

“Walking the Land”: an Alternative to Discourse as a Path to Ecological Consciousness and Peace

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Abstract

For more than forty years environmental philosophers have been arguing that anthropocentrism, enshrined in classical science, is the normative premise of Western civilization, and that this premise, being logically unsound, needs to be overturned in favour of a much more bio-inclusive, environmental ethic. Yet this argument has not availed: modern industrial societies have continued to develop and expand with little consideration for the interests of the wider Earth community. What can account for this failure of reason? What would it take to shift society towards genuinely ecological consciousness? The old doctrine of historical materialism can perhaps help to account for this failure. According to historical materialism, it is not discourse but the underlying modes of production and praxis in a society that give rise to the particular forms of consciousness that prevail in it. Adapting this doctrine, it is here argued that while a genuinely ecological outlook can never emanate from current industrial modes of production, there are other practices, consonant with Indigenous ones, that may engender such an outlook, and that other incentives than the economic one may be mobilized to motivate the uptake of these practices.

Let us start with some of the received verities of environmental thought, as viewed through the lens of environmental philosophy over the last several decades. Modern civilization is urgently in need of a change of worldview. The anthropocentric and dualist view of nature that we in the West have inherited from the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, and that represents nature as brute object – a realm of mere matter - relative to the sovereign human subject – the realm of mind - is the very cornerstone of modern civilization. With its implied instrumentalism towards nature, this view laid the ideological ground for the environmental crisis, now shaping up as a total catastrophe for human civilization as well as for the rest of life on Earth (1).

One of the persistent themes of environmental philosophy since its early days in the 1980's has been that the domination of nature serves as an ideological template for political domination across many axes: a default modality of brutal exploitation and callous indifference towards the Earth-community to which we as humans belong will inevitably set the tone for our social and political relations with one another. For this reason, it has long been argued, particularly by ecofeminists and environmental philosophers in the critical theory tradition, that peace and justice can never be achieved in society until we learn to live in ecological harmony with our Earth

community (2, 3). This is a theme that also echoes through Pope Francis' Encyclical on the Environment, *Laudato Si'* (4).

Of course, the actual causes of human conflict, as well as of oppression, lie not merely in ideology but in underlying economic inequalities and other material circumstances. Ultimately these must be addressed if the conditions for conflict and oppression are to be ameliorated. Nevertheless, ideology is a powerful legitimator of aggression, oppression, exploitation and injustice. So the view of nature as moral nullity must, for both environmental and political reasons, be replaced by a new, Earth-centred or ecocentric outlook. Instead of construing nature as devoid of the kinds of qualities—mind, intelligence, sentience, meaning and purpose—that confer moral significance, we need to re-construe it as fully imbued, like ourselves, with those very qualities. We need to recognize in the natural world a larger field of intelligence, meaning and purpose, kinship and communicativity—a field in which our own human consciousness is embedded, as a sub-set, and to which it is inalienably referenced.

For more than forty years, environmental philosophers have been advocating such a moral rehabilitation of nature. They have rigorously laid out arguments for Earth-centredness, ecocentrism, biocentrism or bio-inclusiveness in ethics. The case for such positions has been detailed in a variety of ways—from arguments concerning the intrinsic value of non-human life to Kantian defences of living things as ends in themselves (as opposed to mere means to the ends of others) to critiques, like those of ecofeminism, of the ideologically loaded human/nature, mind/matter, culture/nature dualisms that have framed most thinking in the Western tradition (5).

In addition to formulating new ethical categories such as biocentrism and the intrinsic value of non-human life, environmental philosophers in the 1980's and 1990's asked an array of foundational questions. Who or what is ultimately to qualify as morally significant? Living things? But if so, what counts as a living thing? Do individual organisms alone count as living things, or do larger living systems also count, in which case how are we to decide who has moral priority when the interests of individual organisms conflict with those of systems—as when feral animals threaten the integrity of ecosystems? Should an environmental ethic cover all living things? Should plants and fungi count as morally considerable in their own right? If so, how considerable? As considerable as animals? Should a distinction be drawn, morally speaking, between higher and lower animals? But which animals are higher and which lower? And what about microbes? Single cells? Viruses? Species? And natural features of the landscape that are not alive, such as rocks and rivers? Should an environmental ethic also cover these? Philosophers teased out such questions, without of course reaching final agreement on them (5, 6).

