The Troubled Marriage of Deep Ecology and Bioregionalism

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ABSTRACT

Bioregionalism is often presented as the politics of deep ecology, or deep ecology's social philosophy. That the ties uniting these doctrines are rarely explored can be put down to a perception amongst commentators that such links are self-evident and therefore unworthy of closer examination. By arguing that the bonds between deep ecology and bioregionalism are more tenuous than has often been assumed, this paper addresses this theoretical lacuna. There is nothing exclusive to the central tenets of deep ecology which provides us with a coherent rationale for a specifically bioregional form of decentralisation. However, deep ecology has nonetheless had an appreciable impact on bioregional thinking. In this context it is argued that bioregionalism's assimilation of aspects of deep ecology, and particularly an emphasis upon cross-species identification, undermines the project in various ways.

KEYWORDS

Deep ecology, bioregionalism, place, decentralisation.

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INTRODUCTION

Bron Taylor (2000a: 269) notes that 'bioregionalism has almost universally been grafted onto deep ecology, becoming its de facto social philosophy'. Bioregionalism puts 'the flesh on the skeleton of a deep ecology platform that was strikingly bereft of political conviction' (Taylor 2000a: 273). That theorists operating within both camps have perceived there to be a link between the two theories is undeniable. However, the reasoning behind this perceived connection is rarely scrutinised. This paper seeks to rectify this by explicitly focusing upon the coherence of this linkage and its implications for bioregionalism. The first section provides an outline of the central tenets of deep ecology. The paper then explores the various ways in which the two theories may be connected. The main finding here is that there is nothing exclusive to the central principles of deep ecology that provides a coherent rationale for a specifically bioregional form of decentralisation. The link between deep ecology and bioregionalism is found to be contingent at best, contradictory at worst. This is not to say that the *perception* of a link between the two theories has had no impact. On the contrary, deep ecology's central concern with changing the worldview of the individual, and in particular with engendering identification with nature, has been assimilated into bioregional thinking. The second main finding is that this assimilation has created various problems for bioregionalism. A section dealing with the problem of defining the concept of the bioregion demonstrates how a preoccupation with identification can translate into an overly idealist and relativist delineation of the term.

DEEP ECOLOGY

The term 'deep ecology' first appeared in Arne Naess's 1973 paper 'The shallow and the deep, long range ecology movements'. In this article, Naess separates a deeper, more trenchant critique of industrial society and its value base from reformist, utilitarian or shallow forms of environmentalism.

The first important deviation Naess's deep ecology makes from its shallow adversary concerns the conceptualisation of nature. Deep ecology rejects the 'man-in-environment image', instead favouring 'the relational, total field image' (Naess 1973: 95). Following Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, according to which 'everything is connected to everything else' (Commoner 1971: 3), deep ecologists conceptualise nature holistically rather than atomistically, as a self-regulating, interdependent whole rather than a collection of disparate elements. Nature is more than the sum of its parts and displays a complexity beyond human comprehension. This has considerable implications. Our knowledge of nature's workings is, and always will be, limited. Deep ecologists therefore advise that we get off our self-erected pedestal, accept the fact that 'nature

knows best' (Commoner 1971: 41), and set about minimising our impact upon natural systems, as we will always be uncertain of the detrimental effects such impacts may have.

There are also significant implications for our view of humanity's place in nature. Enlightenment humanism locates the essence of humanity in its ability to break with natural determinants, be they instinctual, biological or otherwise. As Luc Ferry (1993: 5) puts it, man's '*humanitas* resides in his freedom'. For deep ecologists, such thinking has fuelled the misperception that humanity stands apart from nature. It is only a short step from this to an anthropocentric value system in which the human is viewed as the sole source of value in the world – a view that, according to deep ecologists, serves to legitimise the domination and exploitation of nature. In opposition to this, deep ecologists stress that humans are a part of the interconnected web of life that constitutes nature, as dependent on the biosphere as the next life-form and no more intrinsically valuable. This leads to the principle of 'biospherical egalitarianism', according to which every living entity is ascribed 'the equal right to live and blossom', even if this is only subscribed to in principle, as 'any realistic praxis necessitates some killing, exploitation, and suppression' (Naess 1973: 95; 96).

The foundation of this principle is articulated in the first of the eight points that collectively constitute the deep ecology platform.[1] Here Naess claims that 'the wellbeing of non-human life on Earth has value in itself' (Naess 1984: 266). Therefore, rather than being solely concerned with the wellbeing of human life, deep ecology has as its objective the flourishing of human *and* non-human life. However, it is not merely the *inclusiveness* of its sphere of concern that is defining of deep ecology; the *type* of value ascribed to non-human life is as important as the bare fact that it is valued at all. As Naess explains, 'this value is independent of any instrumental usefulness for limited human purposes' (Naess 1984: 266). Such thinking forms the basis of an ecocentric value system, according to which non-human entities have interests of their own and thereby possess a value intrinsic to themselves rather than merely as means to the achievement of human ends.

