

# LOVE IT OR LOSE IT: THE COMING BIOPHILIA REVOLUTION

David W. Orr

David Orr believes Americans lack *eco-literacy*—the basic language and perspectives necessary for understanding the earth. In this essay, he contests core beliefs of the Western Tradition regarding objectivity, neutrality, autonomy, and free will. Orr presents a choice between biophobia (aversion to nature) and biophilia (nurturance of nature). He observes that early humans actually had no choice—they necessarily embraced nature. Now, video games, shopping malls, and freeways encourage biophobia, a rejection of nature.

Orr argues we are not free to ignore nature; he equates biophobia with misanthropy (hatred of people) and sociopathy. Because we all depend upon the earth, no one has the right to expect a “free-ride.” Whereas Naess, Ridley, and Quinn focus on our close ties to other creatures, Orr raises the bar by invoking moral responsibility. He argues that we simply cannot be neutral about life and nature, demanding that we take a stand and avert catastrophe.

As you read, consider whether one can be a good person without embracing nature. Does Orr have the right to condemn those who don’t embrace nature? Do we have a right to ignore Orr? What might John Stuart Mill suggest we do?

---

I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.

—DEUTERONOMY 30:19

<sup>1</sup> “Nature and I are two,” filmmaker Woody Allen once said, and apparently the two have not gotten together yet (Lax, 1992, pp. 39–40). Allen is known to take extraordinary precautions to limit bodily and mental contact with rural flora and fauna. He does not go in natural lakes, for example, because “there are live things in there.” The nature Allen does find comfortable is that of New York City, a modest enough standard for wildness.

<sup>2</sup> Allen’s aversion to nature, what can be called biophobia, is increasingly common among people raised with television, Walkman radios attached to their heads, and video games and living amidst shopping malls, freeways, and dense urban or suburban settings where nature is permitted tastefully, as decoration. More than ever we dwell in and among our own creations and are increasingly uncomfortable with nature lying beyond our direct control. Biophobia ranges from discomfort in “natural” places to active scorn for whatever is not manmade, managed, or air-conditioned. Biophobia, in short, is the culturally acquired urge to affiliate with technology, human artifacts, and solely with human interests

Orr, David W. “Love It or Lose It: The Coming Biophilia Revolution.” From *Earth in Mind* by David Orr. Copyright © 1994 by the author. Reproduced with permission of Island Press, Washington, D.C.

regarding the natural world. I intend the word broadly to include as well those who regard nature “objectively” as nothing more than “resources” to be used any way the favored among the present generation see fit.

<sup>3</sup> Is biophobia a problem as, say, misanthropy or sociopathy, or is it merely a personal preference, one plausible view of nature among many? Is it OK that Woody Allen feels little or no sympathy or kinship with nature? Does it matter that a growing number of other people do not like it or like it only in the abstract as nothing more than resources to be managed or as television nature specials? Does it matter that we are increasingly separated from the conditions of nature? If these things do matter, how do they matter and why? And why have so many come to think that the created world is inadequate? Inadequate to what and for what?

<sup>4</sup> At the other end of the continuum of possible orientation toward nature is “biophilia,” which E. O. Wilson (1984) has defined as “the urge to affiliate with other forms of life” (p. 85). Erich Fromm (1973) once defined it more broadly as “the passionate love of life and of all that is alive” (pp. 365–366). Both agree, however, that biophilia is innate and a sign of mental and physical health. To what extent are our biological prospects and our sanity now dependent on our capacity for biophilia? To that degree it is important that we understand how biophilia comes to be, how it prospers, what competencies and abilities it requires of us, and how these are to be learned.

<sup>5</sup> Biophilia is not all that tugs at us. The affinity for life or biophilia competes with other drives and affinities, including biophobia disguised beneath the abstractions and presumptions of progress found in economics, management, and technology. Whatever is in our genes, then, the affinity for life is now a choice we must make. Compared with earlier cultures, our distinction lies in the fact that technology now allows us to move much further toward total domination of nature than ever before. Serious and well-funded people talk about reweaving the fabric of life on earth through genetic engineering and nan-

otechnologies, others talk of leaving the earth altogether for space colonies, and still others talk of reshaping human consciousness to fit “virtual reality.” If we are to preserve a world in which biophilia can be expressed and can flourish, we will have to decide to make such a world.

## The Origins and Consequences of Biophobia

<sup>6</sup> In varying degrees humans have always modified their environments. I am persuaded that they generally have intended to do so with decorum and courtesy toward nature—not always and everywhere to be sure, but mostly. On balance, the evidence further suggests that biophilia or something close to it was woven throughout the myths, religions, and mindset of early humankind, which saw itself as participating with nature. In Owen Barfield’s words, people once felt “integrated or mortised into” the world in ways that we do not and perhaps cannot (Barfield, 1957, p. 78). Technology, primitive by our standards, set limits on what tribal cultures could do to the world, while their myths, superstitions, and taboos constrained what they thought they ought to do. But I do not think that early humans *chose* biophilia, if for no other reason than that there was no choice to be made. And those tribes and cultures that were biophobic or incompetent toward nature passed “into oblivion through starvation and disease” (Diamond, 1992, pp. 317–338).

