RECEIVING THOREAU: THOREAU AS A RESOURCE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS TODAY

by

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Henry David Thoreau developed a style of interacting with the natural world in which he became personally involved with the changing of seasons and with the various creatures that he found out in nature. Knowing about this style is important for environmentalists today, because it is often difficult for us to develop such an interaction, and also to stay in one place long enough to get to know it well. Thoreau's is an inspiring voice for today's environmentalists to know about and listen to.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Henry David Thoreau, and to my houseplant, which came back to life against all odds.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> A man receives only what he is ready to receive, whether physically or intellectually or morally, as animals conceive at certain seasons ... We hear and apprehend what we already half know ... Every man thus tracks himself through life ... I find, for example, in Aristotle, something about the spawning, etc., of the pout and perch, because I know something about it already and have my attention aroused.
>
> Henry David Thoreau[1]

I choose to begin my study of Thoreau and his relationship to subsequent history with this quotation because while he was a man of powerful ideas, no idea--no matter how eloquently formulated, no matter how fervently created-- has an effect on people unless they choose to receive it. And, as Thoreau suggested, unless an idea speaks to something that people already know, it is unlikely that they will hear it.

Thoreau's ideas have been heard. His voice rings through Walden, several additional essays, and, to a lesser extent, his voluminous Journal, to an astoundingly large readership which has included ecologists, social activists, and scholars, as well as countless high school English students.

The question of exactly who these reading audiences have been and the ways in which they have heard or not heard what Thoreau had to say is too large for me to fully address in the context of this thesis. I

find it valuable (and more possible) to present instead certain aspects of Thoreau's thoughts concerning the relationship to the wildness he found in and around Concord, where he made his permanent home. I would like to make a case for the value of those ideas to people who are involved in certain environmental movements occurring at this time.

Thoreau's journals have provided me with the vast majority of my source material about his relationship to nature; this material has been supplemented by his essays "Walking," "Wild Apples," and "Huckleberries," as well as by a knowledge of the broad ideas contained in Walden. I have relied chiefly on the Journal because it is personal, daily, and comprehensive, having been a receptacle of Thoreau's thoughts for most of his adult life.

My thesis will be presented in two parts. Part I will discuss the ways in which Thoreau experienced nature in the area where he lived. As a naturalist, Thoreau had an unusual spirit and style which he shared openly in his journals; I have sought to convey this through certain journal selections.

Part II will examine the modern-day environmental movements of bioregionalism, deep ecology, and ecofeminism, as well as the phenomenon of environmental activism, in relationship to relevant aspects of Thoreau's writings. A discussion of how Thoreau viewed economics will be included in the section on activism.

I don't think this thesis would be complete without mentioning how writing it has affected me. One of my instructors this quarter has said that the ultimate purpose of good nature writing is to make you put down the book and go outside. Reading Thoreau and writing about him has made me do that. In January, when I was reading through volumes of his journals, I found I saw nature through Thoreau's eyes, powerful memories of the

things he wrote coming back to me as I walked through the rain-soaked streets of Eugene. Now, I am seeing it more through my own eyes, making my own discoveries, learning more names of plant species than I have since I was much younger.

For those of us who are trying deeply, sometimes desperately, to understand how we can begin to live in a way that is not harmful to our environment, the companionship of an historical personage who has such wisdom to offer on the subject is an essential source of help, if only to tell us that we are not in this struggle alone. Yet Thoreau's writings do more than assuage loneliness. Because of the intensity of experience they express, his writings have the capacity to deepen and enrich today's environmental movements by providing them with opportunities for further thought.

PART I

Thoreau and the Natural World of Concord

Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts, the son of self-employed parents who manufactured lead pencils and provided room and board for paying guests (Harding, Dictionary of Literary Biography, 170). He left home at age 16 to attend Harvard College and again ten years later to serve as a tutor to his friend Emerson's nephew on Staten Island. Presumably (so Emerson hoped), Thoreau could better advance his literary career by being close to New York City. After six months of chronic homesickness, Thoreau returned to his native place and "never left Concord again for any extended period of time" (Harding, DLB, 173). The two years he spent at Walden Pond were but a small part of a more extensive, if lesser-known, "experiment": sustaining a lifelong relationship with Concord and its environs. Thoreau pledged a deep loyalty and appreciation for the home he had chosen to return to, while Concord, "ringed by hills and deep glacial ponds," provided him with "three rivers, countless brooks and swamps, and many acres of forest and open fields" (Howarth, xi-xii).

Thoreau spent much of his time rambling alone through the fields and woods of the Concord area. Although many of his friends and acquaintances mayt have thought that he was impoverishing himself by, as he put it, "withdrawing from men" (J 9:246-7), Thoreau believed that he was enriching himself. "In my solitude I have woven for myself a silken web or chrysalis," he wrote, "and, nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect

creature" (J 9:247). Indeed, he felt that too much time amid the hustle and bustle of the town had a cheapening and dissipating effect on him. He became depressed and saddened in town. Time spent out in woods or meadows was a needed tonic. There he was able to "come to himself"; to once more feel "grandly related."

> I come to my solitary woodland walk as the homesick go home ... I wish to get the Concord, the Massachusetts, the America out of my head and be sane a part of every day.(J 9:208)

Thoreau was not a misanthrope, nor was he a hermit. He spent a good many evenings in the company of his friends. He was overcome with grief at the death of his brother John, and was also grief-stricken at his father's death many years later. He appreciated the company of those not caught up in maintaining or increasing their property--laborers, children, loafers. What he did not enjoy was the influence the dominant value system had on most of those around him. It was a system that, then as now, prized stylishness and accumulation of material wealth most highly, as well as a work ethic that kept people at their jobs and away from nature. Thoreau believed it was to nature that humans must turn for lessons of the highest order. "I am tired of frivolous society," he wrote.

> I would fain walk on the deep waters, but my companions will only walk on shallows and puddles ... One talks to me of his apples and pears, and I depart with my secret untold. His are not the apples that tempt me. (J 7:417)

He perceived, probably correctly, that his neighbors regarded him with compassion and some pity because he was materially poor and spent so much time on solitary walks. Many subjects which to him were a source of endless fascination, such as fallen leaves and mud-turtles, would probably not have been seen as endlessly interesting by his neighbors. That Thoreau was able to develop an openness to such things was a direct result of his decision to live what was materially a very simple life. In the first

chapter of Walden he wrote with compassion about the plight of most of his townsmen, who found themselves more or less enslaved by "one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot!" (Howarth, 6-7) Thoreau chose to treat himself more tenderly, living for the most part with his family (father, mother, and sister) in town, and spending a minority of his time--about six weeks a year--in income-producing activities. F.B. Sanborn, who by his own account was quite close to the Thoreau family, wrote that

> his room...was rather small, with sloping ceilings, in the attic, looking toward the southwest, which was his favorite view. In this there were bookshelves, made by himself out of driftwood, toilsomely gathered in his large green boat...His furniture was plain and not extensive--a bed, bureau, and two chairs-- he devoted the mornings to his books and papers; his evenings were much at the service of his friends, unless some task of writing, lecturing, or mapping his extensive land surveys kept him busy at night. (Sanborn, 10-11)

Sanborn explained also the economics of the family, which converted from pencil-making to the storing and shipping of a fine-ground lead-based material for electrotyping when pencil-making became no longer profitable. This "yielded a modest income," wrote Sanborn, "supplemented by Henry's receipts for land surveying, lecturing, and writing magazine articles" Sanborn, 9).