Meanwhile, the categories and arguments that had been developed in environmental philosophy were taken up across a range of academic disciplines. In the humanities, discourses such as ecocriticism, eco-cultural studies, animal studies, multispecies studies, biosemiotics, cultural geography and the new materialisms emerged, reconfiguring their disciplines-of-origin through the lenses of the new eco-ethical categories. Social theorists had also, from the start, been working with these categories to develop new detailed blueprints for ecological societies. From Murray Bookchin in the 1970's to bioregionalists and ecosocialists through the 80's and 90's

to present-day theorists from the Biomimicry Institute and Simplicity Institute, thinkers have been offering detailed scenarios for societies organized around paradigm-shifting bio-inclusive values. In the sciences, conservation biology has also (until recently) organized its research around this new value axis.

Did any of this visionary and revisionary thinking, this evocation of an alternative ecological worldview, avail? No. The state of the environment, as every scientific indicator confirms, only continued to worsen (7). And although many forms of environmental activism and innovation budded forth in the 1980s in response to calls for an Earth-centred paradigm shift, offering any number of radical, organic, countercultural alternatives, these alternatives rarely attained mainstream status. They either lingered on, as minority movements, or faded only to be reinvented by later generations, still as minority movements. By the turn of the century, ‘radicalism’ itself seemed to have gone out of fashion as a mode of progressivism, acquiring sinister new undertones associated with violent right-wing extremism. Younger people staked their claims to cutting-edginess and the generational high ground not so much on politics, let alone on the ‘social movements’ of the earlier counter-culture, as on the great digital revolution that was taking place in *their* time, as *their* turf.

Progressive individuals, including younger ones, certainly acknowledged the need for environmental sustainability as part of the bottom line of capitalist economies, while sincerely bemoaning the “biodiversity crisis”, but environmental issues were just one part of a much larger portfolio of social issues that, it was hoped, could be addressed within the moral, political and economic parameters of our liberal democracies. The call for a specifically environmental ethic, for a new Copernican Revolution in ethics that would overturn anthropocentrism—the veritable cornerstone of Western civilization—and reconfigure human identity as essentially ecological, requiring epochal reform of economies and politics, seemed by the early twenty-first century to have pretty much fizzled out.

That, at any rate, is how the state of play appeared to myself, as a keen long-time observer and commentator, until just two years ago. At that moment, there was something of an awakening in parts of Europe and the Anglophone world. A genre of essays heralding near-term climate chaos and consequent civilizational collapse suddenly erupted, sending shock waves far and wide. These essays were authored not by the usual doomsday malcontents and conspiracy theorists but by highly reputable journalists and scholars, such as David Wallace-Wells (1), Jem Bendell (8) and Rupert Read (9). Their appalling forecasts are based on behind-the-scenes conversations with climate scientists apparently too constrained by professional conservatism to publish their own real inferences. The direness of these essays has been compounded by a spate of dumbfounding reports, such as the WWF Living Planet Index (10) that shows a 60% decline in wildlife populations from 1970–2014 and the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Global Assessment Report announcing that a million species are currently facing extinction (7).

Arguably it is this new literature that has thrown up, just within the last year, vibrant new movements such as Extinction Rebellion and the School Climate Strikes that have broken the mould of older, now outworn forms of environmental activism. Something, it seems, is finally starting to shift.

However, momentary upsurges in climate change consciousness have occurred in the past—in 1989, when the IPCC was first established and ambitious emissions targets were widely set, including in Australia, and in 2006, when Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth* galvanized world opinion. But in both those cases the upsurge was short-lived. Public opinion proved not sufficiently greened to mandate strong environmental and climate change policy initiatives from governments. Green parties remained, for the most part, minority parties, and in liberal democracies electorates chose governments that continued to put short-term economic interests very far ahead of environmental reforms. Emissions accordingly continued relentlessly to rise, global temperatures to soar, biodiversity to unravel.