However, deep ecology has undergone corrective surgery since Naess's original articulation in the early 1970s. As Alan Carter (1995: 329) implies, this was perhaps inevitable: the principle of biospherical egalitarianism seeks to have all life-forms treated equally, whereas the principle of the total field image seeks to blur the boundaries of these life forms by conceiving them not as distinct, compact entities, but as 'knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations' (Naess 1973: 95).

Such tensions could only be resolved by one principle taking precedence. In the early to mid-eighties a series of articles by Devall and Sessions, which, combined, form the basis of their *Deep Ecology* (1985), and Warwick Fox (1984a; 1984b) set about the task of enthroning the total field image as the guiding principles of deep ecology. The fact that this principle is an ontologi-

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cal principle, a statement regarding the nature of being, rather than a normative or ethical axiom, has led John Barry (1999) to define this shift in emphasis as the 'ontological turn' in deep ecology. It turns the central aim of deep ecology away from constructing an ethical theory around the idea of intrinsic value and towards what Fox (1995) calls a 'transpersonal' form of ecology, which is concerned with engendering *identification* with non-human nature – with the process of what Naess terms *'Self-realization'*. By the mid-nineties this form of deep ecology had achieved dominance, with the translation into English of Naess's own *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (1989) making an influential contribution to this shift.[2]

As indicated, central to the ontological articulation of deep ecology is the notion that through an increased *identification* with nonhuman life we can expand the self beyond its egoistic liberal sense to encompass parts of nature external to the individual organism. Naess's theory of what he terms *gestalt thinking* provides a useful starting point from which to explore this process. He explains the basis of the theory by means of an analogy with music:

> When we hear the first tones of a very well-known complex piece of music, the experience of those few tones is very different from how they would be experienced if we had never heard the piece. In the first case, the tones are said to fit into a *gestalt*, into our understanding of the piece *as a whole*. The basic character of the whole influences *decisively* our experiences of each of the tones. (Naess 1989: 57)

A *gestalt* is therefore a holistic understanding of the whole. Such an understanding is qualitatively different from an understanding of the workings of the individual parts which constitute that whole, as understanding the whole itself changes our perception of these parts. Naess applies such thinking to our perceptions of nature. Once we understand nature as an interconnected whole, our perception of its differing parts, ourselves included, alters dramatically. In particular, such a holistic understanding reveals a *commonality of interest* within nature. All parts of nature partake in, contribute to and depend on the whole for their existence. Our goals and interests are therefore tied-up with the rest of nature, thereby rendering nonsensical any notion that we can pursue them in isolation. This includes not only other beings, but also landforms, watersheds, rivers and the systems which they constitute. For Naess, through experiencing such a unity and commonality of interest, we acquire a sense of solidarity with such entities. We come to *identify* with other parts of nature by seeing ourselves in the other, and as such expand our sense of self to include the other.

Dissolving the barriers between the self and the other and therefore the valuer and the valued, allows deep ecologists to side-step the persistent problem of finding value independent of a valuing subject, a problem which has haunted intrinsic value theory. By a process of identification we no longer perceive the I and the not-I as separate things. The implication of this, as Andrew Brennan

(1988: 43) points out, is that 'provided I am valuable, then so is my extended self, the natural world'. We need no longer worry about finding objective value 'out there', as there is no out there. The defence of nature becomes a form of self-defence; it rests not on moral law or ethical obligation, but is instead intuitive, natural and automatic. Our actions become part of the process of Self-realization, where *Self* is capitalised to indicate that the development of the potentialities of all beings is experienced as part of our own individual self-development.

For Devall (1988: 71), this bypassing of the difficulties inherent to traditional ethical theorising is essential, as 'Our ontological crisis is so severe that we cannot wait for the perfect intellectual theory to provide us with the answers. We need earth-bonding experiences'. Following Kant, Naess (1989: 85) distinguishes between 'beautiful' and 'moral' actions: 'Moral actions are motivated by acceptance of moral law, and manifest themselves clearly when acting against inclination. A person acts beautifully when acting benevolently from inclination'. For Naess, 'fostering inclination is *essential* in every aspect of socialization and acculturation, and therefore also in the global ecological crisis. Moralizing is too narrow, too patronizing and too open to the question, "Who are you? What is the relation of your preaching and your life?"' (Naess 1993: 71, emphasis added). And it is the process of identification, of Self-realization, that is essential to fostering this 'inclination' towards caring for the environment (Naess 1989: 85–86). For Fox (1995: 246–247), 'This is why one finds transpersonal ecologists making statements to the effect that they are more concerned with ontology or cosmology … than with ethics'; this shift 'is (and should be) deep ecology's guiding star' (Fox 1984b: 204).

As Eric Katz (2000: 24) correctly observes, then, the deep ecology position, as it presently stands, can be boiled down to three basic features: '(1) identification with the nonhuman natural world; (2) the preeminent value of Self-realization; and (3) a relational holistic ontology as the basis of normative values and decisions'. As Katz (2000: 24) is himself aware, however, this interpretation is not uncontroversial: 'The chief objection to the use of these ideas as definitive of the deep ecology position is their association with Naess's own version of deep ecology'. To be more precise, the criticism of such accounts is that they fail to distinguish between Naess's own *personal* Ecosophy T and his articulation of the much broader deep ecology *political platform*.