Thoreau found the greatest value in what was simple and close to home. At a time whan many Americans were still looking to Europe, or at least to the large urban centers of the East Coast, for education and "culture," Thoreau extolled the virtues of his native place. He wrote,

> If these fields and streams and woods...should cease to interest and inspire me, no culture or wealth would atone for the loss...At best, Paris could only be a school in which to learn to live here...I wish to live ever as to derive my satisfactions and inspirations from the commonest

> events, everyday phenomena...my daily walk.
> (J 8:204-5)

Judging from the content of his journals from about 1850 onward, Thoreau's daily rambles did come to provide him with both inspiration and satisfaction. These later journal entries are full of botanical information, observations about wildlife and seasonal changes, and deeper ponderings about human relationships with nature--all gleaned in some way from what he saw, felt, heard, tasted, smelled, and touched during his everyday walks.

In his essay "Walking," Thoreau described himself as a saunterer, a word he claimed is derived from those who said they were going à la Sainte Terre--to the Holy Land--in the Middle Ages. "Some, however," Thoreau wrote, "would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere" (Natural History Essays, 93). He wrote that he didn't think he could preserve his health and spirits unless he spent four hours a day--usually more--"sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements" (Natural History Essays, 95).

Thoreau found freedom of many kinds in his walks. He wrote in "Walking" that he sometimes had no preconceived destination, but allowed his instinct to decide for him where he would go (Natural History Essays, 105). He also consciously tried to free himself from the cares of living in town, saying, "In my walks I would return to my senses like a bird or beast. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?" (J 2:110) Thoreau used his walks to let his thought be as free-ranging as his movement and to let the nature he encountered inspire him as it chose to. To him, writing and walking were indispensable to one

another, like inhaling and exhaling; he tried to bring the freedom of thought, movement, and inspiration he found on his walks back into the journals that he kept in the shelter of his cabin at Walden or a house in town.

Walking and writing every day allowed Thoreau to observe and express many of the details involved in Concord's seasonal changes. While at Walden, he wrote that one attraction of coming to live in the woods was that he would have the leisure and opportunity to see the spring come in (Howarth, 269). Making a journal entry about the details of spring's arrival, Thoreau portrayed Walden as a creature becoming vibrantly alive. The wind, he wrote, would blow on a dead (ice-covered) pond, until it reached the place where the ice had already melted, and then, finally would raise "a million brilliant sparkles on the bare face of the pond, an expression of glee, of youth, of spring as if it spoke of the joy of the fishes within it and of the sands on its shore" (J 5:26).

Even in late winter, Thoreau noted days when the quality of the air or the sound of a cock crowing reminded him of spring. To him, being fully wrapped up in the anticipation and discovery of spring's return meant an experience of renewed life. When a south wind melted January snow in Concord, Thoreau wrote that a perfume seemed to exhale from the earth itself and that she seemed like "my mother earth" once more (J 1:315). This feeling of kinship enabled Thoreau to experience a sympathy, or unity, with nature, as he recorded one March:

> We are affected like the earth and yield to the elemental tenderness, winter breaks up within us; the frost is coming out of me, and I am heaved like the road. (J 5:34)

Discussing with fascination the ripening brought about by late summer, he said that even the waterside sands seemed to ripen, "with the slender

grasses waving over them," as they became "empurpled" with the summer sun. "Such," he wrote, "is the consequence of all this sunshine absorbed into the pores and plants of the earth. All sap or blood is wine-colored" (J 9:131). With this theme of ripening, as with the theme of thawing and coming back to life in the spring, he expressed not only that he observed changes in nature, but that he felt them in himself. "Do you not," he asked rhetorically, "feel the fruit of your spring and summer beginning to ripen, to harden within you?" (J 6:426)

This idea of being related to the moods of the earth was important to Thoreau and recurred as a theme in his writings. It was not an idea gleaned from scientific observation (though Thoreau was most certainly a scientist as well as a philosopher and lover of nature--historian Donald Worster calls him "an active field ecologist" [Worster, 58]), but a deep-seated feeling that happened at unpredictable times. This is significant, as we shall later discuss, in considering Thoreau's relationship to the modern-day deep ecology and ecofeminist movements because of their emphasis on feeling and intuition as an important way to connect with nature.

But experiencing a close relationship with the moods of nature, however important it was to him, did not mean that Thoreau lived in anticipation of times when the weather was happy, sunny, or congenial. Although he did not see as valuable the difficulties his neighbors imposed on themselves in order to increase their property, Thoreau did value the dark side of nature, which he perceived as being an important part of the real world. (He also wrote in a free and uninhibited way of his own "dark times" of depression and sadness.) Dark, cold, and misty days and nights, said Thoreau, encouraged contemplation. "By moonlight," he wrote, "we are not of the earth earthy, but we are of the earth sprritual. By moonlight all is simple...We are no longer distracted" (J 7:50). The nighttime, he wrote,

allowed him to keep his thoughts concentrated rather than dissipating them as a sunny day would do. "The moon is like a lamp within an apartment," he wrote. "It shines for us" (J 2:372). Describing impressions gathered on an afternoon walk through cold mist and rain, he indicated that such a walk was more "suggestive and profitable" than one undertaken on a bright and sunny day. "I am more open to impressions," he wrote,

> more sensitive (not calloused or indurated by sun and wind), as if in a chamber still. My thoughts are concentrated; I am all compact...The mist is like a roof and walls over and around, and I walk with a domestic feeling...My power of observation and contemplation is much increased. The world and my life are simplified. (J 8:14)

Of winter, a time which encourages contemplation and solitide, Thoreau wrote, "It is thrown to us like a bone to a famishing dog, and we are expected to get the marrow out of it" (J 6:84-5).

An idea that Thoreau returned to many times in his journals was that of encouraging and delighting in an internally warm spirit in the face of external coldness. This may have had something to do with the lack of conviviality he found in the society that pervaded Concord--a society whose values and cares were very different from his own. Knowing that he may have experienced some loneliness gives special poignancy to his expressions of warm feeling for aspects of the natural world. "Even in winter," he wrote, "we maintain a temperate cheer and a serene inward life, not destitute of warmth or melody" (J 6:9).

Along with his appreciation for the gifts it had to offer, Thoreau was sensitive to winter's hardships. He wrote that on a "perfect" winter day, "the tension of nature must not be relaxed." The perfect winter music, he felt, was "the unrelenting still-cold scream of a jay, unmelted, that never flows into a song...hard, tense, frozen music, like the winter sky itself" (J 6:118). But he also realized with some relief that the winter

was finite: "Is not January the hardest month to get through? When you have weathered that, you get into the gulf-stream of winter, nearer the shores of spring" (J 6:91).

Thoreau advocated "living in each season as it passes."

> Breathe the air, (he said), drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of each...In August live on berries, not dried meats and pemmican ... Be blown on by all the winds. Open all your pores and bathe in the tides of Nature, in all her streams and oceans, at all seasons. (J 5:394)

Thoreau got to know nature not only by watching, but also by listening, smelling, and tasting. He found refreshment and satisfaction in the sound of crickets at dawn (J 4:109), the "cool water" twitter of a goldfinch in the afternoon (J 4:251), and the first "humming of bees" and "stuttering of frogs" in the spring (J 12:148). He wrote about the "strong invigorating aroma of green walnuts, astringent and bracing to the spirits" (J 4:300), the "medicinal odors" of fall (J 3:63), and the soothing smell of catnip. He appreciated the tart tastes of wild cranberries and wild apples that would have made many turn away. "No tarts that I ever tasted at any table," he said, "possessed such a refreshing, cheering, encouraging acid as the cranberries I have plucked in the meadows in the spring" (J 4:36).