<sup>7</sup> Looking back across that divide, I think it is evident that tribal cultures possessed an ecological innocence of sorts because they did not have the possibilities or the knowledge given to us. We, in contrast, must choose between biophobia and biophilia because science and technology have given us the power to destroy so completely as well as the knowledge to understand the consequences of doing so. The divide was not a sharp break but a kind of slow tectonic shift in perception and attitudes that widened throughout the late Middle Ages to the present. What we call “modernization” represented dramatic

## THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE: WHO AM I?

changes in how we regard the natural world and our role in it. These changes are now so thoroughly ingrained in us that we can scarcely conceive of any other manner of thinking. But crossing this divide first required us to discard the belief that the world was alive and worthy of respect, if not fear. To dead matter, we owe no obligations. Second, it was necessary to distance ourselves from animals who were transformed by Cartesian alchemy into mere machines. Again, no obligations or pity are owed to machines. In both cases, use is limited only by usefulness. Third, it was necessary to quiet whatever remaining sympathy we had for nature in favor of "hard" data that could be weighed, measured, counted, and counted on to make a profit. Fourth, we needed a reason to join power, cash, and knowledge in order to transform the world into more useful forms. Francis Bacon provided the logic, and the evolution of government-funded research did the rest. Fifth, we required a philosophy of improvement and found it in the ideology of perpetual economic growth, now the central mission of governments everywhere. Sixth, biophobia required the sophisticated cultivation of dissatisfaction, which could be converted into mass consumption. The advertising industry and the annual style change were invented.

<sup>8</sup> For these revolutions to work, it was necessary that nature be rendered into abstractions and production statistics of board feet, tons, barrels, and yield. It was also necessary to undermine community, especially the small community, where attachment to place might grow and with it resistance to crossing the divide. Finally it was necessary to convert politics into the pursuit of material self-interest and hence render people impotent as citizens and unable to talk of larger and more important things.

<sup>9</sup> To this point the story is well known, but it is hardly finished. Genetic engineers are busy remaking the fabric of life on earth. The development of nanotechnologies—machines at the molecular level—create possibilities for good and evil that defy prediction. How long will it be until the genetic engineers or nanotechnologists

release an AIDS-like virus? One can only guess. But even those promoting such technologies admit that they "carry us toward unprecedented dangers . . . more potent than nuclear weapons" (Drexler, 1987, p. 174). And immediately ahead is the transformation of human consciousness brought on by the conjunction of neuroscience and computers in machines that will simulate whatever reality we choose. What happens to the quality of human experience or to our politics when cheap and thoroughgoing fantasy governs our mental life? In each case, untransformed nature pales by comparison. It is clumsy, inconvenient, flawed, and difficult to move or rearrange. It is slow. And it cannot be converted to mass dependence and profits so easily.

<sup>10</sup> Beneath each of these endeavors lies a barely concealed contempt for unaltered life and nature, as well as contempt for the people who are expected to endure the mistakes, purchase the results, and live with the consequences, whatever those may be. It is a contempt disguised by terms of bamboozlement, like *bottom line*, *progress*, *needs*, *costs and benefits*, *economic growth*, *jobs*, *realism*, *research*, and *knowledge*, words that go undefined and unexamined. Few people, I suspect, believe "in their bones" that the net results from all of this will be positive, but most feel powerless to stop what seems to be so inevitable and unable to speak what is so hard to say in the language of self-interest.

<sup>11</sup> The manifestation of biophobia, explicit in the urge to control nature, has led to a world in which it is becoming easier to be biophobic. Undefined nature is being replaced by a defiled nature of landfills, junkyards, strip mines, clearcuts, blighted cities, six-lane freeways, suburban sprawl, polluted rivers, and superfund sites, all of which deserve our phobias. Ozone depletion, meaning more eye cataracts and skin cancer, does give more reason to stay indoors. The spread of toxic substances and radioactivity does mean more disease. The disruption of natural cycles and the introduction of exotic species has destroyed much of the natural diversity that formerly graced our landscapes. Introduced blights and pests have or are destroying American chest-

nuts, elms, maples, dogwoods, hemlocks, and ashes. Global warming will degrade the flora and fauna of familiar places (Peters and Myers, 1991–1992, pp. 66–72). Biophobia sets into motion a vicious cycle that tends to cause people to act in such a way as to undermine the integrity, beauty, and harmony of nature, creating the very conditions that make the dislike of nature yet more probable.

<sup>12</sup> Even so, is it OK that Woody Allen, or anyone else, does not like nature? Is biophobia merely one among a number of equally legitimate ways to relate to nature? I do not think so. First, for every “biophobe” others have to do that much more of the work of preserving, caring for, and loving the nature that supports biophobes and biophiliacs alike. Economists call this the “free-rider problem.” It arises in every group, committee, or alliance when it is possible for some to receive all of the advantages of membership while doing none of the work necessary to create those advantages. Environmental free riders benefit from others’ willingness to fight for the clean air that they breathe, the clean water that they drink, the preservation of biological diversity that sustains them, and the conservation of the soil that feeds them. But they lift not a finger. Biophobia is not OK because it does not distribute fairly the work of keeping the earth or any local place.