Naess defines deep ecology as a *movement* rather than a foundational philosophical system. The deep ecology *platform* defines this movement by outlining the common ground upon which all advocates of deep ecology converge. Its emphasis, as John Clark (2000: 4) observes, is on 'expressing widespread agreement on fundamental points of theory and practice', and on facilitating 'cooperation between those who accept an ecological view of reality (sometimes called ecocentrism) and who share the goal of changing society's direction from an ecocidal one to an ecologically sound one'. Naess employs what Harold Glasser (1995: 71) terms a 'methodological vagueness' when outlining

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the platform. This allows its principles to be derived from a variety of ultimate premises or foundations. Andrew Light (2000: 136) is correct to observe that in this respect 'Naess, perhaps more than any other deep ecologist, has worked to foster a form of metatheoretical pluralism'. Each individual must cultivate their own total view or *ecosophy*, which Naess (1989: 38) defines as 'a philosophical world-view or system inspired by the conditions of life in the ecosphere'. They should find their own grounding for an acceptance of the principles of the deep ecology platform.

Glasser (1997: 76) stresses that 'Naess's brand of radical ecosophical pluralism ensures that no particular ecosophy, his own Ecosophy T or any other, is to be identified with the deep ecology approach'. However, he considers this to be exactly what Fox does when he argues that 'Self-realization' should be recognised as the ultimate norm of the deep ecology approach (see Fox 1995). Glasser (1997: 75) accepts that 'it is indisputable that 'Self-realization!' is the nonderived or ultimate norm of Ecosophy T'; however, it 'is only one of a multiplicity of viable nonderived norms that are consistent with Naess's deep ecology approach'. By presenting 'Self-realization' as the fundamental, ultimate norm of the overall philosophy of deep ecology, Glasser thinks Fox 'radically diminishes the intent and scope of the deep ecology movement' (Glasser 1997: 82). The same could be said of the tripartite definition of deep ecology subscribed to here.

This criticism has its merits; however, Katz (2000: 24) convincingly argues that although the three basic features of the ontological form of deep ecology are deemphasised in the deep ecology platform, 'in [an] attempt to achieve ideological consensus', this 'must not blind us to the fact that these are crucial features of the deep ecology position as it appears in almost all published discussions'. As he goes on to observe, 'virtually all discussions of deep ecology use these ideas as core doctrines' and 'virtually all serious deep ecological thinkers … agree to versions of Naess's key ideas' (Katz 2000: 25).

It is therefore legitimate to use the definition of deep ecology outlined above, while acknowledging that this is only one form of deep ecology, albeit the overwhelmingly dominant one. Indeed, given that the main ways in which deep ecology and bioregionalism may be linked revolve around the notion of identification with place, the acknowledgement that the concept of identification may be considered a contingent component of deep ecology merely reinforces one of the main arguments of this paper, that the *overall* link between the two theories is itself contingent. Before going into this in more detail, however, it is essential to first spell out what bioregionalism is.

BIOREGIONALISM

Bioregionalism is a body of thought concerned with contemporary society's disconnection from its natural base. Our cultural and economic practices have

come to be at odds with the sustenance of the ecological systems we rely on for the provision of our material life. Political boundaries are superimposed onto geographical regions in an ecologically arbitrary manner which takes no account of the actually existing natural regions and their boundaries. As Snyder (1980: 24–25) points out:

> We are accustomed to accepting the political boundaries of counties and states, and then national boundaries, as being some sort of regional definition; and although, in some cases, there is some validity to those lines… the lines are quite often arbitrary and serve only to confuse people's sense of natural associations and relationships.

Such an arbitrary grafting of political boundaries onto natural ones precludes an adaptive fit between societies and the natural systems, or bioregions, which they inhabit. McGinnis (1999: 72–74) stresses the autopoietic, self-generating nature of ecological regions or ecosystems. They are, to a degree, organisationally closed, in that the self-generating or self-correcting processes that sustain them are largely contained within set boundaries, which emerge as the system's components interact. This being the case, where political boundaries cut across such systems there is a greater probability that the impact of any social interaction with nature will occur outside these boundaries, and therefore outside the field of perception of the polity inhabiting that region. To remedy this situation, and ensure that the majority of natural processes are contained within the boundaries of the polity, 'bioregional boundaries should reflect the self-producing and self-withdrawing characteristic of living systems' (McGinnis 1999: 73). Milbrath (1989: 211) is correct, therefore, to view the idea that 'economic, social and political life should be organised by regions that are defined by natural phenomena' as a central principle of bioregionalism.

