

My ecocentric decisions

Ian Whyte

Ian is a field naturalist who lives in Ottawa, ON, Canada.

Keywords: ecological living

Citation: Whyte I (2024) My ecocentric decisions. *The Ecological Citizen* 7(2): 111–12.

Many people are unsure at first of what ecocentric thinking consists and how to apply it to their circumstances. So, perhaps my personal thinking will be of some use.¹

To begin, I need to state that my ecological viewpoint is a stark alternative to the usual mainstream one of unbridled human superiority. I regard myself as one of the many myriads of animal and plant people who make the total of life on Earth. All of us, plus the ecosystems, make up the living Earth, Gaia. Every living entity is equally distant from the original spark of life, and as such are all substantially equally evolved; think of the outer surface of a ball, and not of a tree. (Framing is important, and how one thinks about things can make crucial differences.) This strongly implies that, with regards to human interference, all species have the absolute right to their continued existence, in approximately normal numbers, and in approximately normal settings, within the web of life on Earth.

Descartes, four centuries ago, was flat, and evilly, wrong in his assertions about the rest of life. There is now, and there was then, no reason to doubt other life's sentience, than the foul desire to be able to exploit it freely and without remorse.

Moreover, I only know about the feelings of one of these species: humans. However, it makes absolute sense to assume, in the absence of contrary certain knowledge, that the myriad other lives feel similarly to us. It should take absolute proof that they don't before different treatment is even considered, and even then I doubt it would be valid to do so. (Moreover, there is no reason why others have to be the same as humans before they are worthy of love and respect!) The current onus of proof, here as in so much else, must be reversed. Even then, similarity to us is a false standard. All life is intertwined, interrelated and I want to treat every life form with respect, love, and dignity. The well-being of all is closely bound up with each other in a seamless way.

As it happens, in Nature there is no waste and no 'harvestable surplus'. Every stage in life's circles is the starting point for the next stage. If at any point biomass is removed, the next stage is truncated, some of it is no more. So, take a fish from its habitat, and the whole ecosystem becomes that bit poorer. Take

a lot, and the ecosystem becomes a lot poorer. Can you see this in an ecosystem near you?

Furthermore, what's allowable on an Earth that's overrun by a vastly excessive human enterprise is very different from what would be sensible, from all points of view, on an Earth with an appropriate human population. On this Earth, life is in the process of collapsing, and ought to be protected at all costs.

While there are many ideas on how to guide a life, a goal and two or three rules of thumb are sufficient with which to get started. My goal is as simple as it is astoundingly unusual: an Earth on which all Earthlings thrive. I use a few basic touchstones: do least harm to all living entities and the ecosphere; greet all life with love, kindness, and reverence; and be life affirming.

Each of these points could be developed and many others added; however as guides, I started with these (although I did not know it at the time), and slowly became aware of and thought out many more over the years. See some of them at 'My path to ecocentrism' (<https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/pdfs/v01sa-09.pdf>).

It's important to realize that these seemingly simple ideas and guides are extremely hard to implement, especially in the world as it is constituted today. Failure in many areas, especially at first, is bound to happen; don't give up, because, gradually, more success will come. Each decision one makes is a fresh start and they come easier with time. Remember, you are making a break both with society's norms and, likely, your own past behaviour. It's hard, but possible in many areas. Try it, and keep at it!

As you adapt to the simple rules, you should at least be aware that there are many more in the background. Consider and be guided by the principles of precaution, weight of evidence, reverse onus (assume xyz is dangerous unless proven otherwise), reverse matrix (humans in park size places, the animal and plant people in the rest), being aware of incrementalism, and $I = P \times C \times T$. Beauty usually indicates positive realities, whereas ugliness reveals broken systems. Be wary of pejorative words like 'balance' and 'reasonable'. Practice usufruct (leave it better than you found it) principles. Be aware of Henry David Thoreau's thought that things own you, practice frugality and simplicity, and consider that the optimum is often very different from the maximum. A final admonishment is to try to use, create and allow nothing toxic to life into yours.

Now, how strident should we be? Well, consider that nine planetary boundaries have been breached, human overshoot is monstrous, all life is at risk, biodiversity is crashing, and on and on. We should be fighting like the proverbial Raccoon, cornered by the big dog in a garage, knowing he's going to die, but fighting like Hell anyway.

Notes

- 1 I have written on this before, and I am pleased to note, in a similar manner: <https://blog.ecologicalcitizen.net/2020/08/13/making-my-decisions-do-least-harm>.