

Unconventional Environmental Theories in the Face of Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss: Re-examination of Deep Ecology, VHEMT, and Primitivism

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Abstract

Deep Ecology, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), and Anti-Civilization Primitivism have frequently been labeled as radical environmental ideologies, owing to their relationship with activities conducted by environmental extremists. Nonetheless, given the serious concerns faced by climate change and biodiversity loss, it is critical to engage with a broad range of perspectives and techniques. Such participation allows us to have access to a greater range of perspectives and a more diverse pool of knowledge, boosting our capacity for creative problem-solving. The purpose of this essay is to reconsider the underlying concepts and principles that drive these theories, as well as to assess their relevance in tackling modern environmental issues. We think that Deep Ecology, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), and Anti-Civilization Primitivism should be called "unconventional" or "distinctive" rather than "radical," because they primarily focus on the ontological perspective but do not urge extreme acts. Meanwhile, their distinctiveness helps increase public awareness about environmental issues and promote reflection on and rethinking of the ontological link between mankind and the natural world.

Keywords: eco-surplus culture; eco-deficit culture; capitalism; voluntary childlessness; minimalism

“It is clear that invasive species have their invasion boundaries, which are determined by the differences between their home and alien ecosystems.

— But how about invasive humans? Will we ever stop claiming nature for our own?”

In “Invading in Moderation”; *Meandering Sobriety* (2023)

Introduction

Throughout the historical evolution of the environmental movement, a multitude of theories and philosophical paradigms have emerged. Some of these theories, while placing paramount importance on environmental concerns, exhibit progressive viewpoints that deviate significantly from conventional anthropocentric perspectives. In certain instances, environmental and animal rights extremists have appropriated the tenets of these theories to rationalize their actions (Gruenewald et al., 2015). Consequently, these theories are often relegated to the periphery of mainstream acceptance and characterized as radical in nature. Among the notable theories and concepts falling within this purview are Deep Ecology, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), and Anti-Civilization Primitivism. All three theories were proposed in the 20th century.

Recent assessments of the planetary boundary status have revealed disconcerting trends (Richardson et al., 2023). They indicate that humanity has transgressed six planetary boundaries, notably including climate change and biosphere integrity. Furthermore, compelling scientific evidence underscores the urgency of the situation, with numerous critical tipping points having already been breached. Even in regions previously perceived as minimally affected by anthropogenic activities, like the Antarctic, sea-ice levels reached record lows twice in 2023 (Biino, 2023; Purich & Doddridge, 2023). This unprecedented decline in sea ice has had far-reaching consequences, including a severe breeding failure among emperor penguins, resulting in the loss of approximately 7,000 chicks (Fretwell et al., 2023; Readfearn, 2023).

Given the exigencies posed by climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, it becomes imperative to revisit these ostensibly "radical" theories. Such a reexamination is essential as these theories underline the imperative of harmonizing human and natural world. Thus, the primary objective of this essay is to undertake a comprehensive exploration of the core content and principles of Deep Ecology, the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), and Anti-Civilization Primitivism. Subsequently, we will discuss the impact of these theories and concepts on human efforts to address the multifaceted crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation.

Deep Ecology

The emergence of Deep Ecology in the early 1970s represented a response to the escalating environmental crisis, signifying a departure from narrow approaches to environmental preservation. The term "Deep Ecology" was first introduced by Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, in his seminal 1973 article, thereby laying the groundwork for the subsequent development of the Deep Ecology worldview (Naess, 1973). Naess posited that profound alterations in Western lifestyles were imperative to tackle the root causes of environmental

predicaments, emphasizing the necessity for ontological shifts concerning the definition of humanity, non-human nature, and their interrelation : “How do we define humanity, non-human nature, and the relation between the two?” (Aaltola, 2010; Naess, 1973).

Naess contended that human should transcend the sole consideration of humanity's distinctive role in the natural world and advocate for the equitable consideration of all components of nature for maintaining the natural order. He emphasized that nature possessed intrinsic value surpassing human-centric valuations and criticized the notion of "shallow ecology," which implied that significant ecological problems could be resolved within the confines of an industrial capitalist society. The adjective "deep" in Deep Ecology refers to the necessity of profound inquiries and a recognition that human society bore responsibility for the ecological crisis imperiling the planet (Aaltola, 2010; Naess, 1973). Hence, in alignment with Naess's perspective, proponents of Deep Ecology championed the intrinsic worth of all living entities and ecosystems, advocating for measures such as population reduction and lifestyle transformations to curtail human impacts on the environment (Smith, 2014).