His desire to hear, smell, and taste nature seems to have stemmed from his wanting to be a part of it rather than an objective observer. It is much easier to stand back and not participate when one is only watching. Watching implies a certain amount of distance between the watcher and the thing being watched. Thoreau sought to participate in nature through senses that didn't allow much distance. He not only listened to, smelled, and tasted nature--he also touched nature and allowed it to touch him, both by walking in all seasons and by letting

himself be emotionally moved--excited, inspired, joyous, sad at times--by what he felt and experienced.

Of Thoreau's sensory way of interacting with nature, Donald Worster wrote that it made him stand out in nineteenth-century Concord, even though Concord was "home to many unusual individuals." Only Thoreau, wrote Worster, "was likely to be seen snorting and galloping with glee after a fox on a snowy hillside," or "sitting at the top of a pine tree, swaying with the wind," or "crawling about on his hands and knees endeavoring to communicate with a reluctant wood-frog" (Worster, 77). Worster reminds us, however, that while the "openness of instinct" and "sensuous attachment to life" that Thoreau managed to carry into adulthood were unusual qualities for a nineteenth-century new Englander, he did not break totally away from New England's ways and its Puritan past. One can see this in reading his journals: many passages disclose Thoreau's appetite for an earthy, instinctual involvement with nature, but many others concern a quest for moral purity.

The aspect of Thoreau that sought moral purity is not the one I have chosen to focus on here, because the search for purity can allow one to repress feelings in pursuit of a higher good. I have looked at those passages from Thoreau's journals in which he allowed himself to feel, to be a part of the changing of the seasons, of morning light and evening darkness, of birdsong and purple sand. Thoreau may or may not have thought this free-ranging, instinctual part of himself was the most important part; he identified himself not only as a saunterer but also as a field scientist and sometimes as a moral purist. But that part of him which merged with nature through feeling is the most important part to me.

It is important because it is so easy to miss feelings in the world of late twentieth-century America, which, like Thoreau's Concord, emphasizes

"productivity." Even for most of us who call ourselves ecologists or environmentalists, time is at a premium; the idea of taking a daily, hours-long saunter through fields or woods seems slightly sinful, and definitely impossible--after all, it would take us away from our work.

For Thoreau, self-allowance and sauntering combined with a powerful desire to mystically understand some of the great truths of nature--as he put it, "to commune with the spirit of the universe" (J 2:150)--led him to some conclusions that he probably didn't tell many people about. Thoreau wrote in his earliest journal that he could hear the universe. "To the sensitive soul," he wrote, "the universe has its own fixed measure" which the soul can move in sympathy with (J 1:10). He found there were "divine sounds," noiseless, "which are breathed in with the zephyr or reflected from the lake" (J 1:65). "Ah, if I could put into words the music that I hear," he wrote, "that music which can bring tears to the eyes of marble statues!--to which the very muscles of men are obedient!" (J 4:368)

Obviously, Thoreau was hearing something that most other people did not--and still do not--hear. One wonders whether many of us could suspend disbelief long enough to listen--to allow ourselves to become empty of the words and messages that usually fill us, and to let that emptiness be filled, not with a mantra, but with the thoughts of nature--whatever nature chooses to communicate to us. One wonders what would be heard, what would be felt, if we could listen in such a way.

Thoreau, who did listen, tried to sense relationship--relationship with the whole of nature, and with the specific creatures that are part of the whole. Of the largest kind of relationship, he wrote, "How can a man sit down and quietly pare his nails, while the earth goes gyrating ahead amid such a din of sphere music?" (J 1:35) On a somewhat smaller

scale, encompassing merely what he could see, the sense of being overwhelmed dissolved and was replaced with simple appreciation. "When my eye ranges over some thirty miles of this globe's surface--an eminence green and waving, with sky and mountains to bound it, I am richer than Croesus" (J 2:18).

Thoreau sensed the relationships wiich occurred within ecosystems, writing that there is a harmony between the hemlock and the water that it hangs over which is "not explainable" (J 3:374). He perceived the essential connection between falling autumn leaves and the earth they enriched, saying, "They teach us how to die" (J 5:442). A year later, he wrote more about the leaves: that they seemed to be happy in going to their "graves," the forest soil.

> Merrily they go scampering over the earth, selecting their graves, whispering all through the woods about it. They that waved so loftily, how contented they return to dust again and are laid low...They are about to add a leaf's breadth to the depth of the soil. We are all the richer for their decay.(J 7:441).

Seeing a cow in an unusual position, Thoreau immediately perceived that she might be engaged in her own kind of connection with natural forces. He wrote that he saw her look steadily up into the sky for a minute, which "gave to her face an unusual, almost human or wood-god, faun-like expression." Not only, them, were humans capable of spiritual pondering; in Thoreau's world, animals possessed that capacity as well--or at least he was willing to consider that they might (J 6:434).

While Thoreau may or may not have believed that cows had a spiritual life, he definitely felt that in terms of their daily activities, animals such as cows are not that different from humans. Humans are clearly a part of nature, he wrote; they live just like animals, appropriating food from the earth and incorporating it into their bodies.

The most numerous and striking of Thoreau's accounts of creatures, however, did not concern their relationship with each other or the earth, or their similarities to humans, but rather, Thoreau's relationship with them. Such interactions, primarily with wild creatures, were of paramount importance to him, perhaps because he felt that there was something about living in the natural world that he needed to learn directly from them.

Watching a bittern near a stream prompted him to write about what kinds of nature secrets it probably understood after spending so many days and nights by rocks and sandy banks, observing moon and stars, "stagnant pools, and reeds, and damp night fogs." Seeking some kind of exchange with the bittern in order to benefit from its special knowledge, Thoreau wondered how much he could learn by looking into its dull green eyes that had seen and experienced so much (J 1:38).

Along with wild species, rare or hard-to-find species had a peculiar appeal to Thoreau that allowed him to establish a strong connection with them. It is possible that their appeal resulted simply from the naturalist's glee in making a new discovery, or from a rejoicing in the diversity that is part of wildness; Thoreau himself did not explore the cause of it in his Journal. His gladness in finding a species he had not previously known about, however, sings forth from the page in describing how, late one autumn, he discovered a new kind of bream in Walden Pond. "I cannot but still see in my mine's eye those little striped breams poised in Walden's glaucous water," he wrote. Everything else in the world at thet time weighed equally with this one species of bream according to Thoreau, because he had just discovered it--to him it was a new species. "For more than two centuries have men fished here and have not distinguished this permanent settler of the township...How wild it makes the pond and the township to find a new fish in it!" Thoreau was not

interested in scientifically weighing and measuring the bream. He was exultant simply because something existed which he had known nothing about.

> The bream, appreciated, floats in the pond as the centre of the system, another image of God... Acquaintance with it is to make my life more rich and wonderful. (J 11:359)

The reader can hardly help but appreciate Thoreau's capacity for being so affected by the discovery of something new. It calls to our attention howwrapped up he was in the nature around him, participating in it as he did through the daily activity of his walks, making daily observations and notes, learning more and more about the species of Concord as time passed...discovering this new species of bream would be like discovering that a family of people had lived just outside the village for a century and no one had ever known they were there. The bream, among other creatures, was in many ways another kind of "people" to Thoreau. "I have a contemporary in Walden," he wrote about the bream. "It has fins where I have legs and arms. I have a friend among the fishes" (J 11:359).

