

Christian Diehm, *Connection to Nature, Deep Ecology, and Conservation Social Science: Human-Nature Bonding and Protecting the Natural World*
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, pp. vii-x

Foreword

Some years back, Chris Diehm invited me to speak at his university. As it turned out, I first met his students on an afternoon walk in a nearby forest on a wintry Wisconsin day. Students were asking me questions about environmental ethics. This particular woods was full of oaks, and Chris was pointing out how you could tell the various oaks apart even in winter, if you looked carefully at bark and buds and found a few acorns or fallen leaves. There were eight or ten different oaks, white oaks, red oaks, and black oaks, and a couple might have been hybrids. I was shivering and, at the end of the walk, over coffee I suggested to the students that our walk was an icon or model of human-nature bonding, one where we experienced the intriguing detail of a local site simultaneously with concern for living well both locally and on the home planet.

This book is that experience writ large. When I gave my featured lecture on campus the next day, Chris's reputation for challenging thinking brought me a packed audience of some four hundred students and faculty. With this book, Chris is challenging as broad an audience as he can reach—including you, the reader—to think deeply about how you are connected to nature. “Connectedness with nature presents itself as a radical but necessary prerequisite for realizing desired conservation and environmental behavior outcomes.”¹ Rid yourself of any “disconnect from nature.”

“But,” I find myself wanting to reply. Well, *humans are disconnected with nature through the kinds of connections they have*. No other species has power to jeopardize the planet. No other species has a “deep ecological philosophy.” No other species can take the kind of walk I took with those students in the Wisconsin woods, pondering ancient natural history and what humans have done to displace it. So we have to spell out our uniqueness. Yes, we connect with nature, but humans are cultural animals, the only

animal with a cumulative transmissible culture. Connecting with nature is necessary, but not sufficient to become human. Connecting with culture is necessary but not sufficient to become human. Man is “a political animal” (Aristotle). That’s where Diehm needs his “social science,” his “conservation social sciences.”

Arne Naess, the famous Norwegian philosopher whom Chris once interviewed (as did I), helps with his focus on the notions of “self-realization” and “identification” with nature. Naess invites us to a “relational, total-field” view.² With *Homo sapiens* he says, “a life form has developed on Earth which is capable of understanding and appreciating its relations with all other life forms and to the Earth as a whole.”³ There is “something of ourselves in the other creature, or something of the other creature in ourselves.”⁴

Humans, he says, “are the first kind of living beings we know of which have the potentialities of living in community with all other living beings. It is our hope that these potentialities will be realized.”⁵ We “seek what is best for ourselves, but through the extension of the self, our ‘own’ best is also that of others.”⁶ Botanists love and seek to conserve plants, but we do not think oak trees with their “own best” are potentially in reciprocating relationships with us. Naess did report that in his mountain hut he found himself “together as one entity” with tiny alpine flowers. “I have known the rocks at Tvergastein since I was very young, and they *look* at me. I *look* at them and they *look* at me.”⁷ Diehm has to twist and turn to show that this experience is in part inexpressible, but is not doublespeak. That is the genius of the book.

Once—on another afternoon before I spoke at Stevens Point—during a rain-storm with lightning, I visited the Leopold shack and listened to Nina Leopold Bradley reminisce about her father. Aldo Leopold finds an A/B cleavage in attitudes toward nature. The A side sees land, water, and forests as commodity, the B side as community. The cleavage continues with game versus wildlife, acre-feet of water versus rivers in ecosystems, timber versus forests, owning land versus sense of place, and humans as conquerors versus humans as citizens. Leopold urges us to love the landscapes in which we reside. The day before I had visited the original John Muir homestead where John Muir insisted, famously: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”⁸ That sounds like deep interconnections. But—

I take an interest in bats, yet doubt that I can think like a bat. I am unable to hear well enough to catch insects flying in the dark, or to find my particular pup by echolocation in a cave and nurse it. Then again, I can understand *that*, maybe even (with some scientific studies) *how* bats do this. Is that my “own best” in others? I’ve watched pelicans in the Antarctic dive and catch fish in freezing water. They avoid the killer whales. They are hungry, I suppose, but my capacities for indwelling empathy end there. It seems crazy to seek the “own best” of malaria parasites or the polio virus.

Once every few years, fishermen in the Indian and South Pacific oceans drag up a coelacanth in their nets. This is a very rare and weird fish, a huge fish with a tiny brain, with a history spanning from the age of the dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago; it is a creature long thought extinct. I saw one once, pickled, when I spoke at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. After the talk, an ichthyologist came up and invited me to visit the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity, which calls itself the “scientific home of the coelacanth.” Researchers first rediscovered the oddball fish on a fishing trawler in port there in 1938. I have no idea how to identify with a coelacanth. I don’t think they are much interrelated with everything else. I do wish to protect them, but is this somehow in my wider self-interest?

I start by protesting: This Promethean force-fitting of every possible conservation good into something good for us in our place goes sour, analogously to the way that force-fitting the conservation of goods for the many peoples of the world into goods for us Americans, or the conservation of goods for Americans into what is good for me and my family, goes sour. No matter how much we enlarge the circle with increasing enlightenment, eventually the curve comes back to us and reveals the underlying motivation as self-interest, even if always with entwined destinies with whatever else there is on Earth.

But then again, challenged by Diehm and Naess, I too twist and turn, torn between the natural world I seek to enjoy and the classic self-defeating character of self-interest. The wild fauna and flora have a good of their own: they are located in a good place, they are desired for their own sake, and appreciating them is my flourishing. That is a win-win situation. Oppositely, losing them is losing the quality of life that comes based on them, as well as their being lost in their own right; that is a lose-lose situation. We win when we assume responsibility for heritages that are greater than we are. Some things have to be won together.

Humans can and ought to inherit the Earth; we become rich with this inheritance only as we oversee a richness of planetary biodiversity that embraces and transcends us. We are not choosing this inheritance for our happiness, but our happiness is bound up with it. We are in significant part constituted by our ecology. There are essential cultural ingredients to happiness, but they now are conjoined with this ecological birthright, my biophilia. Repudiating the natural world in which we reside, repudiating our ecology, is itself unsatisfying. Not choosing these ecological goods in order to gain authentic happiness, therefore, is a logical, empirical, psychological impossibility.

Read this book. Get the gestalt. If that is not already your conviction, I predict it will be by the time you finish reading!

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NOTES

1. Matthew J. Zylstra et al., "Connectedness as a Core Conservation Concern: An Interdisciplinary Review of Theory and a Call for Practice," *Springer Science Reviews* 2, no. 1–2 (December 2014): 119, cited in the Introduction.

2. Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," *Inquiry* 16, no. 1–4 (1973): 95, cited in the Introduction.

3. Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*, trans. and rev. David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 166, cited in chapter 1, note 24.

4. Arne Naess with Per Ingvar Haukeland, *Life's Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*, trans. Roland Huntford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 114, cited in chapters 1 and 3.

5. Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being-in-the-World," in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century: Readings on the Philosophy and Practice of the New Environmentalism*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 239, cited in chapter 1.

6. Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 175, cited in chapter 1.

7. Arne Naess, "'Here I Stand': An Interview with Arne Naess," interview by Christian Diehm, *Environmental Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 9, 14.

8. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 211.