Green fidelity and the grand finesse: Stepping stones to the 'Pacocene'

"In arguing that an ecological ethics is not only desirable but urgently needed, I am aware that it could also be asked: but is it feasible? A number of answers come to mind. One, the simplest but not the least important, is: who knows? But it has got to be worth a try, because if we don't then the answer will certainly turn out to be 'no'. Even if we do try, there are no guarantees; but then there is a chance."
(Curry, 2011: 269)

In the card game of contract bridge, players must work with incomplete information. For instance, a player - let's call them Sam – might hold the ace and queen of hearts but not know which opponent has the king. Because of the order of play, the queen is only likely to win a trick for Sam if the king sits in the hand to the right rather than the one to the left. And so Sam might mentally place the king in the hand to the right and play as if it definitely is there. If it turns out to be, a bonus trick can be won; if it isn't, then there is no major cost. Such a strategy is called a 'finesse'. But how is this relevant to us?

Success for the deep green movement is ultimately contingent on an Earth-wide cultural change among industrialized society to ecological citizenship and ecocentric modes of governance.[1] Such a major shift will take time, if it happens at all. Yet, despite this uncertainty, there is much work that must be carried out now if life as we know it is to flourish for millennia to come. For example, we must act urgently to ensure a short-term future for species threatened with anthropogenic extinction in the hope that the culture shift necessary for long-term survival will occur. Here, as it was for Sam, the wise – and, I would argue, only – course of action is to assume the best and act accordingly. I term this strategy a 'grand finesse'. The analogy is imperfect, of course. Sam has no influence at all on the position of the king; however, for us, while it may feel at times as if we are at the mercy of a celestial card dealer, we can at least do something to effect cultural change. But the task is gargantuan.

To get an idea of the scale of our challenge, it is worth reflecting on an observation made by John Michael Greer (2009: 187):

> The successful efforts for change are usually those that pursue specific improvements or target specific injustices, while those that pursue grander agendas tend to fail the more completely and disastrously the more utopian their goals become.

While this point should not be ignored, what our 'ecotopian' mission – unlike many previous societal-change projects (Greer, 2009) – has going for it is a grounding in ecological reality.

Apportioning and building

Our movement is not just ecological but organic, being driven by spontaneously spawned efforts that are only loosely coordinated. However, let's assume for a moment that it would be possible to deliberately apportion our efforts. Should they be directed completely at societal change?

In the first issue of *The Ecological Citizen*, the piece that generated the most discussion was Ian Whyte's 'Life's defeat is imminent' (Whyte, 2017). It was pleasing to see the level of response to the article because it was perhaps the best example of a writer taking advantage of this novel forum unfettered by anthropocentric bias and censorship. On the subject of apportioning our efforts, the piece argued that we "don't need any more articles

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or research into the cause of the problem," while its overall conclusion stated:

> [W]e need to devote a maximum effort into the problem which has always beaten us: how to change humanity's operating paradigm.

I would agree that societal change is resoundingly the most important area for focus; however, I feel it is possible to interpret this article's message too literally. Yes, the dire problems that life as we know it faces are undoubtedly caused by the excesses of humanity, and no amount of research will change the conclusion that our most urgent and important task is to humanely scale back the industrial enterprise. On the other hand, I believe that now is not the time to withdraw, for instance, from collecting data on life's diversity, the very thing we are trying to save (Wilson, 2017).[2] Life has been forced onto a perverse anthropogenic course, and there are no guarantees that the knowledge we have gathered up till now to inform conservation biology and restoration ecology can be reliably extrapolated to the coming decades. The complexity of ecology is at once beautiful and humbling, and it would be dangerous, in this field, ever to conclude that we know enough.

"The complexity of ecology is at once beautiful and humbling, and it would be dangerous, in this field, ever to conclude that we know enough."