Admittedly, it is different this time. Climate change is now undeniably upon us, as fires bear down on our homes, droughts wither our crops and floodwaters lap at our doorsteps. So the current upsurge is unlikely wholly to subside. But will the way societies address the climate emergency, when they do finally address it, be inspired and led by an environmental ethic as opposed to mere human expedience? Since environmental ethics has had so little traction to date, it is perhaps hardly to be hoped that now, when humanity itself is under serious threat, the interests of other-than-human species will figure prominently on government agendas. On the contrary, although amelioration of climate change will indeed incidentally benefit many species, economic resources currently invested in conservation may be redeployed, in the new state of climate emergency, to human protection, and the interests of mere “nature” relegated once more, indeed more than ever, to the moral background.

So despite the ever-deepening climate catastrophe and the ever-more-visible extinction crisis, it seems we are really no closer to the kind of ecological consciousness and culture that could release us from dominator patterns of thought and afford us genuine foundations for habits of peace with Earth and one another. The current upsurge of activism seems primarily a last ditch response to the threat that climate change is now palpably posing to our own security. Mixed in with this anxiety is grief and anger at the catastrophic decline and disappearance of wildlife and biodiversity. But saving (some) species from outright extinction seems to be the sum of the agenda in this connection. There seems little awareness in the rhetoric of current activism that civilization itself, in its current form, is so deeply rooted in anthropocentrism that its trajectory in relation to nature cannot be altered by a few ad hoc changes of policy. Even in the heartland of conservation itself—as evidenced in the pages of conservation biology journals—a push to prioritize human interests over the interests of threatened species has recently found favour, in the name of ‘eco-modernism’ (11).

One is inevitably led then to ask *why*. Why has the ground-breaking thinking spearheaded a generation or two ago by environmental philosophy failed? Why has impeccably reasoned argument done so little to shift the wider society off its anthropocentric moorings? Why have the ecological counter-cultures of past decades remained just that—counter cultures, despite their demonstrably sound rational credentials? Thirty years ago, I personally thought that if we could only demonstrate that the anthropocentric bias of the Western tradition was rationally indefensible, a value reorientation would ensue that would begin comprehensively to re-draw the

moral map. Environmental philosophers did, in my opinion, demonstrate this, but moral change on a significant scale has not ensued.

One way of making sense of this failure of uptake of environmental ethics and its many discursive corollaries is to revisit the Marxist theory of historical materialism. One by no means has to be a Marxist to find historical materialism a compelling explanation for why societies adopt the particular value-sets they do.

According to historical materialism, the values that characterize a given society—which is to say, the consciousness, culture and identities which prevail therein—arise from its underlying ‘modes of production’, its basic economic modalities, in particular the practices or *praxes* whereby its members act upon nature in their efforts to wrest a livelihood from it.¹ So, for example, hunter gatherers dwelling in a rainforest might be expected to hold very different views of self, society and world from, say, industrial workers in a 19th century factory town. All that counts as culture and consciousness in a particular society is basically, from an historical materialist perspective, ideological, in the sense that it reflects and legitimizes more basic economic conditions. These ideological structures cannot be changed by argument (philosophy, science, discourse) or exhortation (moral persuasion). They can only change when the underlying *praxes* of the society in question change. So, one would not expect to persuade a hunter gatherer to become anthropocentric in outlook just by engaging them in philosophical argument any more than one would expect by the same method to persuade workers in, say, a factory farm or on an assembly line in a twentieth century factory to embrace an Earth-centred or ecocentric perspective.

