viewing a collapse as prerequisite to the reharmonising of life on earth. But overall, their pessimism provides an important contrast between the earth-oriented world views of radical greens and those of the more cosmically-oriented New Age. New Age groups are generally more hopeful that a salutary change of human consciousness can peacefully, and without cataclysm, yield environmentally sustainable lifeways.

This fault-line between more and less apocalyptic visions can be seen in Foreman’s argument urging forthright environmentalist resistance ‘restrained only by what is strategically and tactically most effective. This view naturally leans far more towards monkeywrenching in the dark than to noble Gandhian direct action or political lobbying’ ([Blea 1983b:17](#)). Foreman concludes this essay by contrasting his own spirituality with other-wordly ones: ‘I’m not trying to win a place for myself in heaven. I’m already there’ ([Blea 1983b:17](#)).

Despite his significant ambivalence about the anthropocentrism and optimism he found among many pagans, Foreman continued to endorse pagan beliefs and ritualising.

In a remarkable passage describing his own religious pilgrimage, Foreman writes that after rejecting Christianity and Eastern religions because of their:

anti-Earthly metaphysics, through my twenties and early thirties I was an atheist—until I sensed something out there. Out there in the wilderness. So, I became a pagan, a pantheist, a witch, if you will. I offered prayers to the moon, performed secret rituals in the wildwood, did spells. I placated the spirits of that which I ate or used (remember, your firewood is alive, too). For almost ten years, I've followed my individualistic shamanism (no, organized paganism smacks a little too much of a Tolkien discussion group, or of a rudimentary 'great religion' for one like me who never quite fits in). (Blea 1987, p. 23)

Foreman was uncomfortable with *group* ritualising, and wondered whether spirituality and ritual might be 'a fatal [human] flaw, leading to abstractions and intellectualising that distracts us from just being the animals we are.' Still, he thinks that people need ritual to bind them to the earth. 'Ritual is that which attempts, albeit imperfectly, to reconnect us,' he concludes, 'Maybe I'll talk to the moon tonight' (Blea 1987, p. 237).

Because Foreman was the most charismatic figure in the first decade of Earth First!, his embrace of paganism is revealing and suggests patterns found among many of his compatriots. He searched through the plural milieu of countercultural earth-based spiritualities looking for those that might cohere with his own religious experiences in nature. Foreman was personally averse to organised religion and ambivalent about collective pagan ritualising. He at least theoretically endorsed the importance of ritual. He expressed affinity with some forms of earthen spirituality while criticising those forms that he considered naïvely optimistic about humans or that the judged unlikely to produce venerating acts of ecological resistance. Perhaps most important, Foreman expressed the common radical environmental perception that *earth-based spirituality is about one's felt connections with, embeddedness in, and belonging to, this living and sacred earth.*

Indeed, on occasions too numerous to mention, in print and during roadshows, Foreman has argued that Earth First! is about two things: 'resacralising' our perceptions of earth and 'self defense.' Why self defence? Because when we defend the earth, we are the earth, recently emerged into consciousness, defending herself.³¹ Despite personal ambivalence about much of the earth-based spirituality that he encountered in the 1980s, Foreman, and the movement he helped organise, expressed and retained an earth-based spirituality with both pantheistic and animistic characteristics that can best be understood as pagan.³²

The second part of this study, 'From Earth First! and Bioregionalism to Scientific Paganism and the New Age,' will appear in the next issue of *Religion*. It broadens the portrait of contemporary earth and nature-based spiritualities, analysing trends and tendencies that can be discerned among them, and examines the prospects for such religious forms in the coming years. Specifically, it illuminates the crucial role that a sense of belonging and connection plays in diverse forms of contemporary, nature-based spirituality.

Notes

- 1 As in Roof's findings, these individuals are 'less likely to engage in traditional forms of worship . . . less likely to hold . . . Christian beliefs, more likely to be independent from others, more likely to engage in group experiences related to spiritual growth, more likely to be agnostic, more likely to characterize religiousness and spirituality as different and nonoverlapping

concepts, more likely to hold nontraditional “new age” beliefs, and more likely to have had mystical experiences’ (Zinnbauer 1997, p. 561). Huston Smith similarly asserts that ‘religion is institutionalized spirituality’ and ‘anti-authoritarianism is a part’ of the increasing preference for spirituality over religion (Smith 1997, p. 42). Daniel Helmianiak states that, for most people, religion ‘implies a social and political organization with structures, rules, officials, dues [while] *spirituality* refers only to the sense of the transcendent, which organized religions carry and are supposed to foster’ (Helmianiak 1996, p. 33).

