



Jürgen Trittin

Ecological materialism

How nature becomes political

The fundamentalist justification for ecological politics is outdated, writes Jürgen Trittin, chairman of the German Green party. The ecological reform of the global economy must bring on board those with no interest in preserving nature *per se*. The more radical, "nature-oriented" and naive a demand is, the less likely it is to be realized and the more catastrophic the consequences will be.

Does nature have an intrinsic value? Or does its value lie in its being the basis for human life? Though fundamentalist conservationists and pragmatic ecologists justify their standpoints differently and regularly disagree, they are mostly fighting for the same thing. If environmental politics are to be successful globally, people need to recognize their own interests in the environment.

Nature becomes political when it finds human advocates in the political sphere. Flora, fauna, biosphere, atmosphere — the everyday definition of "nature" — then become subject to the conflict of interests and ideological differences. Why is this? Germany's Nature Conservation Act rules that "nature and countryside" must be protected both because of their "intrinsic value" and because they are the "fundamental basis of human life, for which we have a responsibility to future generations". The priorities here are the "efficiency and functionality of the ecosystem", the "sustainability of natural assets", the "biospheres of the animal and plant world", and the "variety, uniqueness and beauty" of nature and the countryside. This double justification, whereby nature has an intrinsic value *and* a value as something that can be used by human beings, is also widespread in public discourse on environmental issues. Fundamentally, though, two quite different arguments are in play.

Since not everybody shares the view that nature is something automatically deserving of protection, conservation is often indirectly justified with reference to the function it plays in preserving the greater ecological context, which is in turn crucial for human life and its ecological niche. Even what at first sight seems to be useless, ugly or even dangerous can be seen as deserving of preservation. One major ecological issue is the global climate, for whose sake vast areas of rainforest, for example, need to be protected from direct human intervention because they indirectly fulfil a function crucial to human survival through their contribution to the climate.

The argument for the intrinsic value of nature, on the other hand, makes no attempt to prove nature's usefulness to human beings. What motivates people to argue for the preservation of nature in non-utilitarian terms? The intrinsic value of nature may become directly apparent to the human observer via the

experience of its beauty, variety and splendour. This intrinsic value is not one and the same thing as existing for humans to experience, however. The experience of the natural world leads people to regard nature with respect and reverence. This respect need not be religiously motivated, though it often is. In this case, nature is deemed worthy of preservation because of its divine character, which exists independently of humans. However, respect for the intrinsic worth of nature can also derive from human self-criticism. The destructive history of humans towards themselves and towards nature can lead the human observer towards an ethic of self-restraint. Nature is then held to be more valuable than the human world, and restraint is demanded in relation to it.

Environmentalists might anyway argue that both arguments are correct. But the difference between them has consequences for ecological politics.

What should be preserved: Nature, environment, ecosystem

Going beyond the everyday meaning of "nature" casually employed above, it soon becomes unclear what exactly it is that we should be preserving. The concept of nature is a dazzling one. In its universal sense it is opposed to the supernatural, and includes human beings and their world. By this definition, deforestation, the contamination of rivers, climatic catastrophe and the possibility of the earth becoming uninhabitable would be "natural" processes, and the concept would be of no use in the justification of a specifically ecological politics. We tend also to set "nature" against the artificial or man-made. Here nature comes to mean "untouched" conditions that have come into being over a long period of time without human intervention. Such a definition of nature is again too narrow, because nowadays there is a lot more that needs to be protected than merely "untouched nature", which has in any case become rare.

The concepts of "environment", "ecology" and "sustainability" are used in public debate almost interchangeably with "nature", but introduce a completely different way of looking at things. "Environment" relates the flow of energy and materials to humans and includes the consequences of these processes; "ecology" is the consideration of systems of exchange and the mutual dependency of biotic and abiotic units; and "sustainability" is concerned with such systems' long-term chances of stability. "Nature", in its extreme sense of being "untouched", enters the political debate only indirectly through these political concepts, as environmental or ecological politics. Either that or it takes on a regional or local meaning, as expressed in the case of "nature reserves". In the global environmental debate, the concept of nature does not play a central role. Hence it becomes less important to argue for the protection of "nature" without reference to humans and their needs.

Nor is this surprising, given that nature can only become political through people. Only a minority share a world view in which the protection of nature is justified on the grounds of its intrinsic value. Even where religions recognize something like a duty to "preserve creation", this by no means prevents them also holding that humans should "master" nature. "Untouched nature" is a modern idea, ultimately the flipside of a civilization founded upon nature's ruthless exploitation and destruction. Many indigenous peoples, often idealized by Europeans weary of civilization, live mainly in, with and also against nature. Ecological politics cannot rely on nature-centred ideologies, be they religious or secular. Quite apart from the ethical dubiousness of belittling humanity, this is also impossible for tactical reasons, since such ideologies will

always remain the preserve of a minority. These ideologies will never attain the influence that ecological politics needs today. There will always be world views driven by strong human interests for whom the preservation of nature comes second to human cultural and economic achievements. Their demands are voiced in the political sphere with equal legitimacy. For fundamentalist conservationists, the interests of Brazilian agriculture, of the Chinese and Czech energy sectors, or of German chemical companies, their employees and their consumers, are all politically and morally illegitimate. But they are not, as ecologically problematic as they may be.

