
13. Sustainable Development Through Spiritual Ecology

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Figure 13.1: Ayutthaya Buddha PC: Ahmet Cigsar (CC licence)

“I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don’t know how to do that.”

— James Gustave Speth

Abstract:

A report released in May 2019 by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services announced that around 1 million species, or 12.5 percent of all world species, are currently at risk of extinction. We are running out of time

to change the trajectory of how we affect the planet, its ecology, biodiversity, resources, and life-support systems. In addition to mainstream approaches to nature conservation & sustainability, there is a growing understanding that this problem has deep internal roots which have outward manifestations. It is now up to us to respond, and to do so in a way that is consistent with our deepest spiritual and moral principles. The cultural narratives and spiritual ideals that sustain our basic existence on the planet need to be urgently reconsidered, according to a large number of academics, activists, leaders, and intellectuals, not just researchers. The present study was initiated with the belief that the more we expand the self to identify with “others” (people, animals, ecosystems) the more we realize ourselves. Reinforcing the significance of a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment, both living and non-living, and the importance of fostering environmental sustainability through responsible ecological behavior is well recognized fact. To read the beauty of the world, a contemplative attitude is needed. The goal of this article is to deviate the current trajectory of “progress” and “development” towards a more sustainable and equitable future by reconsidering the very beliefs and values that guide our individual and collective actions.

Keywords:

ecological behavior, environmental responsibility, spiritual ecological consciousness, conservation, sustainable development, ecosystem.

13.1 Introduction:

The world is a “great book” in which one can decipher something of the beauty and goodness of God. In the great book of nature, every creature is like a letter of the alphabet. After spending a lifetime advancing science and the environment, Speth—a lawyer, author, and senior US advisor on climate change for more than fifty years—now promotes systemic cultural transformation, which science clearly cannot do on its own. The last male northern white rhino, Sudan, died in 2018, and the two surviving females are too old to reproduce making this species functionally extinct. The sixth mass extinction is caused by human action, mainly (but not exclusively) the unsustainable use of land, water, and energy as well as climate change, in contrast to other extinction events that were brought on by natural causes.

Our window of opportunity to effectively manage our effects on the planet, its ecosystem, biodiversity, resources, and life-support systems is closing. We now need to respond, and we need to respond in a way that is based on our highest moral and spiritual values. Not just researchers but many academics, activists, leaders and thinkers are calling for urgent reconsideration of the cultural narratives and spiritual values that support our very existence on the planet.

They believe that a common understanding of our place in nature and critical thinking about our relationship and connection to the natural world, to the people and communities around us, will aid in the preservation of our planet and that many ecological problems originate from the human belief that we are superior to it. In addition to mainstream approaches to nature conservation, there is a growing understanding that this problem has deep internal

roots which have outward manifestations. This inner component relates to our basic beliefs that view the Earth as a resource and a commodity, as well as our inability to acknowledge the essential interdependence and connectivity of all species.

Spiritual ecology (Figure 13.1) is a recent term that refers to the intersection between religion and spirituality and environment. Spiritual ecology is an emerging field that combines environmentalism and ecology with a heightened understanding of nature as sacred, living, and alive. Spiritual ecology refers to the fundamental and universal understanding of the divine nature inside creation rather than being founded on any one religion or spiritual path. It is influenced by the new scientific worldview, indigenous wisdom, and the teachings of religious and spiritual traditions. This worldview's core principles include interconnectedness, reverence, service, compassion, and inclusivity.

Thomas Berry, a scholar of world religions, particularly Asian traditions, was a Catholic priest as well as a cultural historian. He later referred to himself as a "geologian" as he researched the history and evolution of Earth. He wrote and spoke widely about the relationship between humans and the environment. In his book, *The Sacred Universe*, Berry states that "at its core, even our spirituality is Earth derived"[1]. Both the Earth and humans are intimately involved in one another. He notes that indigenous peoples have recognized for millennia that there is a spiritual component to the ecological challenges of today.

13.2 Indigenous Traditions and Cosmologies:

"The Great Spirit is in all things. He is in the air we breathe. The Great Spirit is our Father, but the Earth is our mother. She nourishes us.... That which we put into the ground she returns to us", says Big Thunder, an Elder of Wabanak in Algonquin Canada.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit priest, on the other side of the Atlantic, wrote that God exists in every molecule of life. Despite their vastly different upbringings and varied life experiences, both men emphasize the idea that all living things—including non-living objects—on Earth share a spiritual connection. These concepts have now been named spiritual ecology in response to the mounting criticism of humanity's relationship with the planet, and their lessons are essential to reshaping the environmental movement.

