A journey to Earth-centredness

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About the author

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Becoming ecocentric

"For every thing that has life as naturally endeavours to preserve it, and feels pain as severely as we, the great self-conceited lords of the universe."

Anonymous (1755), from *A Voyage to the World in the Centre of the Earth*

"It is only when you suffer that you really understand."

Jules Verne (1864), from *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*

It was a humid night in the summer of 2002, and I was drinking beer in Tortuguero, a village on Costa Rica's north Caribbean coast. I was an undergraduate on a month-long field course. From our base – a field station set in 1000 hectares of rainforest, seven-tenths primary – we spent our time observing wildlife in various ways: swimming in caiman-inhabited lakes; night-trekking along slender jungle paths; and looking, most carefully of all, for the animal that had made a home underneath the deck of our wooden cabin – a bushmaster, the longest venomous snake in the Americas.

The overnight excursion to Tortuguero was our only trip out of the station. Over an Imperial, the local lager, our group reflected on the egg-laying sea turtles we'd just observed, aided by a conservation guide and the light of his red torch. It was on the same beach where the conservation imperative had crystallized for David Ehrenfeld, on a night in the mid-1960s (he witnessed a turtle trailing a line of eggs on the unprotected sand, her undershell having been taken by poachers [Ehrenfeld, 1993]). Another round. Andrew, a bear-like primatologist, looked upset. Contemplating the stress we might have caused these graceful creatures, he said: "That was probably the most unethical thing I've ever done." My reply: "I don't think ethics extends to animals," in a tone more condescending than sympathetic.

The *cerveza* became *ron* and our conversation more radical. A girl from Iowa State University took the prize: if she was driving a car and there was a human ahead, she would not swerve if it meant hitting a jaguar instead. The minds of these American students were broader than those back at Cambridge University. A supposed hotbed of big ideas, it had enclosed me in a materialist-dominated circle, broken only by a few spirited socialists and a solitary green-minded soul (who I ended up marrying). I refuted all that was thrown at me that night, but I could not prevent a seed being planted. Or maybe it was a previously sown grain that was starting to germinate.

From an early age, I felt a great sadness about deforestation and the plight of endangered species, particularly primates. I wrote poems – "Kindness needs to be around / Especially to stop the trees fall to the ground" – and stories. One tale, from when I was 9 or 10, saw a scientist named John team up with the jungle animals to tackle illegal logging. Pippa the parrot was the coordinator, and her grand plan hinged on monkey-wrenching: "John can go and do something to the machinery to make them go away."

I was also deeply interested in the natural world at this time. I kept counts of the birds I saw in my garden, and, with the help of my uncle, learned some of the wild flowers and trees in the surrounding region: the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley, on the English–Welsh border. We took

long walks, collecting nuts and leaves that I could arrange on display tables at school.

I turned eleven and headed to secondary school and a more focused curriculum. There was no place for natural history here, and conservation was little more than a footnote in the syllabus. Although I still cared about the state of the Earth, my attention turned away from natural history towards maths and atheism, and later rationalism, humanism and the scientific method. The school's maths department was having a turbulent time, and I developed a preference for teaching myself. A chemistry report criticized me for getting "sidetracked into irrelevant subject areas" (a relief to re-read today).

I differed from the norm, lacking an interest in learning to drive and resisting the mobile phone. But I was no Luddite. I devoured each new issue of *Scientific American*, inspired and reassured by the promise of techno-fixes to all the Earth's problems. I also sharpened my rationalist edge with a subscription to *Skeptical Inquirer*.

There were times when my interest in natural history was temporarily awakened from its stasis. Perhaps the most memorable was when I travelled around Western Europe for a month, shortly after turning 17. Despite the very limited nature of our funds, my two friends and I made it as far as the French Alps. Climbing the forested slopes there – seeing life on a scale far grander than I'd known before – I felt a new sensation: exhilaration at being alive.

Next came Cambridge. After two weeks of copying chalked equations off titanic blackboards, I decided that I was done with maths. I needed something that would allow me to engage more intimately with the world around me. Looking through the list of other options, I set my heart on studying primatology (a module within the biological anthropology course). Such was the narrow outlook of the university, though, that my permission to change was contingent on completing the year of maths and getting a 2.1.

With my interest in the subject gone, I minimized my activities. A 2.1 was out of the question, I thought, but I was prepared to leave and start again at another university. I made a nervous call home, but my parents were fully supportive. That year, I spent most of my 'academic time' reading books of my choosing (the way I knew to learn), on biology, especially evolution, and nature. Most of all, I loved coffee-table volumes celebrating the Earth's wildlife, which I bought second hand in the institution that was Galloway & Porter. Miraculously, when exam time came, a couple of the papers offered questions that I could tackle by applying what I'd learned at school, and I got the 2.1.