While historical materialism is not a cast-iron or fully comprehensive explanation of values in society, it definitely helps to explain why occasional upsurges of environmental protest historically tend to peter out and why even the best-intentioned individuals fail to sustain other-than-token environmental reforms to their life styles. No amount of wilderness workshops or classroom discussion or even public debate will genuinely induce ecological consciousness or identity in us, as members of modern societies, if we have to return to the twenty-first century landscape of capitalism—the shopping malls and mills of industry, commerce and corporatism—after leaving our green rallies and conferences and eco-retreats. And return to these most of us do, since alternative opportunities for making a living are exceedingly thin on the ground.

To allow that historical materialism largely explains why value-sets vary from society to society and from one historical moment to another need not imply that all such value-sets are *merely* relativist. I think certain value sets can be demonstrated by reason to be sound and others not so if they are considered against a background of agreed further ends. But what historical materialism does teach us is not to expect a society to *adopt* new value sets, no matter how rationally preferable to the old ones, if the new values are inconsistent with the basic praxis of that society.

While historical materialism might then go a long way towards explaining why value-sets vary from society to society, it does not in itself solve the problem of how actually to bring about new value regimes when required. For to replace a set of

¹ For an account of historical materialism in the sense in which I am reading it

underlying praxes such as our own with praxes that would induce ecological consciousness would require massive economic and political investment in new eco-compatible modes of production. Such investment could presumably not occur unless those very ecological values were already in place.

It is this vexing circularity—which I call the Hard Problem of environmental reform—that makes such reform in contemporary societies so unachievable. ²

In light of such circularity, and the moral inertia it entails, what is to be done? Are there other motivating forces as powerful as materialist or economic ones that might be mobilized to shift entrenched outlooks? Marx would presumably have said no. Materialist or economic forces are determinative, for him, precisely because they ultimately govern our survival, and nothing is more fundamental, in terms of impact on consciousness, than the survival imperative. But perhaps this presumed priority of material forces is debatable. Perhaps in the human context there are other forces, further to materialist ones, that also impact on our survival. The imperative to affiliate, for instance. The need to belong to a community or group or troupe is perhaps as core to our survival, in evolutionary terms, as our need for food and shelter. This seems to be borne out not only in our own present-day experience of life in society, with its many imperatives to conform, but also when we look to our evolutionary reflection in primate societies. In chimp troupes, affiliation is important not only for the purpose of sharing resources but also for social legitimacy—misfits and stragglers are policed and killed. In evolutionary terms, affiliation may be as powerful a determinant of identity and consciousness as praxis is.

Perhaps then identity, in the sense conferred by affiliation, is a potential site of value shift, one that could serve as prelude and impetus to the longer term, ecological ‘transvaluation of values’ that may indeed, as historical materialists insist, require an overhaul of economic praxis.

How might this strategy work? What loci of affiliation might serve to embed Earth-friendly values in society? One major possibility is religion. For Marx, of course, religion was a prime instance of ideology, different religions serving merely to prop up and legitimate different economic regimes. In industrial societies, characterized by intensely instrumentalist relations with the entire biosphere, only religions that reinforce an anthropocentric orientation might be expected to achieve social traction.

² From a Marxist point of view, changes of consciousness occur when an economic system encounters ‘contradictions’ between the requirements of labour and the logic and conditions of production. These contradictions lead to failure of the institutions on which the system is based, where such failure will necessitate a re-set of the economy. As part of the process of re-setting, new praxes, modes of production and institutional arrangements will emerge. In due course these will give rise to new forms of consciousness. The ecological crisis is undoubtedly a contradiction of capitalism, but in this instance we surely cannot merely wait for the contradiction to play itself out. Since the ‘failure’ to which this crisis is likely to lead might be wholesale biosphere collapse, we must try to avert that collapse by instituting in advance new values that will guide the economy towards eco-compatible goals.

But in a twenty-first century context in which the star of secularism is rising, at least in some parts of the West, and that of traditional religions appears to be waning, the bedrock formations of belonging and hence of identity that religions afforded may be eroding.³ Perhaps for many people in this new context the basic need for affiliation is ceasing to be satisfactorily met. The forms of identity and consciousness that emanate from capitalist-industrial modes of praxis are possessive, individualist and self-centric as well as instrumentalist: they untether the self from any larger—social or environmental—meanings or responsibilities (13). Possibilities of affiliation do of course exist, but, arising as they do from contingent interests or causes rather than from the moral or metaphysical core of people's existence, they arguably leave members of modern societies morally and metaphysically marooned and accordingly at existential risk.