This realignment of political and natural boundaries allows for a return to the practice of *living-in-place* – of 'following the necessities and pleasures of life as they are uniquely presented by a particular site, and evolving ways to ensure long-term occupancy of that site' (Berg and Dasmann 1977: 399). Bioregionalists aim to create decentralised, self-sufficient, self-ruling, sustainable communities, where 'culture is integrated with nature at the level of the *particular ecosystem'* (Gorsline and House 1974: 39). Indeed, the bioregion offers 'a scale of decentralisation best able to support the achievement of cultural and ecological sustainability' (Aberley 1999: 37). Land is held in common at the community level, creating what Joel Kovel (2002: 174) has accurately termed a form of primitive communism.

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BIOREGIONALISM AND DEEP ECOLOGY

A useful starting point for an exploration of the perceived connection between bioregionalism and deep ecology is the developmental aspect Naess introduces to his theory of *gestalt* thinking. For Naess, as we mature we come to perceive greater and more encompassing *gestalts*, and therefore encompass an ever-greater diversity of nature into one's self. However, it is an identification with what may be termed *home-place* – the immediate natural surroundings of our developmental years – which is the most vital for the health of our self:

> To move from the [home] area implies the loss of an appreciable part of one's self – loss of gestalts which comprise 'one's roots', 'my surroundings', 'our surroundings'. New gestalts must be built up at the new location, but after the developmental years it is not possible to recreate the most fundamental gestalts and symbols. One remains a stranger towards or in oneself; or one preserves the old associations, and a self which belongs to somewhere else, an emigrant. (Naess 1989: 62)

For Naess then, without this fundamental identification with home-place, we are in a sense psychologically damaged and unable to cultivate higher-level gestalts. This is particularly worrying for deep ecologists given their belief that identification is essential to the cultivation of a caring attitude towards nature. Our identification with home-place and other regional *gestalts* are essential if we are to view their defence as being our self-defence.

Such concerns clearly resonate with bioregionalism's emphasis on reinhabitation, on 'becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships which operate within and around it' (Berg and Dasmann 1977: 399). As Andrew McLaughlin (1993: 207–208, emphasis added) correctly observes, 'It is care for other life forms, *engendered by an identification with place*, that is one of the reasons for the affinity between deep ecology and bioregionalism. One can truly love what one knows.' However, beyond merely *resonating* with the aim of identification, it may be that a bioregional form of decentralisation is an important *contributor* to this process. As Mathews (1996: 66) comments, 'small face-to-face communities provide conditions for the growth of relational selves'. Naess similarly believes that local autonomy and self-sufficiency provide the conditions for identification and self-realisation, as people have more control over their environment in decentralised, self-sufficient, autonomous local communities than in centralised polities where the sources of need satisfaction are remote (Naess 1989: 204–206).

Such observations help explain why deep ecologists have perceived bioregionalism to be the most suitable vehicle for the implementation of their goals. Bioregionalists themselves have generally embraced this linkage. Indeed, as Taylor (2000b: 57) notes, at the second *North American Bioregional Congress*, the principles of deep ecology were adopted almost intact. This grafting of

bioregionalism onto deep ecology has unsurprisingly had a weighty impact upon the shape of bioregional theory itself. It has imbued bioregionalism with a tendency to focus upon the consciousness or worldview of the individual when explaining the causes of the current ecological predicament. In particular, and in accordance with deep ecology, bioregionalists regularly emphasise the lack of human identification with the biotic communities that constitute the bioregions they inhabit; for example, McGinnis et al. (1999: 206) mourn the loss of an 'ecology of shared identity'. Such a dysfunctional consciousness is also often expressed in spiritual terms; for example, Kirkpatrick Sale laments the abandonment of Gaea worshipping religions in which nature is viewed as sacred (Sale 2000: 12–15).

Such processes are invariably tied up with what may be termed an *epistemic* disconnection from nature. Bioregionalists often point out that as a species we lack knowledge of the complexity of the processes and relationships which constitute the bioregions we inhabit, and of the carrying capacities that represent their ecological limits. Peter Berg challenges us to ask the city dweller where their water comes from: 'most will answer with something like "the faucet, of course. Want water? Turn the tap handle"' (Berg 1990: 137).

These more individual forms of disconnection contribute in turn to a more general cultural disconnection from nature. Our lack of psychological and spiritual identity with, and knowledge of, the biotic community, has fuelled the mutation of a misfit mass culture: an abstract, homogenous and rootless social entity, disconnected and floating above the idiosyncratic and heterogeneous bioregions which form the patchwork quilt beneath. Such a maladaptive, misfit culture cannot help but be damaging to the natural regions which it inhabits but ignores.

Where such a supposedly dysfunctional worldview is given explanatory primacy as the cause of the current ecological predicament, it is unsurprising that the solution prescribed is to transform this worldview – to engender an ecological consciousness. McGinnis (1999: 67) emphasises that 'bioregionalism requires the natural incorporation of interior with the exterior, and the field of bodily expansion to include others and place'; Berg (1990: 139) stresses that 'bioregional politics originate with individuals who identify with real places'; again adopting a more spiritual tone, Sale (2000: 41) pleads for us to 'regain the spirit of the ancient Greeks, once again comprehending the earth as a living creature and contriving the modern equivalent of the worship of Gaea'; while Snyder (1990: 41) emphasises the need to identify with 'the spirit of the place' and realise 'that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole'.