There were other organisms that had a special place in Thoreau's heart for various reasons. The white water-lily, for example, worked its way into his awareness because of the purity its white petals and fragrance suggested to him. Upon seeing and smelling the water-lilies of late spring, he wrote, "If Nature can compound this fragrance still annually I shall believe her still full of vigor and that there is virtue in man, too, who perceives and loves it" (J 6:352). That so much sweetness could be extracted from "the slime and muck of the earth" helped stave off some of the despair he felt in observing the actions of his fellow humans, especially as regarded the slavery question. (The Fugitive Slave Law, which denied escaped slaves the right to obtain freedom by going to a free state, was

upheld by Massachusetts, a decision which totally disgusted Thoreau.)

Thoreau developed a great fascination for mud-turtles, keeping their eggs inside his room in a tub of mud and water late one summer so he could watch them hatch. Seeing how quickly one of the turtles started running about after coming out of the egg gave Thoreau yet another kind of perspective on human life. "The insensibility and toughness of his infancy," he wrote, "make our life, with its disease and low spirits, ridiculous" (J 7:9). He also noticed how time takes on a new meaning when one considers the world of a developing turtle embryo. No matter how many emergencies, worries, and cares have colored human life during the three-month span of summer, to the turtles, it is simply the right amount of time for their eggs to hatch" (J 9:32).

In his writings on the water-lily and the mud turtles, Thoreau indicated that he sensed a primeval power in mud. To him, the water-lily was all the more amazing in its purity and sweetness because these qualities were extracted "from the slime and decay of the earth" (J 6:352). The mud-turtle also, it seemed to Thoreau, derived vigor from his contact with mud. Something about tracing life to its vital, fundamental source appealled to Thoreau; it may be that in cultivating a relationship with mud, that primeval life-giver, he was able to feel more of a connection with the organisms that depended on it. His fascination with life's most basic elements is also evident in several journal entries which discuss a certain area near the railroad-bed in Concord where mounds of sand took on certain leaflike shapes.

> On the outside all the life of the earth is expressed in the animal or vegetable, but make a deep cut in it and you find it vital; you find in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf ... No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly with leaves, which labors with the idea thus inwardly. (J 6:148)

Thoreau noted with a special awe and wonderment his observations of

mammals, perhaps because they resemble humans more than any other kind of creature. "What sort of philosophers are we," he wondered, "who know absolutely nothing of the origin and destiny of cats?" (J 9:178) He said that he respected the skunk as "a human being in a very humble sphere"; (J 6:162) this opinion doubtless extended to other animals as well. Hearing foxes trotting over dead leaves while he was out on a camping trip, Thoreau wondered why humans and foxes could not come to have some kind of neighborly relationship.

Thoreau mentioned many times how the sounds of animals -- particularly birds -- captured for him the feelings of the season. I have already mentioned how he found the unrelenting, cold scream of a jay to be the perfect winter music; using an even more extensive symbolism, he wrote about how it is the bluebird's warble that "drills the ice" and "sets free the rivers and ponds and frozen ground" in the spring" (J 12: 5). Excited by the air of mid-February, which was already undergoing spring changes, he wrote that it seemed "ready to split into the bluebird's warble," and that if he were to throw some dust into the air, the dust itself would take on the form of a warble. "Any sound uttered now would take that form" (J 9:270).

The wood-thrush's song seemed to evoke something different -- not the ebullient feeling brought out by the bluebird's spring warbling, but rather a sense of wistfulness, a longing for wildness, for "a nature which I cannot put my foot through." All that is best about wilderness, he wrote, is preserved and transmitted through the wood thrush's song. "It lifts and exhilarates me. It is inspiring. It is a medicative drought to my soul. It is an elixir to my eye and a fountain of youth to all my senses" (J 5: 292).

Another kind of song, the song of the cricket, imparted a dreamy

feeling to Thoreau; he wrote that their sound at dawn seemed to indicate a continuing of the earth's nighttime dreams into the day, and remarked that the cricket song was present on earth before Christianity and before the Greek and Roman civilizations. To him, their music signified a kind of eternal return, and upon hearing it, he felt that the world "was not so much with him" (J 4:109). Hearing a cricket creak in the shade one morning, he recorded:

> At length the melody steals into my being. By some fortunate coincidence of thought or circumstance I am attuned to the universe ... my being moves in a sphere of melody, my fancy and imagination are excited to an inconceivable degree. (J 4:275)

Thoreau called the chirping of crickets an "earth-song," and said that when it began to appear in the summer, he noticed an increased serenity in his thoughts. "Our thoughts pillow themselves unconsciously in the trough of this serene, rippling sea of sound," he wrote. Nourishing his ears, the crickets' sound, he discovered, provided something for his thoughts to rest on so they didn't have to come in contact directly with the "bold echoing earth" (J 9:403).

In this instance, as so many others, Thoreau demonstrated a heightened sensory awareness of nature and a willingness to let it affect his thoughts. It is no wonder that he found himself "marching to the beat of a different drummer" from his neighbors, many of whom may have believed natural stimuli to be pleasant, perhaps even meaningful, but certainly not central to their lives. The goal of most Concord farmers and tradespeople was probably to make good financially by increasing their stock of property. Thoreau's aim was to learn about and learn from nature -- to become, as he put it, "of the earth earthy." While he was certainly interested, as a naturalist, to recognize the names of the various plants and animals around him, his deeper wish was to know something about their

inner lives. To look into the eye of a bittern, to become uplifted by a water lily's purity, to feel eternity in a cricket's song every summer morning--these instances and countless others were ways in which Thoreau learned about the inner spirit of nature by opening his own spirit to it, and allowing himself to change in response to what entered there.

Although he was a self-trained field scientist, Thoreau found the scientific way of viewing nature to be a limited one because the scientist is not seeking the expression of self, but merely recording facts. "I think that the man of science makes this mistake," he wrote,

> and the mass of mankind along with him; that you should coolly give your chief attention to the phenomenon which excites you as something inddpendent...not as it is related to you. The philosopher for whom rainbows...can be explained away never saw them. (J 10:164)

Science, Thoreau felt, hungers after an objective knowledge to which the expression of self is not integral or even desirable. "The man of science," he wrote, "studies nature as a dead language. I pray for such inward experiennce as will make nature significant" (J 5:135).

As he did make a great deal of use in his journals of certain kinds of scientific knowledge, especially botanical nomenclature and phenological observations, one realizes that he must have engaged himself in internal battles over whether his scientific training did not at times prevent him from achieving the kind of subjective richness he found to be so essential and meaningful. In one of his later journals, he wrote that while he did think that it was important to consider nature from the point of view of science, it was equally important to ignore or forget "all that men presume that they know, and take an original and unprejudiced view of Nature, letting her make what impression she will on you." Science, he found, is invariable "more barren and mixed up with error than our sympa-

thies" (J 13:168-9). "I do not get nearer by a hair's breadth," he wrote,

> to some natural object so long as I presume that I have an introduction to it from some learned man. To conceive of it with total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange. (J 12:371)

In order to see something for what it was, Thoreau believed he had to free himself from studying it too acutely. His eye was not wearied, he wrote, by seeing a complex pattern such as a maze of bare twigs, because he did not feel the need to focus on any particular part of it (J 11:295). Too much observation, he felt, dissipated him. Better to "knock the back of his hand against a rock" and then make a scientific study if the lichens there than to remain uninvolved, disengaged from nature. Thoreau felt a need to touch and taste the natural world--to feel his place among its creatures. Distancing himself by relating to it only as an observer, not as a participant, had the potential of placing him in the grip of a coldness he associated with science and wished to avoid.