A new formation, introduced to take the place of traditional religions but serving Earth-friendly values rather than the anthropocentric ones served, to varying degrees, by major present-day religions, might in this context prove as powerful a determinant of consciousness as are materialist or economic forces. Of course, a preliminary step in this connection would surely be to attempt to green existing religions. Such efforts may not suffice to turn the moral tide in the modern West however, because (a) religion in its currently prevailing forms might already be too discredited—as inimical to science; as authoritarian rather than democratic; and latterly as riven with sexual and other scandals. And (b) those world religions with the greatest currency and influence in the West, viz the Abrahamic faiths, may resist being greened to any significant extent in any case, having arisen as expressions of an agrarianism that set humanity outside and above nature, as domesticator, ruler and engineer of hitherto sovereign (ie self-ruling) lands. Strenuous efforts are admittedly at present being made within the Abrahamic faiths to overcome the dualist tendencies of their traditions and reinterpret those traditions in ecological terms (14). In Christianity, for example, a rich discourse of ecotheology has been evolving over decades – with offerings ranging from the ‘cosmic Christ’ of Matthew Fox (15) to the Earth Bible of Norman Habel (16) to the ‘Christology’ and ‘deep incarnation’ of Niels Gregerson (17) to Pope Francis’ own beautiful recent paean to an inspired cosmos, *Laudato Si* (4). This discourse has tremendous value for committed Christians seeking to reconcile their pre-existing faith with a growing sense that environmental catastrophe is charged with spiritual as well as practical significance. But to people not already strongly committed to Christianity, the appeal of an ecological message wrapped in the anthropomorphisms typical of theisms, Christian or otherwise, is likely to be weak.

³ If Australia is at all representative of Western democracies (with the exception perhaps of USA), it is demonstrable that secularism is on the rise, though the terrain of religion in society is shifting and complex. Although in 2016 the majority of Australians were still affiliated with a religion or spiritual tradition, according to the census for that year, “about one third of all Australians (30 per cent, or 7 million people) indicated either ‘No Religion’ or a secular belief such as Atheism, Humanism or Agnosticism. The number of people indicating they had ‘No Religion’ has increased by almost 50 per cent from 2011 to 2016.”(18) In 1966, almost 90% of Australians identified as Christian, while fifty years later in 2016 a mere 52% did so; ‘other religions’ accounted for 1% in 1966 and 8% in 2016; ‘no religion’ accounted for close to 0% in 1966 and 30% in 2016 (19).

In any case, whatever progress may be made in this matter of greening existing religions, it may nevertheless be strategic to introduce in addition an entirely new formation, a formation which creates a new narrative of identity and belonging, a narrative devoid from the start of anthropomorphic undertones. We might perhaps choose not to call this Earth-friendly formation a ‘religion’ at all, even though it might be socially organized into communities of interest as religions are. For it would differ from theistic traditions inasmuch as it would not feature notions of godhead, popularly construed in highly anthropomorphic forms, but would instead feature science as integral to its notion of the universe. Mind however, in some larger sense, might be re-construed as immanent in matter (20); and the universe itself might thus be perceived as intrinsically alive, inherently communicative, and accordingly as the ultimate wellspring of meaning (21, 22). There would be no need, from the point of view of this new formation, for texts or scriptures, nor hence for spiritual interpreters or authorities. Earth, as microcosm of the living universe, would provide the ‘scripture’; transactions with Earth-mind or mind-in-nature would be a personal affair, a personal locus of revelation (21). The orientation of this Earth-friendly formation might be described as eco-spiritual, but unlike spirituality generally, which is often taken to connote value-sets held outside of formal institutions, the Earth-friendly values of the new formation could be held collectively, since the purpose of this formation would be to constitute powerful new loci of affiliation. Members would be allied not only to Earth itself and the larger community of all life, as implied by eco-spirituality, but also to organised local ‘congregations’ comprised of people whose allegiance was likewise to Earth.