This is not to say that bioregionalists are ignorant of the relationship between changing worldviews and socio-economic factors. To take but two examples, McGinnis (1999: 61–68) comments on how the increasingly prevalent conceptualisation of nature as a purely instrumental value and resource is bound up

with the requirements of the industrial capitalist system, while Sale (2000: 19) similarly states that 'for the new *capitalism* … the underlying principles of the scientific ideology were ideal'. The point being made is simply that their *focus* when explaining and prescribing solutions for the ecological predicament tends to be on the ideological *aspects* of society's disconnection from its natural base. This focus undoubtedly leads to important observations: epistemic disconnection is clearly something that needs to be dealt with if sustainability is to be achieved; we need to understand once again the workings of the regions we inhabit and rely upon, and thereby the consequences of our actions, culture and lifestyle.

The linking of deep ecology and bioregionalism via the process of identification is subjected to critical analysis below. However, before undertaking this, the next section makes a necessary detour by outlining a *materialist* analysis of society's disconnection from its natural base. There are two reasons for undertaking this detour: first, such an analysis supplements and enriches the bioregionalist account of epistemic disconnection by bringing to light aspects of this disconnection which may be overlooked when the focus is explicitly on ideas, beliefs and attitudes; and second, as becomes clear later, this analysis also helps shed light on the problems deep ecologists face in the operationalisation and justification of a specifically bioregional form of decentralisation.

DISCONNECTION FROM NATURE: A MATERIALIST VIEW

One of the basic tasks of any successful economy is to ensure that society's labour capacity is allocated in need-satisfying production of differing types. This is done through the management of the division of labour. Under capitalism, any given expenditure of labour is socially validated as being part of the *necessary* labour time of society, as being *need*-satisfying production, by the end-product realising an exchange value on the market. The market therefore regulates the division of labour *postproduction*.

As Paul Burkett (1999: 58) points out, for such a system to become the dominant, generalised form of production, there must be a social separation of workers from the conditions of production, of which nature is included. Such a separation ensures that no individual can obtain that which is necessary for his or her subsistence independent of interaction with the commodity market, with wage-labour becoming the only means of obtaining the money necessary to be able to undertake this interaction successfully. This fundamentally alters our relationship with nature. We no longer obtain the necessary use-values for our survival directly from nature, but indirectly through interaction with the market. Workers no longer rely upon the conditions of production worked upon for the provision of their means of subsistence, and an acute division of labour ensures that they experience an increasingly narrow relationship with nature, stemming from their increasingly specialised role within the productive process.

As a result, they have no overarching knowledge of the totality of our productive relationship with nature, but only of their particular part in that process. For the rest of the time they occupy the role of consumer, gaining use-values indirectly through the market rather than directly from nature.

Such a disconnection is necessary for a growth economy, as it allows for the transcendence of natural limits. Were the towns, cities and indeed nation-states of the developed world restricted to producing and using resources only within their immediate surroundings, while maintaining current consumption rates, their resources would be exhausted within a short space of time. The transcendence of localised natural limits requires the market to cast its net over an ever-increasing geographical area, providing access to an ever-greater resource base, until it has come to engulf the globe as a whole. At this global level our relationship with nature is at its most indirect and distant. The global market serves to mask the origins of products, the manner in which they are produced, the impact this production has on nature, and indeed the extent of our dependence upon nature as a whole. The impression that local adaptive fitness has been replaced by global adaptive fitness is achieved through the exporting of production and pollution to either uninhabited areas or developing countries.

This materialist analysis demonstrates how our epistemic disconnection from nature is a result of our separation from the conditions of production. As mentioned, this account also helps shed light on some of the problems in attempting to provide a specifically deep ecological justification for a bioregional form of decentralisation. The next section details such problems.

DEEP ECOLOGY AND BIOREGIONAL DECENTRALISATION

As noted above, the idea that decentralisation to the bioregional level helps engender identification is one way in which the gap between deep ecology and bioregionalism may be bridged. This process of identification is vital to the cultivation of a proper attitude of care towards the environment. However, there are problems with this form of linkage. If we are conceptualising a process in which identification is the product and *aim* of decentralisation, it cannot also provide the motivation for it. That is, if deep ecologists believe, as has been shown to be the case, that an ecological consciousness based on identification is an essential prerequisite for a caring attitude towards the environment, why would anyone wish to undertake such a radical programme of decentralisation?

Of course, the deep ecological literature is peppered with arguments that stress the ecological virtues of decentralisation without alluding to identification. To pick just a couple of examples, Sale stresses that decentralisation and self-sufficiency preclude the transcendence of localised natural limits, as 'people do not, other things being equal, pollute and damage those natural systems on which they *depend for life* and livelihood' (Sale 2000: 54), while Naess (1989:

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144) himself sees decentralised polities as more compatible with small-scale 'soft' technologies. But the point still stands: identification with, and a caring attitude towards, the environment would have to exist already for these arguments to have motivational purchase. Viewing decentralisation as a means to engendering identification therefore seems to put the cart of political change before the horse of moral motivation.