So I studied primatology and then went on to read zoology to complete my degree. However, I opted not to take the module on conservation. To explain why, I need to return to the beach in Tortuguero. My visit had been during the holiday immediately prior to my final year. I learned there how conservationists were considering putting a jaguar-proof fence along the beach to prevent them predating the turtles. "But what about the jaguars?" I thought. It wasn't their fault that turtle populations had plummeted. The more I learned about conservation, the more it seemed to me like god-like meddling (today, though, I would agree that the fence is a lesser of two evils).

By the time I got my bachelor's degree, I was done with academia. The grant-chasing environment, and the culture of backstabbing that I had heard went with it, was not for me. Instead I took a job in medical publishing, and then another, and another. I did some of the things expected of a 'young professional', getting married and buying a house (in east England). My wife and I led a reasonably green life and had already decided not to have children. All the while I maintained a faith in science and progress.

My interest in natural history slowly rekindled, first on trips abroad. Whenever we spent time in forested regions, that feeling of elation I'd experienced as a

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seventeen-year-old in the Alps returned. Then, about five years after leaving university, we took three weeks off work to travel round south-west USA, visiting a dozen national parks and many other state parks. Here, I learned that the exhilaration was not brought about by the forest itself but by immersion in nature, both biological and geological. It was just that in overdeveloped Western Europe, achieving this state of mind required a buffer of trees. With a rekindling interest in natural history came a returning sense of injustice about Earth's destruction. I was now old enough to take action, but I struggled for motivation to do something to help others, knowing that most people around me didn't care.

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Loch Mallachie and Scots pine forest, in the Scottish Highlands. Seeing ospreys nesting on the nearby Loch Garten was one of the most memorable experiences of the author's childhood. Joe made his first return to the forest and lochs in his early 30s and shortly after began a mental transition (back) to ecocentrism.

In the year I hit 30, I decided to reduce my working week to 25 hours so that I could start a part-time MSc in Forestry. This increased my interest in the woodland around my home and completed the restoration of my passion for local natural history. However, what I was learning on my local walks, such as the degradation caused by modern agriculture, and on the course – the deep flaws in carbon offsetting, for instance – turned my sense of environmental injustice into full-blown despair.

My response was to come back fighting, but I had a single weapon, rationality. I recalled how I was taught to observe the world as a zoologist: impartially as an outsider. Through the 'zoologist's lens', how could I judge humans differently from other animals? Destroying the Earth was just human's natural evolutionary destiny, like it was a dolphin's to swim in a pod or a chimpanzee's to tease termites out of their nests using grass-blades. Seeing myself as being outside the system calmed my mental suffering for a few weeks, but the veneer was chipped away by every mouthful of food I consumed from the Earth's soil and every sip of water from its river catchments. The bleak basis of this coping mechanism was revealed. And the anguish returned. Until I had this critical thought: Can I not be *inside* the system and still value all life-forms in the same way, as an equal player in nature?

Once the valuation barrier between humans and the rest of life had been broken, there were only two paths that *rationally* made sense to me. One was to nihilism; the other to measuring all life's meaning with the same stick. There was no defensible breakpoint in the middle. I chose the latter and, at the age of 32, suddenly, and finally, had the motivation to fight for the Earth, for all those life-forms *without a voice*.

I reflected on that night in Tortuguero a dozen years earlier, the conversations that challenged the anthropocentric valuation system by considering a human and a big cat side by side in a moral judgement and by applying ethics to reptiles. I did not know the word for it then, but I had emerged from my crisis *biocentric*. My next thought, naturally, was to wonder how many people saw life the same way. An internet search led me to the Deep Ecology platform. The existence of this was reassuring, but I still had unanswered questions. Not knowing where to turn next, I sent a group email to local members of a population charity that I belonged to and had a response from one of its advisors, Patrick Curry. A few get-togethers with Patrick were enough to help me understand what David Ehrenfeld (1993) meant when he argued passionately that books alone are not sufficient for transmission of knowledge; that the process also demands a skilled instructor. Through these meetings I graduated from biocentrism to ecocentrism – for me, another purely rational leap.

But I did not yet have a completely stable footing. What was I to do about science and reason? Here I sought help from Stan Rowe and Edward Abbey. Rowe (1987) reassured me that science: "with the goal of fitting civilizations to ecological models" was still fine. And according to Abbey (1984: 228–9), reason was okay too. It just needed to be redefined as "intelligence informed by sympathy." Or as "fidelity to what alone we really know and really must love—this one life, this one earth on which we live."

Summing up: while, in my case, early contact with the more-than-human world presumably laid the groundwork, it took a period of mental suffering to jar me from humanism to a more inclusive ethic. Is this an early rumbling, I wonder, of a Gaia-like 'self-correcting mechanism', in which the Earth's destruction triggers a mass ecocentric awakening while the worst outcomes of the sixth mass extinction can still be averted? This possibility gives me much hope – for sea turtles, for jaguars, for *all* our futures. ■

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