Actually, I think it would be important not to call this value-set, and the new narrative of identity attending it, a religion (or faith or credo) because the term, *religion*, has long been used to disparage environmentalists—to imply they act from irrational motives. But nor would it count merely as philosophy, since it would betoken much more than philosophy does—a whole-hearted commitment to care for Earth-life and identification with the human community sharing that commitment. Perhaps the term, *cosmology*, might serve best – cosmologies can be exclusively scientific or exclusively mythopoetic or a combination of both. The very term, *cosmos*, after all is directly derived from the Greek, *kosmos*, meaning order, and is in this sense inherently normative, implying that the physical universe as we encounter it does not merely hang together contingently but is self-conforming to some kind of inner principle of integrity or goodness. Such a cosmos is immanently lawful in its configuration not merely in a causal but in a normative sense. An ecological cosmology would thus have much more in common with the Earth-based cosmologies of Aboriginal Australia than with major religions such as the Abrahamic faiths, since it, like Aboriginal cosmologies (23, 24), would be organized around an immanent, normative axis of ecological Law rather than around worship of gods.

In the absence as yet of widespread economic praxes conducive to an ecological orientation, day-to-day practices that could anchor the Earth-friendly values of the new cosmology in actual experiences of reality could include the practice of conservation. Through *in situ* activities such as revegetation, restoration and re-wilding, people could gradually begin to decode, and become implicated in, actual ecologies, gaining in ecological literacy and becoming initiated into the intricacies—the myriad minds and mysteries—of actual life communities.

Indeed, I would suggest that hands-on practices of conservation, undertaken not in a purely utilitarian spirit but as devotional service—as the defining telos of one’s community and as the perceived end-point of human agency—afford new ways for us to re-enter reality and find our normative direction therein. To practice conservation effectively requires the closest attention to the particularities of a given place, to the lie of its land and the patterns of its weather, to the minutiae of the manifold identities and relationships that are forever forming and reforming there.

The practice of conservation also involves push and pull: we make interventions, such as plantings, thinnings, weedings and perhaps, in some circumstances, baitings and sprayings. We must pay attention to the consequences of those interventions for ecosystems, including all the vertebrate and invertebrate actors therein, rapidly adjusting our actions in light of often unintended outcomes. Our activities may expose us to risk, as we immerse ourselves in life-worlds outside the blind bubble of modern civilization. In these normally overlooked life-worlds, venoms and wild antagonists, hidden perils of many kinds, lie in wait for us. Such threats, as much as our ministrations, force us to cultivate attentiveness and responsiveness, and little by little this attentiveness, together with the respect that grows from our engagement with a multitude of inscrutable agencies, opens our eyes. It opens our eyes to worlds within worlds within worlds of astonishing embodiments of life, all cohering and conforming to one another—insofar as they are not derailed by the industrial juggernaut of modernity—in accordance with the manifest principles of creation and regeneration that Indigenous peoples signal when they say, “the Law is in the land” (23). In this way, right under our very noses, the land may begin to open to us, to come alive, and a whole new horizon of relationship, presence, communicativity, enthrallment, mystery and indeed revelation may come into view.

To approach this Law in something like the way Aboriginal people approach it, which is to say affectively and not merely abstractly or theoretically—and hence to inhabit this Law normatively, as one’s very consciousness—requires precisely such a shift in epistemology as I have been intimating here. This is a shift from an epistemology based on theoretical reason, as in Western discourses of philosophy and science, to one based on feelingful awareness. Traditional teachers of high repute, such as Senior Law Men, Bill Neidjie of Kakadu (25) and David Mowaljarlai (26) and Paddy Roe (27), both of the Kimberley, emphasize repeatedly that Aboriginal ways of knowing cannot be extricated from feeling. One arrives at this kind of knowledge not by adopting a stance of detached observation and inference, as Western scientists and philosophers do, but by, as Mowaljarlai puts it, “walking the land”. (23) By this I take him to mean that we should walk the land not merely in a literal sense but in a paradigm-shifting epistemological sense as well. Rather than stepping back from the land, as the observer and theoretician do, we have actively to enter it, address it and engage it as a collaborator that can and will join forces with us in some vital venture.