Turning this argument on its head, another way of interpreting the idea that deep ecology and bioregionalism are linked via the notion of identification with place would be to start with the recognition that community identification with the bioregion can be cultivated *prior* to decentralisation. This being the case, the argument could plausibly be made that identification with the bioregion would ignite a community's desire for decentralisation on the grounds that it allows them to better manage and protect such regions. However, the above analysis of society's economic disconnection from the land highlights difficulties with such reasoning. First, as shown, one of the functions served by society's disconnection from nature is that it acts to keep to a minimum, especially in the developed world, the perception that current economic practices are unsustainable. Environmental degradation – for example in the form of waste or damaging forms of production – is often exported either to areas where there are no human inhabitants or to the developing world, where debt and the threat of capital flight are used to ensure that such conditions are accepted, or more accurately, not actively rejected. Consequently, for those in the *developed* world to *focus* solely on their own bioregion will not necessarily reveal the damaging effects of our current economic system. As Marius de Geus (1996: 195) argues, 'local communities lack a general overview of the "total ecological situation"'. Following on from this, even if a knowledge of the destructiveness of the current economic system were acquired, if a community only *identifies* and cares for their own bioregion, the perverse situation may arise where it becomes irrational for a it to wish to move to the type of self-sufficient economy advocated by bioregionalists, as in the ways identified above, the market protects the environment of the developed world from the degradation our consumption patterns would otherwise inflict upon it. As Barry (1995: 189) implies, this would especially be the case for developed countries occupying resource-poor ecosystems.

Naess' theory of *gestalt* thinking provides us with a further avenue to explore. The argument could be made that it is possible to generate, prior to decentralisation, not only identification with the region, but with higher-level *gestalts* and indeed the biosphere as a whole. Once this global identification has been achieved, the motivation to decentralise will be based not only on a care for our region, but for the biosphere as a whole. This would reduce the danger of caring and identifying with one's own bioregion at the expense of global sustainability. It is also the case that those arguments for decentralisation which do not allude to its ability to assist in engendering identification will derive motivational purchase from the existence of such a global consciousness.

Such a view resonates with the spirit of the 'think globally, act locally' slogan, and, as shown, deep ecologists clearly believe that the cultivation of higher-level *gestalts* is possible; indeed, as Tony Lynch (1996: 150) points out, with deep ecology 'not only… are we to "think like a mountain, to think like a bear", we are to think like every mountain and every bear and everything else'. However, deep ecologists also highlight that this process is hindered by our current mobile society. Indeed, Naess critiques contemporary society on the basis that its increased mobility destroys *gestalt* understandings (Naess 1989: 62). On this thinking it is difficult to see how deep ecologists could subscribe to the view that a *global* consciousness could be achieved within our current society. There may also be a tension between the need for such a global consciousness and deep ecology's insistence on our inability to comprehend the complexity of nature according to the total field image. Can we really understand our unity with all life without an understanding of the biosphere's workings? Sale states that perceiving our dependence upon nature 'cannot be done on a global scale, nor a continental, nor even a national one, because the human animal, being small and limited, has only a small view of the world and a limited comprehension of how to act in it' (Sale 2000: 53). Sale cannot, therefore, rely on the attainment of a global ecological consciousness to motivate people to decentralise without descending into complete contradiction.

However, even if these tensions were to be resolved, stating that higher-level *gestalts* can be cultivated prior to decentralisation, and can therefore act as the motivational thrust behind other arguments for decentralisation, may in fact undermine the link between deep ecology and bioregionalism. Were such an argument to be deployed, identification with the *region* would no longer be viewed as the *aim* of decentralisation, nor would a specifically *regional* form of identification be viewed as the *motivation* for decentralisation. This being the case, despite the fact that the arguments for decentralisation in general gain motivational purchase from, and are operationalised by the existence of, such a form of identification, the link between deep ecology and a *specifically bioregional form of decentralisation* is removed. In other words, why match political and natural boundaries?

Of course, deep ecologists could rightly point to the argument outlined in the overview of bioregionalism, to the effect that feedback loops between society and nature are improved when political and natural boundaries are matched. To embed a polity in this way could undoubtedly help offset the epistemic disconnection caused by the separation of workers from the conditions of production, and there is nothing which precludes deep ecologists from subscribing to bioregionalism on the basis of this rationale rather than via some form of connection with the process of identification. However, the important point to be made here is that such a rationale is not exclusively available to deep ecologists; on the contrary, it is external to any particular ethical or moral doctrine, in that it can be embraced by ecocentrists and enlightened anthropocentrists alike. In other words, there is

nothing *specific* to the logic of deep ecology which provides us with a rationale for decentralisation taking a specifically *bioregional* form. The link between the two theories is most coherent when at its most contingent.