Thoreau once wrote that "the knowledge of an unlearned man" is like a living forest, but is for the most part inaccessible to others, while the knowledge of a "man of science" is like timber in a yard--accessible, to be sure, but, for the most part, dead. It is evident from reading his Journal and other works that Thoreau only let go of science and learning for contained periods of time--he did not totally dispose of them. He often referred to books he had read, including classical works, which he frequently quoted in Latin or Greek. Many of his journal entries were filled with botanical information, and he devoted some of his last years to a scientific study of trees.

Thoreau obviously did not wish to be an "unlearned man" (though he appreciated the knowledge and resources of such men, recording conversations with many people of little formal education in his Journal), and

he probably didn't want to be a "man of science" either, but rather something in between. Coming from a world of books and education, which he valued highly, Thoreau was not able to and did not want to completely shun education in order to become a man of the wild. But by preserving subjectivity in his works, by using his scientific and literary knowledge chiefly to better understand his native place, and by letting go of that knowledge when he felt it was getting in the way of truly understanding nature, Thoreau was able both to experience nature in ways that were unusual for white Americans of his time, and to communicate those experiences in a literary fashion.

Thoreau did not attain much public success as a writer during his lifetime. One of his best-known biographers, Walter Harding, tells us that "Few admirers made pilgrimages to see him...Few editors asked him to write for them...Indeed, his greatest problem was getting his work into print, getting his writing noticed" (A Thoreau Handbook, 175). His fellow townsmen, wrote Harding, "looked upon him as a crank and did not hesitate to tell him so to his face." They recognized that he was a competent surveyor and that the pencils he made "were the best in America, although they could not understand why he did not devote himself to the business and make himself a fortune" (178).

Thoreau's journals were not published until 1906, nearly fifty years after his death. While "the publication attracted wide notice" according to Harding (182), it took another fifty years for Thoreau to achieve "full recognition."

The chronicle of a writer's rise to success tends to imply that someone now considered to be a "great writer" was always destined to be so--that it just took some time for people to understand the greatness inherent in him or her. If one approaches the idea of success more sub-

jectively, however, one realizes that it is determined by the decisions of an audience. Thoreau's popularity was not predestined; people chose to listen to him because he answered to something in their own lives. Thoreau himself, of course, had no idea that he would ever become "great"; he probably gave up on the idea when his first published work, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, was a commercial failure. At some point, he shifted his attention away from trying to gain a wide reading audience and towards a better appreciation and understanding of his home.

A certain journal entry derves well to metaphorically describe Thoreau's eventual decision not to pursue the public limelight. One day in late August he went on a long excursion in order to gather a kind of cranberry known to botanists as Vaccinium Oxycoccus. These cranberries being exceedingly small, he almost decided that the assuredly tiny harvest would not be worth the trip. He finally did go in search of the berries, realizing that he had always harvested "unexpected and incalculable advantages" from "carrying out any enterprise" which his instinct suggested he should (J 9:35-6). This willingness to follow a path that most would not simply because something inside him told him it was the right one, this appreciation of a materially small, but spiritually rich harvest, is emblematic of Thoreau's whole life.

PART II

Thoreau in Relation to Environmental Movements of the 1990's

It is hard not to connect many of the themes in Thoreau's Journals and other writings with environmental movements that are afoot today. Indeed, key authors in today's environmental movements have cited Thoreau as one of the earliest American voices articulating values that have become more widespread in recent years--values such as local self-reliance, the intrinsic worth of nature, and a questioning of, and in many cases, opposition to, the process that is commonly known as economic progress.

For the most part, Thoreau is simply invoked as an early prophet of environmentalism who can provide us with eloquent and inspiring words to support our cause. Using his writings in this way is appropriate and valuable.However, it is also important to look at Thoreau's works critically, just as it is important to look critically at our own lives and the work we choose. We may find that Thoreau can offer us certain things that today's environmental movements lack--and that today's movements shed light on some shortcomings in Thoreau's thinking. No one person or philosophy could ever have all the answers we need to bring balance with nature back into our way of life on this earth; we need for our ownssakes to inquire into the ways in which others have thought and acted. I have chosen to examine the newly emerging environmental philosophies of bioregionalism, deep ecology, and ecofeminism in terms of their relationship to Thoreau's ideas, as well as

the older, more widely encompassing phenomenon of environmental activism.

Deep ecology and ecofeminism, two philosophies that were first formulated and named in the last twenty years, are both aimed at encouraging humans to identify more closely with nature so that it will be obvious to us that preserving it is in our own self-interest--that in fact, preserving nature amounts to preserving ourselves. Both movements propose a kind of nature spirituality in which humans take inspiration from rocks and rivers, animals and plants. Of course, such an idea would not be news to Thoreau. He spoke again and again of the spirit and meaning which he found in nature.

Thoreau would probably have agreed with one of the fundamental tenets of deep ecology and ecofeminism--that allying oneself closely with nature is an important part of human growth and self-realization. In an article called "Deep Ecology and Its Critics," bioregionalist author Kirkpatrick Sale has written of the importance of self-realiaation in deep ecology.

> The true realization of the individual self is in a close and unfolding identification, spiritual and intellectual, with the larger biotic "self"; the more diverse and complex the larger one, the richer and more developed the smaller one. (671)

Ecofeminists, too, say that self and nature are inextricably linked. Author Judith Plant has written that once people come to understand this, they are able to adopt compassion as the basis for a new ethic. "Feeling the life of the 'other,'" she said, "--literally experiencing its existence--is becoming the new starting point for human decision-making" (Plant, 1).

Deep ecology has received both acclaim and attack. It has received acclaim because it has delved into an area that scientific ecologists have for the most part neglected--that is, the relationship of the self to the

web of nature relationships being studied; as Thoreau would say, the "inward experience which makes nature significant." It has come under attack because some argue that it fails to take humans sufficiently into account; that it values nature above humans; and that it even intimates that since humans have divorced ourselves so far from the natural order, the world would be better off without us and we deserve to be exterminated. (Sale's article cites an Earth First! article that spoke favorably of AIDS as a "welcome and necessary control on human global population" [Sale, "Deep Ecology and its Critics", 670]).

Elements of deep ecology have emerged that seem quite different from one another. All of them have as their focus changing human perceptions of nature. Some seem to be more optimistic about the human spirit than others, saying that we--all of us--can change the way we experience nature in a way that will make life richer. Others, while still promoting the importance of realizing the self, argue that in realizing ourselves, humans cannot help but realize that we are inherently destructive; that no good can come of us. The extreme abnegation that results from such a view oint is frightening to many.

In some ways, it is difficult <u>not</u> to have such a viewpoint in a world where environmental destruction has become blatant and widespread. It is difficult to believe that human beings can be a helpful, rather than a detrimental, part of their environment. Thoreau, like many present-day environmentalists, had a cynical view of most of his fellow humans. One can sense his cynicism and muffled anger in his description of the way a neighbor of his was managing the white pine wood-lot that he owned. The white pine had all been cut off the previous winter; Thoreau discovered to his chagrin that "the fellow who calls himself its owner has burned it all over and sowed winter rye from it in the meanwhile." The owner,

Thoreau wrote, no doubt meant to let trees grow there again in a year or two, but "thought it would be clear gain if he could extract a little rye from it in the meanwhile." Anyone treating a piece of land in this way, thought Thoreau, must be a worshipper of money.