- 2 Helminiak has found six ways that the term spirituality is presently used: (1) ‘as *the human spiritual nature* as such’, (2) ‘as *concern for transcendence* [and the belief in and commitment to] something in life that goes beyond the here and now’, (3) ‘as a lived reality’ related to social or individual growth, (4) ‘as *an academic discipline*’ both therapeutic and theoretical, (5) ‘as *spiritualism* [involving] communication with human . . . or . . . nonhuman spiritual entities’, and (6) ‘as *parapsychology* [namely] involvement with extraordinary human powers that result in psychic . . . phenomena like clairvoyance, telekinesis, precognition, and out-of-body experiences’ (1996, p. 32). The second, third, fifth, and sixth of these uses are most commonly found within contemporary nature religions.
- 3 Chidester adds that ‘what people hold to be sacred tends to have two important characteristics: ultimate meaning and transcendent power . . . Religion is not simply a concern with the meaning of human life, but it is also an engagement with the transcendent powers, forces, and processes that human beings have perceived to impinge on their lives’ (Chidester 1987, p. 4). For a provocative recent discussion of what should count as religion, see Chidester 1996a. Although some working definition of religion is required for its study, so is a recognition that the term ‘*religion* has been a contested category’ and that therefore ‘a single, incontestable definition of religion cannot simply be established by academic fiat’ (Chidester 1996b, p. 254). Chidester’s recent work urges caution, documenting as it does how ‘the term *religion* has been defined as a strategic instrument’ often in violent power struggles and that ‘we can only expect those struggles to continue’ (Chidester 1996b, p. 254; cf. xiii).
- 4 More research is needed to explore the spirituality of participants in groups like ‘the wild ones’ native plant society and the Nature Conservancy, in addition to more politically-oriented environmental organisations.
- 5 Although radical greens cannot plausibly claim full credit, recent ethnographic and survey data reveal that the American public endorses many radical environmental beliefs, including the convictions that the natural world has *intrinsic value* and is *sacred* (or at least should be treated with reverence by virtue of its having been created by God), and that indigenous people are the original ecologists. See Kempton, Boster and Hartley 1995, esp. Appendix C, for the respondent acceptance of ‘intrinsic value’ axiology (survey items 16, 50, 80, and 124); and for spirituality-related responses, see items 69 and 124, and the discussion pp. 89–94. These data show that Earth First! activists endorse some radical environmental ideas in only slightly greater proportions than do the public at large or Sierra Club activists. Even blue-collar workers, in surprising proportions, including those in the timber industry, express agreement with radical environmental-type propositions. Unfortunately, the survey item most directly addressing spiritual feelings in nature was inadvertently left out of their survey (p. 94). Two recent studies have begun to remedy the need for more quantitative data on spiritual attitudes toward the environment. Brasier illustrates that nature spirituality resonates with many Americans (Brasier 1995). Minter and Manning found that ‘a number of radical environmental ethics, which revolve around a set of arguments for the intrinsic value of nonhuman nature, were embraced by respondents, especially “organicism/animism” . . . “natural rights” . . . and to a lesser extent “pantheism”’ (1999, p. 199).
- 6 Some scholars now eschew the term animism because of its origins as a pejorative devised to contrast ‘primitive’ tribal religions to ‘higher’ monotheistic ones (see Tylor 1871). But contemporary earth-based religions have widely adopted the term. I employ the term in a non-pejorative way to indicate a perception that the world is inspirited and that inter-species communication is possible.
- 7 The emphasis is mine.
- 8 At a 1997 conference in Stockholm, Gordon Melton criticised Campbell’s assumption that tolerance among such deviant religious groups is the norm, noting that many of these religions have high expectations of their followers and strongly disapprove of other ‘deviant’ groups.