<sup>13</sup> Biophobia is not OK for the same reason that misanthropy and sociopathy are not OK. We recognize these as the result of deformed childhoods that create unloving and often violent adults. Biophobia in and of its forms similarly shrinks the range of experiences and joys in life in the same way that the inability to achieve close and loving relationships limits a human life. E. O. Wilson (1984) put it this way:

<sup>14</sup> People can grow up with the outward appearance of normality in an environment largely stripped of plants and animals, in the same way that passable looking monkeys can be raised in laboratory cages and cattle fattened in feeding bins. Asked if they were happy, these people would probably say

yes. Yet something vitally important would be missing, not merely the knowledge and pleasure that can be imagined and might have been, but a wide array of experiences that the human brain is peculiarly equipped to receive. (p. 118)

<sup>15</sup> Can the same be said of whole societies that distance themselves from animals, trees, landscapes, mountains, and rivers? Is mass biophobia a kind of collective madness? In time I think we will come to know that it is.

<sup>16</sup> Biophobia is not OK because it is the foundation for a politics of domination and exploitation. For our politics to work as they now do, a large number of people must not like any nature that cannot be repackaged and sold back to them. They must be ecologically illiterate and ecologically incompetent, and they must believe that this is not only inevitable but desirable. Furthermore, they must be ignorant of the basis of their dependency. They must come to see their bondage as freedom and their discontents as commercially solvable problems. The drift toward a biophobic society, as George Orwell and C. S. Lewis foresaw decades ago; requires the replacement of nature and human nature by technology and the replacement of real democracy by a technological tyranny now looming on the horizon.

<sup>17</sup> These are reasons of self-interest: It is to our advantage to distribute the world’s work fairly, to build a society in which lives can be lived fully, and to create an economy in which people participate knowledgeably. There is a further argument against biophobia that rests not on our self-interest, but on our duties. Finally, biophobia is not OK because it violates an ancient charge to replenish the earth. In return for our proper use, the earth is given to humankind as a trust. Proper use requires gratitude, humility, charity, and skill. Improper use begins with ingratitude and disparagement and proceeds to greed, abuse, and violence. We cannot forsake the duties of stewardship without breaking another trust with those who preceded us and with those who will follow.

## THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE: WHO AM I?

<sup>18</sup> Biophobia is certainly more complex than I have described it. One can be both biophobic and a dues-paying member of the Sierra Club. It is possible to be nature averse but still "like" the idea of nature as an abstraction. Moreover, it is possible to adopt the language and guise of biophilia and do a great deal of harm to the earth, knowingly or unknowingly. In other words, it is possible for us to be inconsistent, hypocritical, and ignorant of what we do.

<sup>19</sup> But is it possible for us to be neutral or "objective" toward life and nature? I do not think so. On closer examination, what often passes for neutrality is nothing of the sort but rather the thinly disguised self-interest of those with much to gain financially or professionally. For those presuming to wear the robes of objectivity, the guise, in Abraham Maslow's (1966) words, is often "a defense against being flooded by the emotions of humility, reverence, mystery, wonder, and awe" (p. 139). Life ought to excite our passion, not our indifference. Life in jeopardy ought to cause us to take a stand, not retreat into a spurious neutrality. Furthermore, it is a mistake to assume that commitment precludes the ability to think clearly and to use evidence accurately. To the contrary, commitment motivates intellectual clarity, integrity, and depth. We understand this in other realms quite well. When the chips are down, we do not go to physicians who admit to being neutral about the life and death of their patients. Nor when our hide is at stake do we go to lawyers who profess "objective" neutrality between justice and injustice. It

is a mistake to think that matters of environment and life on earth are somehow different. They are not, and we cannot in such things remain aloof or indifferent without opening the world to demons.

## Biophilia

<sup>20</sup> We relate to the environment around us in different ways, with differing intensity, and these bonds have different sources. At the most common level, we learn to love what has become familiar. There are prisoners who prefer their jail cell to freedom; city dwellers, like Woody Allen, who shun rural landscapes or wilderness; and rural folk who will not set foot in the city. Simply put, we tend to bond with what we know well. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) described this bonding as "topophilia," which includes "all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment" (p. 93). Topophilia is rooted less in our deep psychology than it is in our particular circumstances and experiences. It is closer to a sense of habitat that is formed out of the familiar circumstances of everyday living than it is a genuine rootedness in the biology and topography of a particular place. It is not innate, but acquired. New Yorkers have perhaps a greater sense of topophilia or habitat than do residents of Montana. But Montanans are more likely to keep kinship with sky, mountains, and trout streams. Both, however, tend to be comfortable with what has become habitual and familiar.