



Why ecocentrism is *the* key pathway to sustainability

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The Earth's biodiversity and ecological integrity is being lost at an ever-increasing rate due to human impacts. The traditional, post-enlightenment Western anthropocentric worldview has failed to halt this (and is almost certainly responsible for it). Changing our worldview to ecocentrism however offers hope for solving the environmental crisis.

What is ecocentrism?

Ecocentrism finds inherent (intrinsic) value in all of nature. It takes a much wider view of the world than does anthropocentrism, which sees individual humans and the human species as more valuable than all other organisms. Ecocentrism is the broadest of worldviews, but there are related worldviews. Ecocentrism goes beyond *biocentrism* (ethics that sees inherent value to all *living* things) by including environmental systems as wholes, and their abiotic aspects. It also goes beyond *zoocentrism* (seeing value in animals) on account of explicitly including flora and the ecological contexts for organisms. Ecocentrism is thus the umbrella that includes biocentrism and zoocentrism, because all three of these worldviews value the nonhuman, with ecocentrism having the widest vision. Given that life relies on geological processes and geomorphology to sustain it, and that 'geodiversity' also has intrinsic value, the broader term 'ecocentrism' seems most appropriate.

Historical roots of ecocentrism

Ecocentrism as a worldview has been with humanity since we evolved. Many indigenous cultures around the world speak of lore and (in Australia) 'law' that reflects an ecocentric view of the world. Ecologist Aldo Leopold in *Sand County Almanac* wrote the classic evocation of ecocentrism in 'The Land Ethic', which expanded the 'community' to include animals, plants and the land itself. Philosopher Arne Naess in 1973 coined the term 'deep ecology' for similar sentiments, later articulating the notion in Principle 1 of the *Deep Ecology Platform*:

The well-being of non-human life on Earth has value in itself. This value is independent of any instrumental usefulness for limited human purposes.

In terms of ecocentrism helping to solve the environmental crisis, ecologist John Stanley Rowe has argued:

It seems to me that the only promising universal belief-system is ecocentrism, defined as a value-shift from *Homo sapiens* to planet earth. A scientific rationale backs the value-shift. All organisms are evolved from Earth, sustained by Earth. Thus Earth, not organism, is the metaphor for Life. Earth not humanity is the Life-center, the creativity-center. Earth is the whole of which we are subservient parts. Such a fundamental philosophy gives ecological awareness and sensitivity an enfolding, material focus.

Acknowledgment of intrinsic value internationally

The intrinsic value of nature has had a mixed history in terms of international recognition. The [1972 Stockholm Declaration](#) was anthropocentric, as was the [World Conservation Strategy](#) in 1980. In contrast, the [World Charter for Nature](#) in 1982 was underpinned by strong ecocentric principles, stipulating that humanity and culture are part of nature. In 1987, the [Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future](#) argued that development: "must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, soils, and living beings." It also (in a little-noticed passage) expressed the view that nature has intrinsic value. However, the [Tokyo Declaration](#) that accompanied this was anthropocentric, as was the later [Rio Declaration](#) in 1992.

The visionary [Earth Charter](#) in 2000 (<http://earthcharter.org/>) strongly advanced an ecocentric worldview, urging in Principle 1a that we:

Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

The [Johannesburg Declaration](#) in 2002 however did not endorse the *Earth Charter*. Likewise, The UN Rio +20 Summit [The Future We Want](#) failed to endorse the intrinsic value of nature. However, in 2008, Ecuador enshrined [Rights for Nature](#) as a part of its new Constitution. In 2010 Bolivia also passed the [Law of the Rights of Mother Earth](#). In contrast, the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) passed in 2015 failed to mention ecocentrism, the intrinsic value of nature, or acknowledge the rights of nature. This mixed history likely reflects the problem presented by the dominance of anthropocentrism in government, academia and indeed, the world's religious traditions. It highlights the need for academics to [speak out](#) in support of ecocentrism.