- 9 For example, only 35 percent of the general public endorsed the proposition that ‘The Creator intended that nature be used by humans, not worshipped by them.’ This suggests that the majority, at least, are not hostile towards nature worship. Moreover, 83 percent endorsed the proposition that ‘plants and animals have intrinsic aesthetic and spiritual value, even if they are not of any use to humans’, compared with 96 percent of surveyed Sierra Club members and 100 percent of Earth First! activists (see [Kempton, Boster and Hartley 1995](#), pp. 262, 268).
- 10 This is another way to express an idea analogous to Campbell’s idea of a ‘cultic milieu.’
- 11 This bricolage is often self-conscious among pagan environmentalists. A humorous example can be heard in Earth First! musician Danny Dollinger’s song ‘Hillbilly Hippie’, found on his *Rome Wasn’t Burn it a Day* album, available from Barnstormers by telephone in the United States at 512/459-4012. See also Trudy Frisk: ‘Who is Goddess? She is not one but many: beneficent Demeter, sensual Aphrodite, learned Sophia, loving Freya, wild huntress Artemis, benevolent Ameratsu, dark Kali, compassionate Tara of Tibet, feline Bast, Cerridwen, keeper of the cauldron of change. She is ancient: Danu, Mother of Celts, Isis Sovereign of the elements, Yemaya, Holy Mother of the West African Sea, Pacamamma of the Andes who pre-dates the Incas, triune Hecate, Spider Woman weaving the threads of Native American fate. She is Gaia’ ([Frisk 1993](#): 21). Compare Ancient Forest activist Lou Gold, who states that ‘I don’t consider myself a follower of Native American religion . . . my spirituality is soup, it is stew . . . but when its time to find the right metaphors, I find [Native American] metaphors come easily to me [and have become] a source of genuine religious experience [promoting] what I’m calling ecological consciousness . . . feeling the relationship to all this magnificent stuff we call the creation’ (26 April 1992 interview, Madison, Wisconsin).
- 12 Chidester uses the word ‘stealing’ as a ‘shorthand designation for complex negotiations over the ownership of symbols’ (1988, p. 157).
- 13 First at a 1972 conference in Bucharest (see [LaChapelle 1988](#), p. 11) and shortly thereafter in print (see [Naess 1973](#)).
- 14 Naess writes, for example, ‘By definition what is called the “deep ecology movement” explicitly bases its activity upon philosophical and religious premises. These can differ considerably without disturbing the fairly uniform character of the aims of the supporters of the movement’ ([Naess 1989](#), p. 178). The aims, summarised in the deep ecology platform, include propositions that affirm the intrinsic value of nature along with general action principles promoting population reduction, voluntary simplicity and political action.
- 15 For example, Naess wrote positively about the California Indians who with their ‘animistic mythology, were an example of equality in principle, combined with realistic admissions of their own vital needs’ ([Naess 1989](#), p. 174).
- 16 Two of the most important mountain climbers in the history of the deep ecology movement are not philosophers but have given millions of dollars to grassroots deep ecology and other environmental groups: Doug Thompkins, who founded North Face and Esprit and who funded the Foundation for Deep Ecology and the El Pumalin Bosque Foundation, and Yvon Chouinard, founder of the outdoor equipment and clothing companies Patagonia and Black Diamond. Naess directly influenced Thompkins and set him on his deep ecology path (May 1994 interview with Arne Naess in Killarney, Ireland).
- 17 Beginning with Naess’s experience, Drengron offers a psychological theory about why many men are drawn to the mountains and then to deep ecology: ‘The mountains became a father to Arne, when as a child he lost his own dad. For many of us whose fathers were gone (to war or depression perhaps) the mountains became surrogates. Many of us share a spiritual kinship with mountains. Mountains help us explore wilderness and ourselves. This is an important journey of self-development for many of us living in the modern period’ ([Drengron 1992](#), p. 44).
- 18 For an analysis of Devall’s inconsistent defensiveness regarding nature mysticism, see Taylor 1996, pp. 99–101.
- 19 Quotations in this paragraph are from a 14 April 1993 interview at Dr Sessions’ home near Auburn, California. Perhaps reflecting his pantheism, there is a massive altar-hearth of granite, located at the centre of his home, quarried from his beloved Sierra Nevada.
- 20 *The Monkeywrench Gang* is a ribald tale of environmentalist saboteurs that draws on the illegal actions and fantasies of those opposed to the Central Arizona Water and Power Project and others acting in defense of Black Mesa, American Indian-owned land that was to be coal-mined as a part of this project. Many environmentalists and Southwestern Indians consider Black Mesa and other Southwestern landscapes to be sacred.

- 21 Abbey cites several books with spiritualities based on desert experiences, including Joseph Wood Krutch's pantheist classic, *The Voice of the Desert*.
- 22 Delores LaChapelle has been the most notably self-conscious Taoist deep ecology theorist. During Earth First! wilderness gatherings in the late 1980s, she introduced drumming into the ritualising. See LaChapelle 1978, 1988.
- 23 The quotations from Loeffler are from 21 and 23 July 1997 telephone interviews. Loeffler and Abbey, after meeting in the early 1960s, participated in a variety of extralegal efforts to thwart what they considered to be commercial desecrations of sacred desert landscapes. Guided by what they found to be the imperfect instructions contained in *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, these exploits provided Abbey with many ideas for his subsequent novels.
- 24 This movement would later take a 'green' turn as it transmogrified into 'transpersonal' and then 'eco-psychology'.
- 25 Interview with Gary Snyder, Davis, California, 1 June 1993. For a detailed discussion of Snyder's animistic spirituality, see Taylor 1995, pp. 110–5.
- 26 From the Nature Conservancy's emphasis on 'coregions' to increasing cooperation among various federal, state, and local resource agencies along bioregional lines in California. See Litfin 1993.
- 27 For an in-depth study, see Taylor 2000.
- 28 As described by Jim Dodge, another proponent of this perspective, '“Bioregionalism” is from the Greek bios (life) and the French region (region), itself from the Latin regia (territory), and earlier, regere (to rule or govern).' Bioregion means, according to Dodge, '“life territory” or “place of life”, or perhaps by extension, “government by life”' (Dodge 1981).
- 29 For a recent editorial focusing on 'woo woo' and illustrating the different understandings of it in the movement, see Lunn 1998.
- 30 All quotations of Howie Wolke are from a 12 November 1994 interview in Missoula, Montana.
- 31 This language Foreman borrowed from John Seed, the Australian Buddhist, deep ecology activist, and co-architect of the ritual process known as the Council of All Beings, to which Wolke previously alluded. Seed also is a prominent international rain forest activist who co-founded Australia's Rainforest Information Centre. For details on the Council process see Taylor 1993 and 1994 and Seed *et al.* 1988.
- 32 Zakin misses how pagan spirituality is a central animating force behind radical environmentalism and has ridiculed the more overtly spiritual participants, but he recognises at least that Foreman had a 'tribal phase' (1993, p. 230) and that he was, essentially, 'a preacher of a pantheistic religion' (p. 425).

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