> He has got his dollars for the pine timber, and now he wishes to get his bushels of grain and finger the dollars that they will bring; and then, Nature, you may have your way again. Let us purchase a mass for his soul. A greediness that defeats its own ends. (J 14:131)

Thoreau's writings and the deep ecology movement seem to share a potential contradiction. They both advocate a shift in values such that humans come to identify with and draw inspiration from nature. If all of us have the capacity to identify with nature, then it would seem that we all have a great deal in common. Doesn't it follow that we are all a part of each other as well as of nature? That we should all be able to identify with our fellow humans as well as with nature?

Thoreau and many deep ecologists must not believe in this line of thinking, for they seem oftentimes not to feel much connection to humans who are directly involved in destroying nature. Deep ecologist Bill Devall, speaking here at the University of Oregon last fall, was asked what action he would suggest that people and our governments should take concerning the displacement of loggers and millworkers, especially if old growth logging is to cease or drop sharply. Devall's reply was that the fate of loggers and millworkers was not of that much concern to him. People have always been displaced by shifts in economies, he said; perhaps unemployed woodsworkers could be paid a few thousand dollars a year.

It is, of course, difficult to believe that you have much in common with someone who is involved with destroying the things that you love.

Thoreau did not express a sense of unity or identification with the wood-lot owner, nor Devall with displaced loggers and millworkers. Yet both Thoreau and Devall would probably be able to identify with nature at her most terrifying and devastating, and be able to understand that nature also has the potential to be beneficent and creative. Identifying with someone we see as being destructive is a great challenge; but if we succeed in doing so, we can address them in a way they will understand.

Deep ecology, then, shares with Thoreau's philosophy a common value and a common problem. The common value is learning to identify with the natural world and to treat it accordingly. The common problem is that neither Thoreau nor many deep ecologists is able to identify on some level with all other humans, and thus both are unable to approach the problems their fellow humans create with compassion. The realities of the deep ecology movement, which have produced much heated dialogue on this very topic, help us to see the ways in which not identifying with other humans can create pain and difficulty; they reveal, too, some shortcomings of Thoreau, which have their roots in the same belief system, but are not so obvious because they have not been the subject of so much public debate.

Ecofeminism can help us understand the problem of non-identification with humans which Thoreau and many deep ecologists seem to share, because it makes a connection between separation from nature and the oppression of a large group of humans: women. As a philosophy, ecofeminism rests on the fundamental tenet that the destruction of nature and the oppression of women are inseparable. Women have been viewed as more "natural" than men because they have been involved in the natural acts of conceiving and bearing children, and, through their work with food and in the household have been responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of their own and others' bodies. Men have been seen as the primary agents of culture and

civilization -- for the most part, they have been the writers, scientists, philosophers, businesspeople, and political figures. In a world where women perform most or all of the "natural" tasks involved in caring for bodies and are not able to have a significant voice in the dominant culture, ecofeminists argue that the separation of that culture from nature is inevitable. In her book Women and Nature, Susan Griffin claims that men have been afraid of and have neglected the emotional and intuitive part of themselves that women seemed to represent. They also, Griffin writes, have been afraid of nature, and these fears are connected, for the emotional and intuitive is the more "natural" part of people than what has been traditionally viewed as male thinking -- rational, deductive logic. Emotions and intuition, by definition, are what "come naturally." Ursula LeGuin has written in an essay called "Women/Wilderness":

> Women .. distrust that word, Nature. Nature as not including humanity, Nature as what is not human, that Nature is a construct made by Man, not a real thing ... Where I live as a woman is to men a wilderness. But to me it is a home. (Plant, ed., p. 46)

Some ecofeminists argue openly that the deep ecology movement is "shockingly sexist" (Plant, ed., p. 40). Shockingly sexist because "deep ecology consciousness" is actually just like "traditional woman consciousness"; deep ecologists are trying to listen to their inner voices, and,"as everyone knows ... Woman traditionally listens to her inner voice" (Plant, ed., pp. 42-3).

Thoreau did not express much appreciation of, or knowledge of, what ecofeminists would call traditional woman consciousness(although he did say once that "the woman who sits in the house and sees is a match for a stirring captain" · [J 1:184]).He never said that he thought women

were unjustly oppressed; for the most part, he spoke demeaningly of qualities that were considered feminine--referring, for example, to the "effeminating" luxury of civilized life (J 4:84), and the feebleness of ladies who carried a parasol to keep out the sun (J 12:356)--without any questioning of how society had created these qualities, and without considering the positive aspects that femininity might have. One of the few times in his journals when he spoke approvingly of a woman, it was because she was "capable of a masculine appreciation of poetry and philosophy," and reminded him "less of her sex than any other woman whom I know" (J 3:113).

Yet there were times in his Journal when Thoreau made an explicit connection between nature or earth and woman or mother. For example, in writing about mud-turtles, he commented, "I am affected by the thought that the earth nurses these eggs." (The turtles would leave their eggs in the earth, which kept them the right temperature and kept them protected until they hatched.) Thoreau was apparently familiar with the Native American myth that the entire earth rests on the back of a giant tortoise, for he wrote about the mud-turtle eggs that "the old turtle on which the earth rests takes care of them while the other waddles off." The earth, he wrote, miraculously enables seeds to germinate as well as mud turtles' eggs to hatch. "Thus the earth is the mother of all creatures" (J 7:28).

Actually, though Thoreau himself would never have admitted it, over time he took on qualities that many would consider to be feminine. As we discussed in Part I, he valued intuition and allowed nature to reach his emotions. He questioned the validity of "objective" science, and seemed to feel more like a whole person when he was able to look at ways that were not rational or scientific. He eventually eschewed public success

and focussed his attention on his immediate surroundings. Only in a society where the best of femininity was repressed could someone take on so many feminine characteristics without even realizing it, maintaining all the while a harshly critical attitude toward women.

If the lesson of ecofeminism is that one cannot understand how humans relate to nature if one ignores how we relate to one another, ecofeminism points up some of Thoreau's strengths as well as weaknesses. He was a staunch opponent of slavery, and became accepting and appreciative of Native Americans over time (especially after hearing a Chippeway native speak in Concord [J 10:293-5]). He expressed appreciation and even love for some of his neighbors (those less caught up in materialism than most), such as an older, old-fashioned farmer named Cyrus Hubbard and a hard-bitten, rather feared character who could be seen out collecting driftwood in his boat. Thoreau did not fail to work in at least some aspects of human relationships into his nature consciousness.

As I suggested earlier, Thoreau's philosophy shares a key element with both ecofeminism and deep ecology: acknowledgement of nature as a spiritual entity. Thoreau even spoke at times of nature worship. "There are square rods in Middlesex County," he wrote,

> as purely primitive and wild as they were a thousand years ago...I belive almost in the personality of such planetary matter, feel momething akin to reverence for it, can even worship it as terrene, titanic matter extant in my day...such matter has in all ages been worshipped. (J 9:45)

Thoreau went on to comment that "it would imply the regeneration of mankind" if they were to "truly worship stocks and stones."

He occasionally recognized a capacity for spirituality and wisdom in animals, as when he heard "the note of the bay-wing" while he was dropping bean seeds into his garden one night. "The spirit of its earth-song, of its serene and true philosophy, was breathed into me, and I saw

the world as through a glass, as it lies eternally." Thoreau referred to the bay-wing as a "brother poet...whose muse inspires mine" (J 9: 363-4).