As tempting as it is to go on with this defence, it would be hypocritical to do so within a broader discussion of apportioning our efforts, for I do not think it is an especially effective use of time. Indeed, it is easy to spend half a day writing responses that uphold a marginally different take on an issue to that of someone else within our camp, but all without doing anything that will materially benefit the ecosphere.

I also question, in practical terms, how much value there is in continuing to vigorously debate internal differences of opinion on ecological ethics. For me (admittedly a non-philosopher), ecological ethics is already sufficient to give us what we need: a robust justification for the moral standing of everything that has been created on Earth, from the biotic to the geomorphic (see Haydn Washington's piece starting on page 137), as well as, crucially, a means of prioritizing need and rights (Curry, 2011). In any case, I doubt that five centuries of further wrangling will deliver us a perfectly unified consensus. Similarly – to cite a related but more specific debate – we may also still be arguing in 500 years about the level of capability for feeling in plants; but I do not believe that ecocentric and biocentric thinkers need to worry too much about this, relatively speaking, as *agency* and *interests* underwrite intrinsic value without a need for sentience (see Curry [2011: 74]).

Of course, I do not wish to completely stifle intellectual curiosity in these matters or nix the right to reply, but we really should be saving as much energy as we can for the fights that demand more urgent attention. These fights include those against neomodernists and 'Anthropocene boosters', a topic that George Wuerthner addresses superbly in an article beginning on page 161 of this issue. In the same piece, we are reminded why we also need to fight to defend and expand protected areas.

Our competitive ability in such fights is proportional to the strength of our movement, and thus it is our job to help build this power. There are several things that each of us can do in this regard:

1 promote the ecocentric (or biocentric) worldview and the public understanding of intrinsic value (potentially useful here

Artwork

Staying with 150 series

by **Andrea Williamson**

About the artwork: Andrea's watercolours in this Editorial, and elsewhere in the issue, are taken from a series of 150 paintings of endangered species for Canada's 150th 'birthday'.

Higher-resolution versions: https://is.gd/ecoartwork

Burrowing owl

is the concise overview of ecocentrism I co-wrote with Patrick Curry and Ian Whyte, starting on page 130, which introduces a plain-language definition of the term 'ecocentric' that has already been translated into over ten languages: https://is.gd/deepgreen);

2 demonstrate consistently and broadly that our ideology is not anti-human (it is also important to avoid getting distracted by such accusations where they are ill-founded, which is one of the many points that Captain Paul Watson reflects on in our interview with him starting on page 152);

3 forge synergies with existing movements, but without compromising our non-anthropocentric foundations (I return to potential partnerships a little later).

What if collapse is inevitable?

A major potential challenge to what we are trying to achieve is that a grand collapse might be inevitable anyway, even if society starts to change in the right direction. Returning to the analogy I presented at the start, is there any point in attempting the 'grand finesse', or should we just throw in our hand?

John Michael Greer (2009) writes in *The Ecotechnic Future* of a seemingly unavoidable progression over the coming centuries, as we are forced to find alternatives to fossil fuels and reshape society. This transition, which moves from an age of scarcity, through an age of salvage, on to a truly ecological (or 'ecotechnic') future, he calls "the long road to sustainability" (Greer, 2009: 32).

I believe that what Greer describes is indeed the most likely course for humanity over the coming centuries. And I also foresee, on this "long road" ahead, much of the diversity of life that we find beautiful and enchanting – and that has the same right as us to carve out an existence on Earth – being irreplaceably lost. The parallel human tragedy in this is that if a 'reduced standard of living'[3] is not voluntary but forced onto us – and if human numbers are not brought down humanely and willingly, rather than automatically through a shortage of resources – then the short- and medium-term prospects for humanity are grim.