These philosophical underpinnings, drawing inspiration from the teachings of Spinoza, Gandhi, and Buddha, found their way into the mainstream environmental discourse during the 1980s. George Sessions, in his 1995 work titled "Biology: Deep Ecology for the 21st Century," extensively expounded upon these ideas (Sessions, 1995). Sessions had previously collaborated with Naess in writing the "Deep Ecology Platform," elucidating eight fundamental tenets of Deep Ecology (Naess & Sessions, 1984). The influence of Buddhist philosophy was particularly evident in Deep Ecology's advocacy for a lifestyle conducive to minimal harm to the environment and other living beings, entailing a shift away from consumerism and materialism toward a simpler, more sustainable existence, like minimalism (Rusu, 2023).

Proponents of Deep Ecology also criticized the prevailing perspective regarding non-human nature as a mere object of human domination, especially in the context of capitalist ideologies. Capitalism's propensity to disregard environmental considerations in global trade decision-making, its inclination to short-term economic gains, its constant pursuit of growth, and its instrumentalization of nature as a mere commodity without intrinsic value or significance stood in stark contrast to the Deep Ecology ethos (McLaughlin, 1993). Deep Ecology, in contrast, upheld the view that humans are integral components of their surrounding environment, eschewing the notion of external manipulation or ownership of nature. This recognition of interconnectedness can foster an ethical standpoint that acknowledges the intrinsic worth of non-human nature, thereby advocating for localized decision-making in matters of environmental preservation, where individuals possessed a deeper connection to their surroundings. This decentralization facilitated the formulation of more sustainable and context-specific solutions.

Nevertheless, Deep Ecology has not been immune to criticism, particularly regarding its ecocentric perspective. Critics contend that the principles espoused by the Deep Ecology worldview, while commendable in principle, prove idealistic and unfeasible when confronted with pressing environmental challenges. They argue that, especially in times of poverty and environmental degradation, human needs must take precedence. Furthermore, the Deep Ecology approach to environmental protection, characterized by decentralization and localism, has raised concerns about its effectiveness in addressing global environmental crises that demand coordinated international efforts.

Voluntary Human Extinction Movement

The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) was conceived by Les U. Knight, an American environmental activist, in 1991 (Jarvis, 1994). Knight, who had been actively engaged in various environmental protection endeavors since the 1970s, arrived at the unconventional conclusion that the extinction of the human species constituted the optimal solution to ecological challenges. His rationale for this stance drew from the philosophical underpinnings of Deep Ecology, which accentuates the intrinsic value of all life forms and adopts an Earth-centered perspective, as opposed to the conventional human-centric viewpoint (Ormrod, 2011).

Central to the ethos of VHEMT is the advocacy for the voluntary cessation of human reproduction, ultimately resulting in the extinction of human species. Proponents of this movement contend that the human population has surpassed the Earth's carrying capacity, rendering voluntary human extinction the most prudent course of action for the well-being of the biosphere (Keck, 2007). Knight went as far as asserting that humans were the singular species incompatible with harmonious coexistence with the Earth, positing that "the more humans there are, the greater those problems will be" (Savory, 2008). It is worth noting that not all adherents of VHEMT endorse the extreme pursuit of human extinction (Ormrod, 2011). Beyond its overarching environmental agenda, the movement also suggests that population decline holds the potential for enhancing the quality of human life (Ormrod, 2011).

Undoubtedly, this movement has encountered opposition within the community. In response to VHEMT, numerous journalists and scholars have argued that humans can develop sustainable lifestyles or reduce the population to sustainable levels. Others argue that, regardless of the merits of this idea, human reproductive instincts would prevent the human species from voluntarily seeking extinction.