The idea of the earth as a single living organism is one that has been quite influential recently among many environmentalists, including deep ecologists and ecofeminists. Through some of the metaphors that he used, Thoreau hinted that he might have had a similar idea. He spoke of the undulations of the earth, as revealed by the light and shade of early morning, as being "nerves and muscles" (J 12:74). He referred to water, "the most living part of nature," as "the blood of the earth," writing during a winter thaw that "we see its blue arteries pulsing with new life now" (J 13:163).

Bioregionalism is a bit different from both deep ecology and ecofeminism. It is less focussed on the spiritual and on identifying the self with the world of nature than it is on the practical aspects of how p ople can live in a way that is less destructive to nature than the urban industrialism that is currently practiced. Dwellers in the Land by Kirkpatrick Sale provides us with a thorough explanation of bioregionalism. In it, Sale describes historical and contemporary ways of life which he considers to be ecological as well as tracing the history of ecological shortsightedness. Ultimately, Sale claims that the only way in which people can be convinced to behave responsibly toward nature is by seeing problems on a small, concrete scale--not a national, multinational, or global one--and understanding that they are directly connected to the ecosystems of the region in which they live. "The crucial and perhaps only and all-encompassing task," according to Sale, "is to understand place, the immediate and specific place where we live" (42).

In a commencement address given in the spring of 1989 to graduates of the College of the Atlantic in Maine, Wendell Berry spoke about why he felt even those of us who manifest concern for environmental problems are not coming up with many solutions that work. "For the most part," he said,

> the subcultures, the countercultures, the dissenters, and the opponents continue mindlessly -- or perhaps helplessly -- to follow the pattern of the dominant society in its extravagance, its wastefulness, its dependences, and its addictions. (Berry, 69)

Berry is right. In a society which tends to use nature irreverently and to place greater emphasis on what is large-scale and visible than on what is small-scale and local, it is often extremely difficult to take the other route. Deep ecologists and ecofeminists may find themselves using nature or natural resources in ways that are not always reverent; bioregionalists may find themselves drawn to spend much or most of their time working to create a bioregionalist movement on a national or international scale rather than learning about the place where they live.

Sale's Dwellers in the Land contains much to support Berry's argument that most opponents of the dominant culture continue to follow its patterns. It contains discussion about the planet Earth as a whole, about why bioregionalism is a good idea, and about how realistic bioregionalism is in light of certain social and political trends such as regionalism and ethnic separatist movements. While these ideas are certainly worthy of discussion, they are large-scale, theoretical ideas that are not themselves place-based. They therefore give the book an air of "bigness" and vagueness, even though Sale says that it is the big and the vague that societies need to get away from. Although he describes the regional settlement patterns of the Native Americans on the Eastern seaboard, Sale

does not describe his own home and his relationship to it.

Thoreau's writings have a great deal to teach with respect to loyalty to place. A native of Concord, he spent the vast majority of his time exploring it and writing about it. Most of his social ties were with other Concord citizens. He wrote about the desirability of rootedness that he would rather watch the cows move about their pastures in Concord than "wander to Europe or Asia and watch other motions there,for...perchance we shall report a more restless and worthless self in the latter case than in the first" (J 9:104).Staying in one place, as opposed to travelling, he felt, could allow a person to feel more whole, more a part of things; it was his belief that "a man dwells in his native valley like a corolla in its calyx, like an acorn in its cup" (J 11:275).

There are many ways, in fact, in which Thoreau was an avid bioregionalist. Not only did he understand and appreciate the place where he lived, he also made a point of revering its products above those from exotic and tropical places simply because they were local. "Do not think that the fruits of New England are mean and insignificant, while those of some foreign land are noble and memorable," he wrote, going on to say that wild strawberries, wild apples, and hazelnuts were much better for New Englanders because of "the part they play in our education" than the tropical fruits and nuts that many were so enamored of" (J 14:274)."What if," he fantasized, "the Concord Social Club, instead of eating oranges from Havana, should spend an hour in admiring the beauty of some wild berry from their own fields, which they had never attended to before?" (J 14:261)

Thoreau felt that it was important to have a culture use symbols drawn from local nature. The Bible, he wrote, has a serious defect in that "it is not ours, but a Hebrew Bible." He felt that the most relevant

illustrations for New Englanders would be drawn "not from Egypt or Babylonia, but from New England" (J 12:389). He wanted to substitute astrological signs more appropriate to New England than the "foreign" ones that are commonly used. "For October," he wrote, "instead of making the sun enter the sign of the scorpion, I would...make him enter a musquash (muskrat) house" (J 12:391).

Thoreau has much to teach aspiring bioregionalists. Giving oneself time to explore place and letting it enter into one's whole being is probably the chief lesson, being the occupation to which Thoreau devoted his whole adult life. Thoreau gives us occasion to ponder the repercussions that living in a time when mobility is increasingly exalted has on all of us--even those who believe in rootedness as a value.

Many of today's bioregionalists (as well as deep ecologists and eco-feminists) desire to live in as wild a setting as possible. Some, in fact, have criticized Thoreau for his loyalty to Concord. Thoreau, they say, cannot be considered a true spokesperson for nature and wilderness, because he did not himself live in a truly wild place, but in a fairly "domesticated" Massachusetts town. Reflecting upon ecological change in eastern Massachusetts since the Puritans arrived, Thoreau himself lamented that fact. "When I consider that the nobler animals have been exterminated here," he wrote,

> the cougar, panther, lynx, wolverene, wolf, bear, moose...etc., etc., I cannot but feel as if I lived in a tamed...country...Is it not a maimed and imprefect nature that I am conversant with?

Thoreau went on to say that he felt cheated out of an acquaintance with true nature--that, spending so much time, as he did, in getting to know nature in all her "moods and manners," it chagrined him greatly to find out that whet he thought was the "entire poem" was really but an "imperfect copy," and that his ancestors had "torn out many of the first leaves

and grandest passages, and mutilated it in many places" (J 8:220-222).

Thoreau was actually not very comfortable in a pristine wilderness setting the first time he experienced it in Maine (although he seems to have felt more comfortable on successive trips there). Of course, anyone who has not grown up familiar with completely untamed wilderness is likely to have some fears about it. Moving somewhere more remote so he could better pursue his naturalistic studies--or making many more trips than he did into places that were truly wild are responses that a contemporary lover of nature would be more likely to make to living in a relatively "tame" place. While Thoreau's choices were not necessarily better or worse than those that are commonly made today, it is important to note the vllue changes that have been brought about by a changing world.

The other facet of modern environmentalism that I have chosen to examine is environmental activism. Activism as a movement is comparatively difficult to define. In some ways it is more established than deep ecology, ecofeminism, or bioregionalism, being an occupation that many large organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and Sierra Club--as well as countless small, grassroots groups--have devoted themselves to. But because it is made up of so many diverse elements, activism does not have one single relatively cohesive set of beliefs. Unlike deep ecology, ecofeminism, and bioregionalism, it does not have a few recognized leaders and a handful of literary works to explain it.

Many would argue, however, that being an activist--working to remove destructive policies and implement ones that are more supportive of environmental health--is the most meaningful part of being an environmentalist. Indeed, an important parttion of deep ecology, ecofeminism, and bioregionalism is to help concerned people create new kinds of bases for making decisions about what kinds of activism they choose

to do.