Intrinsic value free from human valuation

We maintain that nature, and life on Earth is *inherently good*. That is to say nature has intrinsic value, irrespective of whether humans are the ones valuing it. Environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston argues, "Some values are already there, discovered not generated by the valuer ..." It is true that, as far as we know at present, we humans are the only species that reflects on and *applies* moral values. However, we can also understand that life has co-evolved to form the wondrous complexity of the web of life – and contend nature has value, whether humans perceive this or not. The theory of autonomous intrinsic value of nature frees humanity from its anthropocentric obsession that it is all about *our* valuing. It states clearly that nature has intrinsic value, whether or not humans perceive and acknowledge this.

Is ecocentrism anti-human?

Ecocentrism has been labelled 'anti-human', or as contrary to concerns for social justice. We reject this contention. Ecocentrists overwhelmingly support inter-human social justice, however they also support inter-species justice, or *ecojustice*, for the nonhuman world. Just as environmental systems involve many interrelationships, we think environmental and social systems are entwined, and so social and ecojustice concerns are (and must be) as well.

Anthropocentrism strong in academia

Anthropocentrism is the prevalent ideology in most societies around the world, and also permeates academia and domestic and international governance. Four examples of this are: 'ecosystem services'; 'strong sustainability'; 'education for sustainable development'; and the so-called 'new conservation' approach. Anthropocentrism continues to be dominant, even in venues where ecological sustainability is a stated goal. We contend, however, that a fully sustainable future is highly unlikely without an ecocentric value shift that recognizes the intrinsic value of nature and a corresponding Earth jurisprudence. *Hence the need for academics to [speak out](#) in support of ecocentrism.*

Why ecocentrism is an essential solution

We believe that ecocentrism, through its recognition of humanity's duties towards nature, is central to solving our unprecedented environmental crisis. Its importance is for multiple reasons:

In ethical terms: ecocentrism expands the moral community (and ethics) from being just about ourselves. It means we are not concerned *only* with humanity; we extend respect and care to all life, and indeed to terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems themselves.

In evolutionary terms: ecocentrism reflects the fact *Homo sapiens* evolved out of the rich web of life on Earth – a legacy stretching back an almost unimaginable 3.5 billion years. Other species literally are our cousins and relatives (close and distant), recognition of a *biological kinship* that many have recognized confers moral responsibilities toward all species.

In spiritual terms: Many people and some societies have developed ecocentric moral sentiments. There is increasing evidence that ecocentric values are being fused into nature-based, ecocentric spiritualities, many of which are innovative and new. With such spiritualities, even people who are entirely naturalistic in their worldviews, often speak of the Earth and its ecosystems as 'sacred' and thus worthy of reverent care and defense.

In ecological terms: ecocentrism reminds us that all life is interdependent and that *both* humans and nonhumans are absolutely dependent on the ecosystem processes that nature provides. An anthropocentric conservation ethic alone is wholly inadequate for conserving biodiversity. Ecocentrism is rooted in an evolutionary understanding that reminds us that we are latecomers to what Leopold evocatively called "the odyssey of evolution". This logically leads both to empathy for our fellow inhabitants; and also to *humility*, because in this process we are no different from other species. And ecology teaches humility in another way, as we do not know everything about the world's ecosystems, and never will.

Western scientific thought corroborates an ecocentric worldview through an understanding of eco-evolutionary processes, hence the science of ecocentricity corresponds closely to belief systems of those indigenous peoples (and others) who have in various ways come to see themselves as part of a sacred world. We conclude that an ecocentric worldview follows naturally from our evolution-derived, empathetic and aesthetic capacities, which when combined with our rational abilities, have enabled us over time to increasingly understand the way we (and the rest of the living world) came to be. And this has enabled us to see that indeed,

we are part of nature, embedded in a beautiful and wondrous living world. Surely, if anything is worthy of respect, even reverence, it is *life itself* on our own home planet. We maintain that a transformation toward an ecocentric worldview, and corresponding value systems, is a necessary path toward the flourishing of life on Earth, including that of our own species.

Accordingly, we suggest you sign the ecocentrism statement:

<http://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/statement-of-ecocentrism.php?submit=Sign+our+Ecocentrism+Statement>

More information about ecocentrism can be found in our recently published article in [*The Ecological Citizen, Issue I 2017*](#)

The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere.

Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

MAHB Blog: <https://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/statement-ecocentrism/>