Blue racer snake, Karner blues, blue lupines, drooping trillium and broad-banded forestsnail

Yet I do not despair. Even if there truly are no prospects to divert humanity from the collapse–rebound (or collapse–extinction) path, I believe that our mission should continue the same. No matter how severe the collapse, a proportion of species and ecological niches will survive, and we can contribute to boosting both, with every single species and unique niche saved being an ethical good. Everything is at stake for the Earth, but we have nothing to lose in trying our damnedest. And, yes, life will radiate again on a geological timescale (and that rightly provides some solace for us as we witness the Earth's horrific mistreatment by many humans), but this in no way justifies a dereliction of our ethical duty to the radiation of life with which we share the Earth today. As Eileen Crist recently commented (Mortillaro, 2017):

"Everything is at stake for the Earth, but we have nothing to lose in trying our damnedest."

Williamson's sapsucker

> When you take care of your family, you don't do it because you're optimistic or pessimistic... it's because that's what you do. Our mandate is that we take care of Earth and earthlings and human beings because we're all family.

One further point I wish to make here is that hard work now in generating creative solutions will pay dividends for our allies in future generations who look to keep humanity from upending nature's tendency to thrive.

In this vein, Paul Ehrlich, in our interview with him starting on page 154, calls for "concerned citizens to work to soften the collapse and, perhaps more importantly, plan for a possible 'reset' that will not lead to another round of growth mania and collapse." Alex Lautensach, in his article on ecological education that starts on page 171, also sees scope to profoundly influence the nature of the collapse:

> Instead of a grand collapse we might well face differentiated disintegration, a scenario which creates room for creative counter strategies based on alternative visions.

That we might be able to soften the collapse, even if it cannot be avoided entirely, is a cause for hope. In isolation that thought might be a little bleak; happily, though, there are additional reasons to be positive, as I shall describe below. These are relevant regardless of whether, like me, you think that we are unlikely to do better than a soft collapse, or whether you hold out genuine hope for a future brighter than that.

Reasons to be positive

As a first reason to be positive, I reiterate the importance of our mission being grounded in ecological reality. In other words, there is no need for us to dwell on the past failures of other movements that were not grounded in this way (Greer, 2009). We and the Earth are pushing in the same direction.

Secondly, some previous change projects, including movements for civil liberties and racial and gender equality, have had major (if incomplete) success. The results provide a firm – and, I would argue, necessary – groundwork for our movement. Of course, they are also hugely significant in their own right, and we should not lose sight of the importance of continuing to fight for them. Indeed, in this issue, Paul Ehrlich calls for the Journal to "fight all kinds of discrimination, especially by gender and race," noting that "we'll need cooperation to keep the collapse from being so severe that no reset is possible."

Thirdly, we have many potential allies in stronger movements than our own, including social justice,[4] light-green environmentalism and animal rights. Partnerships here, if honest from the start, have real potential to deliver mutual benefits. For us, that benefit would be the kick-starting of a genuinely ecological revolution. If, instead, we distance ourselves from other groups, thinking that our viewpoints are too dissimilar, then we will greatly lessen the impact we can have (and possibly get nowhere at all).

Fourthly, I believe that, where there is the will to make the necessary adjustments, ecocentric ideas can be laid over many existing ideologies (e.g. Taylor, 2010). To put it differently, ecocentrism is a worldview that can be subscribed to by any individual, regardless of race, wealth, gender or nation

"Ecocentrism is a worldview that can be subscribed to by any individual, regardless of race, wealth, gender or nation."

(although it is, perhaps, more likely to emerge in those fortunate enough to receive a comprehensive education [Noss, 2017]).

Lastly, as I touch on in 'A journey to Earth-centredness' (Gray, 2017), with escalating ecological destruction it becomes harder for the masses to ignore ecological injustice. Thus, while we should never stop reinforcing the message of ecological urgency, there will soon be little sand in which wilful deniers can hide their heads.

Green fidelity

There is a further reason for positivity that could be added to the list, and it relates to something in the control of the broader green community. Put simply: what if all those people making recommendations about ecological living were able to demonstrate consistently green behaviours themselves? After all, in order to inspire change against long odds, we will need a plethora of role models, ranging from celebrities to academics. However, I suspect that a large proportion of Western celebrities espousing the ecological cause have very big personal footprints. If these 'trailblazers' of a developed lifestyle could instead live truly green lives, then those looking to imitate them from 'developed' and 'developing' countries alike would have sound role models.