There has always been spirituality based on the marvel of creation, since the dawn of human civilization. Indigenous Peoples are distinct and yet diverse social and cultural groups that share collective ancestral ties to the lands and natural environment where they live. Indigenous peoples around the world have traditionally incorporated the natural world into their spiritual rituals, and the majority of world faiths today contain elements of eco-spirituality. Robin Wall Kimmer, in her excellent book *Braiding Sweet grass* states that "indigenous ways of understanding recognize the personhood of all beings as equally important, not in a hierarchy but in a circle."

Around the world, particularly among indigenous and First-Nation peoples, many ontological orientations do not make a distinction between humans and their world (De la Cadena, 2015; Watts, 2013).

Animism is the most ancient, geographically widespread and diverse spiritual belief system that attaches souls or spirits to all living things, including inanimate objects. The word "anima" is derived from the Latin word "anima," which means "soul" or "life." It captures the notion that everything in the cosmos is profoundly and intricately connected by a single life force that is unique to each entity.

In the mid-20th century, ethnographic studies conducted among the Ojibwe communities in Canada demonstrated their idea that personhood did not necessitate human-likeness; rather, people were seen as being similar to other persons, such as bear persons and rock persons. The Ojibwe see these elements of nature that acquired strength and meaning from their relationships with others.

All white quartz rocks are considered "holy" to the Qiang people since, in the past, they served as directional markers for their migration route to the Upper Min Jiang River basin. Even though every one of these pebbles is "holy," only certain of them have been imbued with spirit by human action.

Animistic religions are still practised by many tribal communities across the world. In India, many of these tribes' people have embraced other organized religions from the mainstream, while some continue to follow their own unique form of animistic faith. Minyong is one of the major sub tribes of the Adis in Arunachal Pradesh. They are Animists in religion and they worship the Sun and the Moon (The Donyi Polos).

The Khasi tribes of Meghalaya, the Santals in Jharkhand and Odisha, the Munda and Oraon tribes in Madhya Pradesh are some of the other animistic tribal groups from India.

Although it is impossible to generalize about any of these religions, there are certain shared principles among tribal religions. Worship of nature, trees, and forests associated with many cultures and traditions, are found all over India.

Several taboos protect these forests from exploitation and there are often deities associated with each of these groves. These practices maybe seen in the sacred forests of Braj, the Orans of Rajasthan or the Kavus of Kerala. Sacred groves are known to be reservoirs of genetic biodiversity and provide habitat for several endangered species of flora and fauna. Studies have documented sacred groves with carbon stocks and species richness often higher than what is observed in legally protected areas such national parks and sanctuaries.

Worship of the elements is another common practice such as is seen in Practitioners of Kirat-Mundhum, a Sikkimese kind of shamanism, acknowledge and respect the powers of the sun, moon, wind, fire, and their ancestors. Kirants make offerings to Mother Nature, such as rice wine, sacrificed roosters, and rice as part of their different rituals.

Close to a quarter of the Earth's land is governed by or belongs to indigenous peoples, and a sizable amount of the planet's remaining biological variety is found on their territory. As a result, they are essential to the preservation of both species and landscapes. Indigenous groups were the original occupiers of the land and therefore the first to establish a spiritual connection with the natural environment that is ingrained in the indigenous identity.

Numerous global examples show how Indigenous peoples' cultural norms, traditional knowledge, and management techniques have preserved and protected native species. For example, the traditional healers in Ethiopia oversee and preserve the forests that are home to significant species of medicinal plants. These communities have so much to teach us, yet all too often they are seen as helpless players with little to contribute to the fight against climate change, rather than as teachers or guardians.

Governments and policymakers make a critical error when they see indigenous peoples as passive stakeholders. In addition to possessing important environmental knowledge and teachings, they also inhabit a sizeable piece of territory that is vital to conservation efforts.

13.3 Science Meets Indigenous World View: Gaia Theory

James Lovelock's famous Gaia Hypothesis, sometimes referred to as the Gaia theory or the Gaia principle, postulates that all species and the inorganic environments they inhabit are intricately linked to create a single, self-regulating complex system that sustains the circumstances necessary for life to exist. These interactions help maintain a desirable homeostasis by stabilizing the temperature of the planet, the salinity of the ocean, the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere, and other habitability parameters.

According to the Gaia theory, the earth has a dynamic system made up of the biosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere's, and pedosphere that regulates itself. According to the notion, this system as a whole, known as Gaia, looks for a chemical and physical environment that is ideal for sustaining life.



Figure 13.2: James Lovelock
(<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EWS19.09.jpg>)

These processes, which are driven by the global thermodynamic disequilibrium state of the Earth system, create a global control system that manages the surface temperature, atmospheric composition, and ocean salinity.