While such collaboration will undoubtedly require a high degree of empirical attentiveness on our part, it will also challenge our agency. We will feel the land’s resistance to efforts which go against the ‘grain’, so to speak, of its own tendencies or conativity, and a kind of smoothing-of-the-way for efforts which are conatively aligned with it. One may find oneself leaning into these latter ‘openings’ and promptly correcting one’s behavior in face of resistances simply because doing so

feels supremely ‘right’—it feels supremely right to find oneself slipping along in a kind of groove of assent while it feels downright wrong to find oneself pushing against some invisible grain. In other words, in walking the land, not merely as an observer but as a collaborator in ventures of mutual concern to the land and oneself, one starts to experience the land’s responsiveness to one’s presence, where that cannot leave one other than profoundly moved. One has perhaps begun indeed to experience the kind of feeling—a kind of vital, participative awareness—that Senior Law Men such as Neidjie and Mowaljarlai have been trying to explain to non-Indigenous countrymen for many years. Once we have discovered this way of knowing, there will be no question of remaining ethically indifferent to the living world, marooned inside a plastic bubble of anthropocentrism. To care for it—and seek solace in its presence—will be as natural as doing so is for Aboriginal people, because caring for it will be what makes us feel attuned and alive ourselves. To sense that one is noticed and intimately acknowledged by country is to experience a metaphysical affirmation that anchors one’s existence to a level of reality that is outside human time and beyond the reach of skepticism.

To walk the land in this new way, adapted to the praxical possibilities of our own time and also to the ecological imperatives of a wounded planet, is not merely the prerogative of privileged land holders. Place-specific conservation activities are surely in principle available to everyone. Those with disposable capital might join with friends to purchase an ecologically strategic property, then safeguard its future with a conservation covenant and prepare to embark on what might become, in its quiet way, a depth-initiation that few anticipate. Those without such financial means can still commit to an ecologically strategic place, by volunteering for caring-for-country type programs on public or private, urban or rural estates, or by creating such programs themselves. Undertaken collectively, via congregations of commitment to an ecological cosmology, such activities not only implicate us, through our own sweat and care, in a cherished place, but bond us to the colleagues-in-care who likewise find themselves drawn into its larger significance. Before too long we may start to feel like keepers of the place in question—the particular woodland or mountain, river or creek, rocky outcrop or arid shrubland—its interests gradually overtaking our own, our allegiance to it outgrowing our narrower, more personal perspectives.

Since commitment to sites pulls keepers into affinity not only with land but with one another, the bonds it forges may emanate not only in care of land but also in regimes of social solidarity and material mutual aid, just as associations based on religious conviction do. This dimension of mutual aid, at a time of escalating insecurity and ever-diminishing levels of state, community and family support, would reinforce the affiliative value of the new congregations, fitting them even more closely to the needs of our era.

Such bonds would moreover transcend other markers of difference, such as religion, race and class, since one’s colleagues-in-care become, again in something a little akin to the Aboriginal sense, one’s countrymen, knitted together by shared loyalty to, and identification with, the ecological interests of a cherished place. This is moreover an identification that, unlike identifications based on ideology, does not divide one’s own group from others: the fact that my group cares for country in a particular locality in no way sets us against groups who care for other localities. On the contrary, it is understood, via our shared ecocosmology, that all places need to be cared for, and

hence that all groups are engaged in a common work. The loyalty of each congregation to its own living country ensures that none covet the country of another and none wish to leave the country in which they have become, through their practice, so deeply invested. In this way, commitment to country, brought about by practices of ‘walking the land’, may help to settle societies down.