The argument for the preservation of the human ecological niche, on the other hand, is a powerful motive that can be shared by all. Ecological politics can portray itself today, with overwhelming evidence, as a general interest that goes far beyond the admiration of nature. After all, ecological politics is about the fight for the material preservation of the fundamentals of life for all human beings. This is self-evident to so many people all over the world that ecological politics, or at least its rhetoric, has become mainstream.

The same aims and conflicts

The growing worldwide support for ecological arguments also plays into the hands of pure conservationists. Defenders of the intrinsic value of nature and advocates of the preservation of the fundamentals of human life march side by side, for the most part, on the way towards an environmentally sustainable global economic order. The saving of the rainforests, nature reserves, the protection of endangered species, ecological agriculture and much more can nowadays be justified through their function in fostering ecological stability and the preservation of the human ecological niche. Different justifications lead to the same results.

But conflicts can also arise between environmentalists and pure conservationists. A more globally oriented ecological politics can, for example, take the view that a high number of wind turbines on the coast is necessary, whereas the locally minded animal and nature conservationist will wish to protect natural cycles and habitats in the region. Yet the time pressure under which we must ecologically stabilize the global economic system has increased dramatically as a result of climate change, population growth, global industrialization and increasing demands on energy and resources, not to mention the global environmental damage that has already been caused. Given the massively powerful interests of hundreds of millions of people who are not the least bit ecologically minded, this forces us to make compromises. Here too a rift emerges between nature fundamentalists and sustainability politicians — because the more radical, "nature-oriented" and naive a demand is, the less likely it is to be realized, the more improbable ecological improvements are, and the more catastrophic the consequences will be.

Especially internationally, the argument based purely on the intrinsic value of nature is falling behind the complex ecological thinking necessary today. Conflicts between conservationists and people in poorer countries over how they make use of their own land will never be resolved by finger-wagging on the part of conservationists or by preaching ecological lifestyles. This is where we have to negotiate and develop regionally and nationally sustainable economic models that combine people's right to use resources with the preservation of nature reserves, the interests of international trade and industry with the fight against poverty in such a way that a sustainable global system develops.

Motivation from the experience of nature

An ecological politics based on a purely scientific approach to sustainability takes a rational, fundamentally sober approach to the problem. Yet often more is needed to motivate people to get politically involved. In practice, many people actively engaged in green parties or organizations are drawn to nature by a powerful emotional, romantic, aesthetic or religious impulse. An emotionally coloured experience of nature can range from sympathy with animals, to being overwhelmed by spectacular landscapes, to the sense of belonging to a higher natural order. Indeed, it is questionable whether one can become an enthusiastic ecologist and be completely devoid of such instincts. This kind of attraction to nature is widespread and is something people experience above all as tourists. Admittedly, tourism is often part of the problem, and all too often the step from experiencing nature as a tourist to putting one's experiences into ecological practice is missing. Nevertheless, the emotional experience of nature is undoubtedly an important motivation for people when they argue for nature to be brought into the political sphere. Being appalled at the sight of contaminated rivers, oil pollution and forest fires, or at breathing polluted air, does seem to be a prerequisite for eco-political engagement.

But such a connection with our natural environment is not self-evident, in no way "natural", and is rather the cultural and historical product of certain eras and traditions. Many people view nature differently, seeing it above all as a resource, and would be incapable of doing otherwise. The sight of smoking chimneys, slash-and-burn agriculture or factory farming does not provoke the same reaction in all people as it does in today's green city-dwellers, who believe that the disgust they feel is quite natural and self-evident. Though the feeling of an emotional relationship with nature is fundamentally important as a motivation for taking part in environmental politics, it is insufficient in providing the necessary thrust for global ecological change. People's material interests need also to be considered and mobilized.

Some parts of the Left frown upon the concept of nature as reactionary. They are right to reject nature as an argumentative anchor. If nature is used in political discourse to denote what is good, to identify what is unnatural with what is bad, and thus to close down the debate, then the concept of nature is indeed reactionary. It becomes the cousin of "human nature", which helps to condemn behaviour that is different, to set the sexes as eternal polar opposites and to brand whole cultures and ways of life "unnatural". In that sense, "nature" is merely a conservative construct.

Ecological materialism versus the false criticism of nature

But occasionally this justified criticism of "naturalism" translates into a rejection of environmental politics. Here it can be countered that the criticism of the concept of nature should not miss the point; a brief glance at the global statistics and reports on climate change, food production, increasing resource shortages, water conflicts, air pollution, mobility and energy, reveals all too clearly the urgent need for ecological reform of the global economy. In such contexts, the ideological critique of "nature" seems immediately and overwhelmingly irrelevant. The concepts of "ecology" and "sustainability" can get by perfectly well without conservative fictions about what is "natural". The rejection of such ideological aspects need not prevent anyone acknowledging the urgency of ecological politics.

Ecological politics does not have to restrict itself to ideologically motivated lifestyle politics; today, it coincides with the politics of production, the economy and the physical flow of energy, materials and resources. A global system of material exchange between human beings, and between human beings and their environment, needs to be designed in such a way that it does not collapse in the medium term. A materialistic vocabulary of resources, food, health and prosperity is sufficient to justify ecological politics. What is at stake today is hard material interests and how to offset their effects. Ecological politics coincides with the original leftwing demand for global material justice.

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