In the 1970s, microbiologist Lynn Margulis collaborated with scientist James Lovelock to establish the Gaia hypothesis. Although the scientific world initially viewed it with disdain, it is currently explored in the domains of geophysiology and Earth system science.

13.4 *Disconnection from Nature - Colonialism, Industrial Revolution and Technology:*

Let's start by examining how agriculture was developed during the Neolithic Revolution. This led to the first disconnection from nature as people left "the wild," domesticated plants and animals, and realized they needed to store and preserve their harvest. Upon closer inspection, however, we find that some societies have engaged in agriculture while maintaining a tight connection to the natural environment, suggesting the necessity for further separation catalysts. The unquestioned acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolutionary biology, which holds that life is essentially competitive and selfish rather than cooperative and beneficial to all, is another strong contributor.

Distinctions between humans and nature have also been introduced through the projects of European colonialism which achieved this through political domination, reeducation programs, cultural hegemony, and forced labor and genocide (Whyte, 2018; Yusoff, 2018). This process of losing out connection with nature also gained momentum around 150 years ago with the Industrial Revolution, which brought major technological advances and yet these goods that these industries produced never again return to a natural state allowing regeneration. We took the raw materials out of their natural state and transformed them into something new and permanent. That's production in the industrial sense. The example of converting sap into rubber tyres is a good example of this industrial process. This is when nature was looked at more and more as a commodity and less as an interconnected web of life embedded with spiritual meaning. People's connectedness to and experience in nature is embedded in larger social, institutional, and political contexts influencing opportunities for and expressions of connections to nature (Andersson et al., 2022) as well as concerning socio-ecological contexts (Kendal & Raymond, 2019). Theodore Roszak, a psychologist and deep ecology practitioner looked for a fresh approach to psychology that tackled the causes of our cultural sickness as well as the psychological damage brought on by living in isolation from the natural world. To characterize this emerging field of research, Roszak created the term eco-psychology. According to eco-psychology, a lot of the sadness, guilt, emptiness, and dread that a lot of people experience could be a normal response to the artificial expectations of the contemporary world and a disconnection from nature.

13.5 *Spiritual Ecology and Conservation Action:*

An increasing awareness of the earth's fragility has inspired many faith organizations as well as non-faith-based organizations, tribal groups and individuals to fight to protect their land, promote green energy, sustainable practices, climate advocacy, and feel a sense of obligation to protect our natural resources.

The case of the Dongria Kondh tribe living in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, in the Niyamgiri hill range is one of the best examples. The highlands of Niyamgiri are covered in thick forests, with steep gorges and bubbling streams.

Dongria Kondhs cultivate the lush slopes of the hills, gather their produce, and worship the hills, which include the 4,000-meter Mountain of the Law, Niyam Dongar, and the mountain god Niyam Raja. After defeating mining behemoth Vedanta Resources in a "David and Goliath" fight, the Dongria Kondh tribe inspired millions. The tribe promised to protect their self-sufficient way of life and the Niyamgiri Hills. However, there were plans by companies to mine the estimated \$2 billion worth of bauxite that lies beneath the hills' surface threatened to uproot the more than 8,000 Dongria Kondh for ten years. After a long standing struggle the Supreme Court ruled that the Dongria would have to determine whether or not to permit mining. This serves as great example of people's connection to their land empowering them to protect it from exploitation. Here is another famous case study from India that shows how people's connection to nature goes beyond physical dependence. A little town in Rajasthan, 26 km southeast of Jodhpur, saw what is likely the nation's earliest and most violent environmental conservation campaign



Figure 13.3 : Chipko Movement : Indian women surround a tree to protect it, 1973 (CC 4.0, Wikimedia Commons)

in 1730 AD. In order to save the sacred trees that Marwar monarch Maharaja Abhay Singh had ordered to be felled in order to construct his new palace, Amrita Devi of Khejarli village and her three small daughters gave their life in defense of the trees. This served as an inspiration to other community members, and in the days that followed, 363 people gave their lives in an attempt to save the trees by embracing them as the king's troops hacked off their bodies with axes. The "martyrs" were members of the Bishnoi community, and the "Khejri" trees were what they were defending. In the 1970s, this incident became the inspiration behind the Chipko Movement.

13.6 Conclusion:

Humanity is living precariously on the edge, challenging the forces of nature at our own risk. Roszak talked about the human species through these words of ancient wisdom that "*Salt remnants of ancient oceans flow through our veins, ashes of expired stars rekindle in our genetic chemistry.*" There has never been a more pressing need for us to mend our broken relationship with the Earth—our shared home—before it is too late.

Beyond conventional methods, spiritual principles can offer the basis for rebuilding and responding, as well as for bringing about significant and long-lasting change. We are part of the cosmic imagination that birthed this planet, and as such, we cannot live a healthy life without nurturing this connection.

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