Even among the conservation community, the situation is far from perfect, according to a recently published study in *Biological Conservation*. The researchers found that the conservationists they sampled had only "a slightly lower overall environmental footprint than economists or medics" and called for them to "do far more" to reduce their ecological footprint (Balmford *et al.*, 2017). My view is that it can be highly detrimental to our cause if experts and other figureheads who are calling for change do not themselves show strong fidelity to green principles (or authentic green behaviour) in their everyday lives. Instead, I believe that anyone calling for change should be striving to live an ecologically sound lifestyle in relation to their own circumstances,[5] even where it means cutting productivity (on account, for instance, of extra time spent travelling by public transport instead of driving).

There are many aspects to green fidelity, but I shall briefly list a few of those that I consider to be particularly important:

- **Population:** promoting small family size, including childless families, by example. (Population is a topic to which we will return again and again in the Journal; in this issue we feature some general insights from Paul Ehrlich, in the aforementioned interview, as well as Karin Kuhlemann's critique, in an article beginning on page 181, of one particular aspect of this, the fallacy of focusing on the rate of population growth as the central problem.)
- **Air travel:** being sure that each flight taken will deliver net ecological benefit and that no one more local to the destination could fulfil a similar role (see https://is.gd/flyless for a project encouraging academics to fly less).
- **Food and drink:** being a green consumer by avoiding industrial meat and also considering land usage per calorie, food miles, packaging, associated energy usage, wastage and the particular impacts of intensive farming and fisheries.

"Anyone calling for change should be striving to live an ecologically sound lifestyle in relation to their own circumstances."

Rusty patched bumblebees and American water willow

> "Each of us needs to achieve pragmatic balances in our own life, not least because influencing the system is easier from the inside."

- **Household products:** reducing the output of toxic substances from the home into the wider ecosystem (by sourcing greener alternatives as much as possible).
- **Luxuries:** striving to reject ecologically harmful luxuries as much possible.

The list continues to many other aspects of life, including energy consumption, water usage and the ways our finances are managed (see Shann Turnbull's piece on page 141 for how well-intentioned citizens could be helped on this last issue). In each of these areas, I am not calling for perfection (nor am I in a position to do so) and I am generally wary of advice pitched in such a way that setbacks might lead to discouragement and, ultimately, an abandoning of the will to change. But there is a lot of space to play in between our current typical lifestyles and an ascetic mode of living.

Continuing on the theme of green fidelity, I was heartened to find a series of points dotted around Alex Lautensach's above-mentioned article that complement the list that I have presented. The piece is applicable not just to educators in a formal sense but any one of us. Among other things, the author calls for those aiming to inspire an ecocentric transition to:

- accept some personal sacrifices and a renouncement of privilege;
- demonstrate a resistance against the dominant custom of commodifying nature (another fight worth fighting);
- reconcile one's personal freedom with the constraints of environmental justice and ecological limits;
- demonstrate empathy, fairness and friendship in relation to non-human animals, other life forms, ecosystems and landscapes;
- show a will to participate in acts of non-violent ecological resistance;
- accept the discomfort that can arise from discordant actions and dissent.

Helpfully, the author also acknowledges the need for pragmatism. In specific relation to formal education, he writes: "Political expediency demands that teachers who are committed to ecocentric transition education retain their jobs and therefore avoid confronting entrenched dominant ideologies head-on." Each of us needs to achieve pragmatic balances in our own life, not least because influencing the system is easier from the inside.