Despite encountering resistance, the theory put forth by VHEMT undeniably underscores the adverse consequences of human actions on the natural world. While it may not represent a mainstream perspective, its influence permeates literary and cultural narratives, as well as human consciousness. For instance, in the film "Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol," featuring Tom Cruise, the character Hendricks, a deranged scientist, seeks to employ an

atomic bomb to eradicate human presence from the Earth, reflecting a commitment to environmental protection. Similarly, in the blockbuster "Avengers: Infinity War," a character named Thanos is willing to make profound sacrifices to eliminate half of the universe's "resource-consuming" beings, contending that such an act would pave the way for a more sustainable and aesthetically pleasing existence for the survivors. In Dan Brown's bestselling novel "Inferno," which was also adapted into a film, an antagonist, a scientist, devises a plan to reduce a portion of Earth's population as a means of safeguarding the planet. To implement this vision, he engineers a deadly virus with global reach.

A recurring theme in these literary works is the portrayal of VHEMT characters as intelligent and accomplished individuals willing to make personal sacrifices in the pursuit of environmental protection. Notably, their selection of individuals for extinction is depicted as random, devoid of considerations such as nationality, political affiliations, or even personal relationships, such as friendships and familial ties.

Anti-Civilization Primitivism

Anti-Civilization Primitivism, commonly known as Primitivism, represents a distinctive socio-political movement that offers a critical perspective on and repudiates the foundations of contemporary civilization. This movement emerged during the latter part of the 20th century in response to perceived destructive tendencies within industrial society. Primitivists advocate a return to a simpler and more primitive way of life, one rooted in a profound connection with nature reminiscent of hunter-gatherer societies. They regard modern civilization as a source of environmental harm (Aaltola, 2010). Within the realm of Anti-Civilization Primitivism, an offshoot known as Anarchist Primitivism exists, aligning with Anarchist principles while seeking the dissolution of complex societies in favor of a primitive, hunter-gatherer existence. Adherents of Anarchist Primitivism perceive civilization as the root cause of oppression, hierarchical structures, and ecological degradation.

Among the prominent figures in the development of Primitivist ideology, John Edward Zerzan, an American social activist, assumes a notable position. His writings critique the concepts of domestication and mediation (Aaltola, 2010). Specifically, Zerzan viewed modern agricultural civilization as an oppressive system and advocated for the lifestyle of hunters and gatherers as a source of inspiration for a more liberated society. Mediations, such as language, numerical systems, the concept of time, and arts, were deemed responsible for fostering alienation between individuals and their natural surroundings, leading humans away from what he considered "authentic" reality (Zerzan, 2002). Zerzan (2002) accentuated that language, in particular, diminished the richness of human perception, distanced individuals from direct experiences, and propagated the notion that reality was constructed from manipulable concepts. Other renowned Primitivist thinkers, such as Paul Shepard, John Fillis, and Richard Heinberg, similarly underscored themes of authenticity loss

and alienation (Aaltola, 2010). However, in contrast to Zerzan's focus on the linguistic dimension, Fillis attributed alienation to technology (Aaltola, 2010), while Heinberg (2005) identified technology, electricity, the pursuit of luxury, and a lifestyle marked by perpetual desire and fear as drivers behind technological addiction and environmental neglect among individuals.

Proponents of Primitivism advance several key arguments, including:

- *Technology Rejection*: Advocates of this ideology advocate for the rejection of modern technology, which they perceive as a tool of domination and environmental degradation. They propose a return to a simpler, low-tech, and sustainable way of life (Morin, 2014).
- *Hunter-Gatherer Lifestyle*: Primitivism idealizes the hunter-gatherer lifestyle as a paradigm for human society. Advocates contend that such societies are more egalitarian, ecologically sustainable, and harmonious with nature. A notable Primitivist, John Kaczynski, despite being a mathematical prodigy, abandoned his academic career to pursue a primitive lifestyle. He gained notoriety for his terrorist mail bombings targeting those he believed promoted modern technology and environmental destruction (Mark, 1996).
- *Anti-Work Ethic*: Primitivists reject modern work ethics, which they perceive as exploitative and alienating. They champion a life characterized by leisure, self-sufficiency, and a deeper connection with the natural world.
- *Rewilding*: Rewilding denotes the process through which ecosystems are allowed to revert to their natural states. Primitivists support rewilding initiatives aimed at restoring damaged landscapes and promoting biodiversity.

However, critics contend that the vision offered by Primitivism is highly impractical in the contemporary world, where billions of individuals rely on advanced technology and intricate social systems for their survival. They question the feasibility of a global transition to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and argue that Primitivism lacks a concrete plan for shifting from modern civilization to a primitive society. Detractors view this ideology more as a critique of the *status quo* rather than a viable alternative. Moreover, the rejection of technology raises ethical concerns, particularly in areas such as medical advancements that save lives and innovations that enhance the quality of life for many individuals.