Despite this, it is still the case, as demonstrated earlier, that many bioregionalists have incorporated identification as a core aim of bioregionalism. The proceeding section demonstrates, however, that giving this aim precedence may actually undermine one of bioregionalism's central rationales: that there are advantages to be gained from matching political and natural boundaries. This occurs when the very process of defining the bioregion is tied to, and viewed as the outcome of, the process of identification – the result being overly relativistic and idealist definitions of the bioregion.

DEFINING THE BIOREGION

Given its obvious centrality to bioregional thinking, it may come as a surprise to the reader unfamiliar with bioregional literature that the term bioregion itself remains an elusive and contested concept. Definitions range from those of a more objective and scientific nature, to those that place more emphasis upon subjective and cultural sensibilities.

Sale provides a definition that can be used as a springboard from which to trace a range of possible positions on the path from science to sensibility. Sale (2000: 55) defines the bioregion as 'any part of the earth's surface whose rough boundaries are determined by natural characteristics rather than human dictates… The general contours of the regions themselves are not hard to identify using a little ecological knowledge'. This definition relies upon objective natural characteristics and is in line with Allen Van Newkirk's original description of the bioregion as a 'biogeographically interpreted culture area' (quoted in Aberley 1999: 22). As a biogeographer, Van Newkirk has no problem in leaving the definition of bioregions to the scientist. However, Sale (2000: 55–56) takes the initial step toward allocating a definitional role for the community when stating that '[bioregional] contours are generally felt, understood, or in some way sensed by those closest to the land'. Communities living on the land are capable of perceiving natural boundaries; all that is required is the employment of a 'little ecological knowledge'.

Further along the line, we find Berg and Dasmann (1977: 399) emphasising that communities are not capable of merely *perceiving* such boundaries; such boundaries are in fact '*best described* by the people who have lived within it, through human recognition of the realities of living in place'. Thus, the privileged task of defining the bioregion is wrestled from the scientist and placed in the hands of those inhabiting the region itself; it is the experience of living within a natural region that provides the 'little ecological knowledge' that is required defining their boundaries.

Despite this change in definitional responsibility, though, the natural world is still presented as a patchwork quilt of neatly separated bioregions simply awaiting discovery. As Snyder correctly notes, 'biota, watersheds, landforms, and elevations are just a few of the facets that define a region' (1990: 41). However, Donald Alexander is correct in stating that such a multiplicity of criteria does not necessarily translate into a sounder definition of the bioregion, as such criteria cannot be employed simultaneously due to their mutual exclusivity. As Alexander (1990: 168) explains, 'a river watershed may yield a bioregion which is long and narrow, biotic shift… usually encompasses several watersheds, and using elevation can yield yet another type of bioregion'. A choice is therefore foisted upon us regarding which criteria to employ, and subjective judgement will inevitably be required in making it.

However, there is also a danger of going too far in the direction of subjectivity. Daniel Berthold-Bond's (2000) article exemplifies how a deep ecological stance, and in particular an emphasis upon engendering identification, can lead to an overly idealist and relativist definition of the bioregion. If we first take the definition of *region*, we find Berthold-Bond contentedly quoting Westfall's remark that 'there are no "natural" regions. Rather, the land is divided into formal regions only as abstract criteria are applied to it' (Berthold-Bond 2000: 14). However, in contrast, James O'Connor (1998: 49) notes, 'while it is true that linguistic access to the material world is the only access available in human discourse, and that struggles over the meaning of this world are always linguistic, it is also true that the material world does exist'. It may be true that the overlapping nature of natural regions opens up a space for normative debate regarding which *form* of bioregion to be used *politically*. However, the mere existence of multiplicity of available criteria to choose from does not inevitably lead us to conclude that such regions do not exist, because it is precisely the overlapping reality of the existing material world that such criteria are derived from.

Berthold-Bond also makes the mistake of defending his position regarding *region* through a discussion of *place*. In particular, he quotes Francis Violich: 'places and people are inseparable. Places exist only with reference to people, and the meaning of place can be revealed only in terms of human responses to the particular environment used as a framework' (Berthold-Bond 2000: 15). However, region and place are distinct concepts, and their conflation should be resisted. Region is a natural space, whereas *place* is best described by Yi Fu Tuan's equation 'space plus culture equals place' (quoted in Flores 1999: 48). Place, by definition, is inseparable therefore from people. Berthold-Bond may be correct in stating that 'places do not exist apart from meanings which are created through experience' (Berthold-Bond 2000: 15). However, this cannot be said about natural regions to the same extent, as the linguistic struggles regarding the definition of place and the selection of natural region are qualitatively different. The definition of place is directly intersubjective, whereas discussion

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regarding which type of bioregion to utilise already acknowledges the objective existence of natural region as defined by purely natural criteria.

The problem with Berthold-Bond's idealist definition of region is that it leads to a situation where the bioregion is what the community defines it, seemingly coming into existence with such a definition in a 'we think therefore it is' sense. This discounts the possibility of any asymmetry between community definition and material reality, creating an extreme relativism in which the community enjoys definitional infallibility. This would leave no way for a community to be criticised for defining their 'bioregion' in an arbitrary manner.