Natural history

As a springboard to highlighting another area I believe to be of deep significance to our movement, there is a final point that I will draw on from Alex Lautensach's piece. He stresses the central importance of natural history within the science curriculum. This point is echoed by Haydn Washington, who, in his article starting on page 203, argues for greater emphasis in universities on field naturalist courses. A third author who has recently written in *The Ecological Citizen* about the importance of teaching and practising natural history is Reed Noss (2017: 32):

> I'm increasingly convinced that the practice of natural history may be the key to the salvation of the fractured conservation–environmental movement, which no longer seems to share a set of core values [...]
>
> The practice of natural history may be the key to restoring joy to conservation, and for helping people recognize intrinsic value in nature.

Newfoundland red crossbill

I could not agree more with Noss's words. On a personal note, my commitment to ecocentric action was recently given one of its periodically necessary boosts by a trip to northern Spain (using Europe's excellent train network). A particularly memorable moment came in Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park, in the Catalan Pyrenees. 'Aigüestortes' translates, poetically, to 'twisted waters' and refers to the meandering streams and diversely shaped lakes that offer a waterscape of startling beauty (see Figure 1 and this issue's cover image). The memorable moment came after a long walk up and down one of the park's stunning protected valleys, a wander punctuated by numerous pauses to search for salamanders, marvel at the signs and sight of mammals and point binoculars towards the canopy-feeding birds. Shortly after a timeless exchange of eye contact with a weasel, the serenity of mid-afternoon was broken by the boisterous noise of red crossbills, a species I had not seen before. With vibrant flashes of colour signalling their movement from conifer to conifer as they fed above my head, I felt a sudden and intense feeling of solidarity with the park's living beings – I knew I was fighting for their cause.

The red crossbill on the previous page (a subspecies from Newfoundland) is from Andrea Williamson's series of watercolours depicting 150 taxa of conservation concern in Canada. A little research reveals a tragic story behind each one. In the case of the once-common Newfoundland crossbill, the anthropogenic introduction of pine squirrels to the island has driven the bird to the edge of extinction, plausibly as a result of being outcompeted for black spruce cones (Parchman and Benkman, 2002).

"I felt a sudden and intense feeling of solidarity with the park's living beings – I knew I was fighting for their cause."

Towards the 'Pacocene'

To recap, I have so far covered the following:

- how a strategic 'grand finesse' – based on the notion that assuming the best can only benefit our cause – gets us around the danger of inaction out of despair;

Figure 1. One of the more than 200 lakes in Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park, Catalunya, Spain (Julien Lagarde; CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

> "The 'Pacocene' – the Age of Peace – is pitched as a deliberate challenge to celebrations of the 'Anthropocene' and the war on wildlife and wild places that is seemingly implicit."

- why we must strive to pick the right fights, build a bigger movement and sharpen our focus on societal change (although not to the point of excluding other vital activities);
- why concerns about collapse need not derail our efforts (and other reasons to be positive);
- how green fidelity could help us deliver more powerful calls for societal change;
- why a resurgence in natural history offers great promise for our cause.

Each one of these points, for me, provides a stepping stone to more ecological times, a possible future I like to think of as the 'Pacocene' – the Age of Peace. This is pitched as a deliberate challenge to celebrations of the 'Anthropocene' and the war on wildlife and wild places that is seemingly implicit.[6]

Journal developments

Another stepping stone to the 'Pacocene' is provided, I hope, by *The Ecological Citizen*, and it is with matters relating to the publication that I shall finish. The first thing to mention is that we have decided on a strapline to appear under the logo on the website: "Striving for harmony with the rest of nature." It is thus fitting that Haydn Washington has written an article, starting on page 203, on the topic of 'harmony'. A second piece of news is that we have opted, for future issues, to encourage loose themes to emerge. Upcoming examples include food, water and religion. While no thematic constraints were in place for the present issue, a critique of 'Anthropocene boosting' emerged as an unofficial one. In addition to the article on this subject by George Wuerthner that has already been mentioned, a complementary argument appears in Helen Kopnina's piece, beginning on page 191, and many pertinent points are also raised in the article by Haydn Washington described above.