The Value of Unconventional Environmental Theories

In the midst of the pressing global challenges posed by the climate crisis and biodiversity loss, it is imperative to engage with a diverse array of perspectives and approaches. Such engagement enriches our problem-solving toolkit by providing a broader spectrum of alternatives and a wealth of varied information (Vuong, 2022; Vuong et al., 2022). While the environmental theories and concepts under discussion here—namely, Deep Ecology, Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), and Primitivism—may appear radical

when viewed from the mainstream standpoint, it is more appropriate to characterize them as "unconventional" or "distinctive" rather than "radical." This distinction arises from the fact that they do not promote extreme behaviors but, rather, inspire individuals to shift their ontological perspective from human-centeredness to nature-centeredness. This transformation is believed to hold promise for mitigating the current environmental urgencies. It is important to note that, although certain environmental extremist groups draw upon principles from these theories, particularly Deep Ecology, to justify their actions (Carson et al., 2012), this should not be construed as indicative of the radical nature of the theories themselves.

Because of their distinctiveness, these unconventional environmental theories serve as a stark reminder of the deleterious impacts of human lifestyles on both human survival and ecosystems on a global scale. Regardless of one's alignment or disagreement with the principles and objectives espoused by these unconventional theories, they stimulate essential dialogues regarding issues such as overpopulation, ecological restoration, and human moral responsibility in the face of environmental crises. Moreover, they underscore the urgency of seeking sustainable solutions to safeguard the Earth's ecosystems and biodiversity. The infusion of these unconventional theories into the underlying ideas and concepts of well-known literary works, such as "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" and "Avengers: Infinity War" (Kavitha & Sudhalakshmi, 2022; Taylor, 2019), exemplifies their success in raising awareness. Furthermore, the "unusual" approach to addressing environmental issues pursued by these theories and concepts has garnered substantial media attention. For instance, despite its initiation in 1991, VHEMT was still remembered by *The New York Times* over 30 years later, following the world's population reaching 8 billion on November 15, 2022 (Buckley, 2022).

Additionally, these theories prompt us to engage in contemplation and reconsideration of the ontological connection between humanity and the natural world. This reevaluation has the potential to facilitate a transformation of our value systems, shifting them from eco-deficit to eco-surplus mindsets (Vuong, 2021a, 2021b). For example, although the tangible impacts of Deep Ecology, VHEMT, and Primitivism on human behavior are challenging to quantify, their principles align with a range of emerging social phenomena and practices. These include the adoption of minimalism, eco-friendly consumption, and voluntary childlessness, etc. Research by Jain et al. (2023) indicates that environmental concerns significantly motivate individuals within the working age and millennials (aged 18-40) to embrace a minimalist lifestyle. Moreover, an increasing number of people are opting not to have children due to concerns about current and projected overpopulation and climate change. Schneider-Mayerson and Leong (2020) study found that 96.5% of respondents reported being "very" or "extremely concerned" about the well-being of their existing, anticipated, or hypothetical children in a world affected by climate change (Angeloni, 2019; Cain, 2020; Patel, 2017). A recent research even suggests that having one fewer child could have a more significant

impact on annual carbon emissions than adopting a car-free lifestyle, avoiding air travel, or adopting a plant-based diet (Wynes & Nicholas, 2017).

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the practical implementation of these unconventional theories and concepts is often fraught with challenges, and, in some instances, it may be perceived as inhumane. Resistance from the majority is also a significant factor to contend with. Society demands a careful evaluation of the feasibility and ethical implications of these distinctive environmental theories in the context of the 21st century. Addressing the profound challenges of environmental degradation and climate change is an arduous task that necessitates substantial resources for both implementation and maintenance. Therefore, contemporary environmental protection theories should prioritize peaceful and pragmatic solutions that can mobilize human talent and material resources collectively for the preservation and enhancement of our ecological environment (Nguyen & Jones, 2022a, 2022b; Vuong, 2021a). Approaches that are too distinctive run the risk of leading to social conflicts, thereby undermining the collective strength that could otherwise be harnessed for ecological preservation and improvement.

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