It is Berthold-Bond's deep ecological leanings which impel him to view the bioregion in such manner, identification being his primary aim. Through this process:

> the very boundary lines which we typically think of as distinguished between self and place are blurred: the stakes are raised, uprooted; we *become* "placed"; the place becomes essential to our self-identity, a self-identity which extends beyond the traditional ontological border stakes of "subject" and "object," "self" and "other". (Berthold-Bond 2000: 19)

In deep ecology, identification entails extending the self *outwards* to encompass ever greater *gestalts* in what is viewed as an experiential process. It is a process of incorporating non-human life into the self. The process is inherently idealist in the sense that the region identified with, and thereby defined as, the bioregion or home place, is dependent upon the evolving worldview of the individual. What is viewed as a natural region is determined by consciousness rather than any objective natural characteristics of the region. This does not present a problem to the deep ecological bioregionalist, because identification is the overriding concern and communities are allowed to identify with whatever level of *gestalt* they see fit. What communities are identifying with is of secondary importance to the fact that they *are* identifying, and that such an experiential process of identification is ongoing, moving towards ever-greater *gestalts.*

In relation to the subject of decentralisation, it should be noted that Berthold-Bond does not forward the argument that bioregional decentralisation is necessary for identification to take place. In this sense at least, he avoids the problem of stipulating political change as being necessary for the cultivation of moral motivation. However, because of the preoccupation with identification, and the idealist definition of the bioregion this produces, if Berthold-Bond were to advocate decentralisation to the bioregional level, he would not be matching the political with the natural, but the political with the larger self as determined by the experiential and spiritual process of identification. This is clearly anthropocentric. Deep ecologists would be expected to be drawn to bioregionalism for the reason that it defines regions according to non-human characteristics. However, an emphasis upon identification leads to a reversal of this position.

This has led Stephen Avery (2004) to define deep ecology as a form of deep anthropocentrism rather than non-anthropocentrism.

The result of tying the definition of the bioregion to the process of identification in the manner outlined by Berthold-Bond is that it undermines one of the central rationales for a bioregional form of decentralisation, that there are advantages to be gained from matching political boundaries with natural ones. If such a definition is used to define the boundaries of a polity, these boundaries are unlikely to match those of the type of autopoietic ecosystems emphasised by McGinnis (1999). This being the case, the polity will be less likely to gain from the type of improvements made to the feedback loops between society and nature outlined earlier. This is not to say that more objective definitions of the bioregion are unproblematic; for example, there is potential for the boundaries of such bioregions to cut through existing communities, which may in turn generate a distrust of scientific criteria. It is merely to note that a level of objectivity will be essential if the definition of the bioregion is to be compatible with the rationale highlighted.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with Bron Taylor's (2000a: 269) observation that 'bioregionalism has almost universally been grafted onto deep ecology'. Such an observation is descriptively accurate; however, the coherence of this marriage has itself been almost universally neglected. In other words, the links between deep ecology and bioregionalism have been regarded as self-evident and therefore unworthy of theoretical scrutiny. This theoretical lacuna is unwarranted, as links between the two theories are more tenuous than has been assumed. Attempts to present bioregionalism as a means of engendering cross-species identification put the cart of political change before the horse of moral motivation. However, once this linkage between deep ecology and bioregionalism is removed, there is nothing left which is unique to deep ecology which provides a coherent rationale for a specifically bioregional form of decentralisation.

Nonetheless, the *perception* of a coherent link with deep ecology has had an appreciable impact upon the shape of bioregional thinking. In particular, many bioregionalists have assimilated the aim of engendering cross-species identification. However, where such a principle has gained primacy – to the extent that the very definition of the bioregion is tied to, and viewed as the outcome of this process – the resulting definition is invariably subjective and relativistic. This in turn undermines one of bioregionalism's central rationales: that there are benefits to be accrued from matching political boundaries with natural ones.

There are two prescriptions which arise from the findings of this article. First, both bioregionalists and deep ecologists should jettison the idea that bioregionalism is a means to engender cross-species identification. This separates

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bioregionalism from a necessary connection to any particular moral or ethical doctrine; it is a *social* philosophy which is justified on its own merits, as a form of social organisation which improves feedback loops between society and nature, rather than as a means to achieving specifically deep ecological goals. However, this is not to say that deep ecologists are precluded from subscribing to bioregionalism; any environmental ethic may underpin this social philosophy. Rather, the point is that the link between deep ecology and bioregionalism should be seen as contingent if it is to remain coherent. The second prescription follows on from the first: if matching political and natural boundaries is to be a rationale for bioregionalism, the process of defining the bioregion should be separated from the process of identification. This is essential if the bioregionalist is to avoid the type of relativistic definition which undermines this rationale.

NOTES

[1] Arne Naess and George Session's original account of this platform is reproduced in Devall and Sessions (1985: 70–73). It is Naess's 1984 articulation of this platform that is referred to in this paper.

[2] Other influential examples of this form of deep ecology include Mathews (1991) and Fox (1995).

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