We have also recently posted a brief history of the Journal and the roots of its founding (see www.ecologicalcitizen.net/history.html). In the same way that John Piccolo, one of our editorial advisors, has described being proud to be able to trace his educational lineage directly to Aldo Leopold (Piccolo, 2017), I am excited that the lineage of *The Ecological Citizen* can be routed back, for instance, to Edward Abbey. (I write about my love of Abbey in a piece starting on page 145, in the first example of a new article type that we have introduced called 'Reflections' [see www.ecologicalcitizen.net/submissions.html for more details on this and our other content types].)

A particularly important point made in the history of the Journal is that it has arisen to unite threads from different, equally important disciplines. But we are conscious that what we need is true interdisciplinarity, not just the token version that was cautioned against some years ago by Clive Spash (1999: 432), current Editor-in-Chief of *Environmental Values*:

> An interdisciplinary approach to the environment can only be achieved by individuals being prepared to cross disciplinary boundaries and learn the language of other academic disciplines [...] In the past, much emphasis in environmental work has been placed upon rhetorical reference to interdisciplinary research

Loggerhead shrike

> but in fact this has meant producing reports which are merely a combination of chapters written by mono-disciplinary groups and bound together without regard to the inconsistencies. Open debate and synthesis are essential...

True interdisciplinarity is something I feel the Journal has great potential to deliver on, and we would certainly welcome further submissions co-authored by representatives of two or more disciplines. With this and all other aspects of the Journal, we are happy to admit that we are feeling our way. The most important thing of all is that we now have a uniting vehicle for communications. It can adapt as we go and as the movement dictates. Our ears are open, but we only have a small voice. You can help us grow louder and amplify the impact of our work by spreading the message.

To close, I am delighted, on behalf of my fellow Editors, to extend sincere thanks to Stephanie Moran (Art Editor), Victor Postnikov (Poetry Editor) and all the other members of our Editorial Board who have contributed to this issue. Without their continuing hard work this enterprise would be impossible. And I wish to thank Patrick Curry, our Editor-in-Chief, for giving me the opportunity to write this Editorial. Happily, I can report that Patrick has invested his writing time elsewhere in the issue, with his Opinion addressing ecocentrism's position on the political spectrum and his review of *The Ends of the World* (Polity Press, 2016), which begin, respectively, on pages 134 and 212. We hope you enjoy this second issue and look forward to receiving your thoughts (www.ecologicalcitizen.net/contact.html). ■

Notes

1 Establishing what I call ecocentric democracy ('ecodemocracy'; Gray and Curry, 2016) will be an important part of decision-making within ecocentric governance.

2 I might be a little biased here. I spend much of my spare time during the northern hemisphere's spring, summer and autumn wandering the surviving scraps of wild nature and non-intensive land usage within the industrialized landscape that surrounds my home trying to document where biodiversity 'clings on'.

3 In my own experience, a voluntary reduction of material consumption and long-haul flights has made me happier, and not just because of the positive impact I know it is having on the rest of life.

4 Social justice could – and, in my opinion, should – be a part of ecological justice, coherent with the bigger picture (and ensuring a genuine long-term sustainability that social justice based on endless economic growth does not).

5 There is a bonus of living ecologically, when coupled with the practice of social egalitarianism, that is especially apparent for white males born in an affluent country: attempts to extinguish any arguments we might make based on claims of privilege are rendered fallacious if our lifestyles demonstrate genuine, hedonistically detrimental sacrifices (and not just in the name of spiritual enrichment).

6 The concept of the 'Anthropocene' is useful, I feel, as a warning that plastic pollution and the global defaunation are so severe that they will be leaving a stark signature in the geological record. However, to think that it might rise from warning metaphor to geological reality and thus rubber-stamp our destruction of the Earth is abhorrent to me.

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"Our ears are open, but we only have a small voice. You can help us grow louder and amplify the impact of our work by spreading the message."