While the hands-on conservation activity of these land-based congregations may not in itself be strictly praxical, in the historical materialist sense, as it does not constitute a mode of production, it is in-service to the praxical, inasmuch as it helps to repair the biospheric fabric that is a condition for any and all ongoing economic activity.

The efficacy of such activity also perhaps brings out a deeper truth of historical materialism itself, which is that people undergo changes of normative consciousness not as a result merely of discourse but of personal—and particularly communicative—immersion in the realities which discourses merely represent. From this point of view, no amount of exposure to environmental philosophy or science—or for that matter, art or literature or theatre—will ever really change the consciousness and normative habits of the public, for the very reason that such discourse is addressed to people as audiences, which is to say as spectators (viewers, readers), as opposed to participants in environmental realities. The model of learning inherent in the common-sense assumption that public consciousness can be changed via discourse is in fact rooted in dualism, inasmuch as it assumes that understanding is ultimately a matter of grasping ideas or theories at an abstract level, rather than immersing oneself in relevant real-world situations and cultivating the skills of attentiveness, acuity and accommodation that would enable one to negotiate those situations sensitively and responsively (28). Environmentalists may in this sense have been working all along with a faulty model of consciousness change: one does not shift public consciousness merely by telling people environmental truths nor even by representing those truths via arts or literature. The most that people can learn, deep down, from being part of an audience is how to be part of an audience, where this is a matter of bracketing their own agency and remaining, as spectators, distanced from the action and hence from their responsibility for it. In order for people genuinely to come to inhabit ecological or Earth-centred consciousness, attuned interactivity with environmental realities may be required.

By creating new congregations to “walk the land” then, not so much in pursuit of livelihood, as was the case with hunter gatherers, but rather in a spirit of conservation, we might start to break the circularity that has foiled our attempts, as environmentalists, to shift society towards Earth-centredness. Such a new social formation would represent a response to our current discursive disquiet regarding the environment, evidenced in the current upsurge of activism, but its deeper, motivating appeal—the hook that would draw people, and bind them, into the congregations—would not be merely discursive but rather the promise of affiliation. Within the framework of this new social formation, the practice of conservation, understood as a cosmological practice emanating from an epistemology of walking the land, would ensure that knowledge of the land was inevitably charged with feeling, where this would in turn lay down a deep and abiding foundation for genuine ecological fealty.

The environmental anxiety and ferment that is currently sweeping parts of the Western world might provide an unprecedented historical opportunity for such a

movement towards deeper change to emerge. Within this historical milieu, an environmental vanguard informed with genuinely lived ecological consciousness might indeed be capable of configuring itself. The existence of such a vanguard might in turn suffice eventually to motivate greater scrutiny of existing techno-economic arrangements in society, where this could lead to investment in new economic arrangements. Such a change of direction at an economic level would then truly begin to dismantle dualism and launch us towards a civilization based not on domination but on adaptive co-existence with all life, human and other-than-human alike.

Note: This article is an adaptation and extension of an essay that was posted on the ABC Religion and Ethics website on 17 June 2019 under the title, **Why has environmental ethics failed to achieve a moral reorientation of the West?** <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/why-has-environmental-ethics-failed-to-achieve-a-moral-reorient/11216540>

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Biography

Freya Mathews is Adjunct Professor of Environmental Philosophy at Latrobe University, Australia. Her books include *The Ecological Self* (1991), *Ecology and Democracy* (editor) (1996), *For Love of Matter: a Contemporary Panpsychism* (2003), *Journey to the Source of the Merri* (2003), *Reinhabiting Reality: towards a Recovery of Culture* (2005), *Without Animals Life is not Worth Living* (2016) and *Ardea: a philosophical novella* (2016). She is the author of over eighty articles in the area of ecological philosophy. Her current special interests are in ecological civilization; indigenous (Australian and Chinese) perspectives on (so-called) sustainability and how these perspectives may be adapted to the context of contemporary global society; panpsychism and critique of the metaphysics of modernity; ecology and religion; and conservation ethics and rewilding in the context of the Anthropocene. In addition to her research activities she co-manages a private conservation estate in northern Victoria. She is a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.