Thoreau was not by occupation an activist in the sense that most people today would probably define the term. He did not spend much of his time trying to change environmentally destructive policies. Yet his writings have spurred many to think--and some to act--on the ideas of living simply and close to nature. Surely that is activism of a sort. One may even argue that the very way that Thoreau chose to live was a kind of activism. Thoreau did not follow the patterns of his fellows; he designed and lived a life that was unique in its thoughtfulness and closeness to nature.

Thinking about Thoreau's life in this context brings up a question: Perhaps one could open up new, beneficial ways of thinking by using the term "activist" in a broader sense than usual. As it is currently defined, the word generally means work that is external--intended to create change in the social, political, or ecological world. It is not often used to mean work that aims to create internal changes--changes in the way the activist thinks, feels, or lives. Yet the external is reflected in the internal. If there is damage being done to the environment, then there is damage being done to human beings, for we are part of our environment in a myriad of ways. There has long been talk of the "internalized oppression" that develops in people as the result of living in a racist or sexist society; many of us oppress ourselves as a result of living in an ecologically damaging society as well. Environmentalists have long known that considering profit to be primary is one of the chief reasons for condoning destructive policies. Yet many of us still hold personal profit or "productivity"--economic or otherwise--to be the uppermost value in our own lives.

Thoreau questioned policies in his writings, but most of all, he

questioned personal values. He was an internally oriented activist who allowed himself to do what he most enjoyed and valued his own creative spirit. His creativity seemed to come naturally to him. ("I am surprised that my affirmations or utterances come to me ready made," he wrote, wondering if he was in "sympathy with the universal mind" [J 13:238].) What he worked on and sought to change had more to do with his internal self. Mainly, he found that he needed to be open to nature in order to perceive it. "You must walk so gently as to hear the finest sounds, the faculties being in repose," he wrote (J 2:338). The way to create this repose and receptiveness in oneself, it seemed, was to "do nothing merely out of good resolutions"; to "discipline yourself only to yield to love" (J 3:253). "Obey the spur of the moment," urged Thoreau. "If you neglect the moments, what but a languishing life is to be expected? Let the spurs of countless moments goad us incessantly into life" (J 3:231).

For the most part, then, Thoreau was an activist of a different sort. He was out to change his <u>own</u> consciousness -- to change it so that he could better receive nature and life itself. But Thoreau's internal activism was not the only kind he practiced. His night spent in jail for refusing to pay a poll-tax to a state that condoned slavery is, of course, legendary, as is his essay "On Civil Disobedience," in which he explained why he thought that one should not obey a government when one disagrees with it. Indeed, Thoreau is often thought of as a forefather of the kind of nonviolent civil disobedience that is practiced today at the Nevada Test Site and countless other places. He also publicly put forth some strong opinions about policy changes he felt needed to be made -- for example, he said that each township should set aside a certain amount of wild land (he suggested at least five hundred acres), for the

health of its citizens as well as of the land itself. The studies he made late in life of forest ecology would, he hoped, make a difference in the way Concord wood-lots were managed--to this end, he addressed the Middlesex Agricultural Society in 1860 on "The Succession of Forest Trees" (Natural History Essays, 72). He wrote in his journals about issues such as fishermen wanting to channel fish from a river into a local pond so that they could get at it more easily (J 9:237), the lack of acknowledgment by townsmen of the death of one of the great old elms of the town (J 8:131), and the incredible fact that the only account of nature's "beautiful insects which God has made and set before us" which the state would deign to publish was about those which were injurious to vegetation (J 13:170-171).

His opinions about local policy bring up another way in which people sometimes attack Thoreau. Of course he spent all his time thinking about himself and doing whatever he wanted, they say. Anyone would if they had the chance. Thoreau was not responsible to anyone but himself; he did not have to make money for a family of ailing elders or squalling children. Of course he thought wild land should be set aside rather than used for profit-making activities -- he could afford to think this. If he had been in debt, needy, struggling, he would have advocated making economic use of as much land as possible, just like anyone else.

Many make similar criticisms about today's environmental activists. They can afford to think this way, they say. If these same people were poor and living in a slum, they would be pro-industry. They wouldn't have the luxury to be out there yelling for more pretty scenery; they'd want what was practical.

These criticisms deserve to be listened to. It is true that most of today's environmental activists are not working-class people. One is tempt-

ed to point out that this is not an ivevitable phenomenon. In societies where people's livelihood is still connected directly with nature, their everyday concerns mesh quite well with the desire for a healthy environment; in fact, there are some cases where people living in such societies have become environmental activists, such as the Penan tribespeople of the Brazilian rainforest , and village women of India who have successfully prevented industrial logging operations from cutting down the trees that provide them with the fuelwood and animal fodder that they need. Most people, however, are dependent on an industrial economy, rather than directly on nature, for their livelihood, and to many of them, preserving nature seems to run counter to economic interests.

Economic questions are most certainly worth looking at, as they are where environmentalists are most likely to encounter their chief obstacles and criticisms. Keeping this in mind, and using Thoreau as a resource person who did examine some economic questions in his writings, I now turn to him for some ideas about the ways that nature should be used -- and not used -- for the purpose of providing humans with their livelihood.

While Thoreau had strong feelings about the exploitation of nature, he was not wholly without admiration for technical progress and for the economic uses to which nature could be put. He praised the "telegraph harp" as a bringer of messages and greatly enjoyed the humming sound it made. Upon observing barrel-makers fashioning hoops for powder-casks out of alder and white birch sprouts, he wrote that he was always pleased when artisans discovered a use for a particular natural material (J 3:36)

For the most part, however, Thoreau saw what was usually termed economic progress as being extremely disruptive to nature as well as hurtful to the human spirit. He mentioned many times the cruelty and greed

with which so many humans treat animals. "What a pitiful business is the fur trade," he wrote. The large companies which still had a great deal of control over both land and money at the time he was writing had, he felt, debased both themselves and the native trappers whom they employed. The wearing of cruelly obtained animal skin, scales, and feathers, he reported, was often considered a mark of high elegance. In Europe, the most "delicately bred lady"--perhaps even the President of the Antislavery Society, or of "that for the encouragement of humanity in animals"--could be seen "marching or presiding" with tortoise scales in her hair (obtained by laying live coals on the tortoise's back to make the scales stand up)) and skunkskin trimming her cloak (obtained by killing a hundred skunks) (J 12:120-122).

Thoreau also illustrated the mistreatment that domesticated animals experienced by describing the behavior of a local farmer's ox at the end of a workday. Suddenly, he said, the ox half lay, half fell onto the hard and grimy floor of its stall, its legs thrown to one side while its head was held uncomforaably in the stanchions. "Thus man's fellow-laborer ... is compelled to take his rest," wrote Thoreau, "like the most wretched slave or culprit" (J 13:240).

As well as criticizing the behavior of others toward animals, Thoreau was careful to examine the morality of his own actions. After killing a cistudo (probably a kind of insect) so he could observe it scientifically, he admitted that he would not be able to excuse himself for such a cold-blooded murder, and prayed that he would be able to walk more innocently and serenely through nature in the future. Realizing that the impact of his action extended not only to the creature being killed, but also to himself, Thoreau wrote that he had lost some some respect, and that even the quality of his observations of the dead cistudo would be affected

(J 6:452).

Thoreau's concern for the impact of his actions on fellow creatures extended to plants as well. He wrote that although throwing stones against a chestnut tree in the fall resulted in showers of ripe chestnuts falling to the ground for gathering, "I cannot excuse myself for using the stone." To injure a tree so it could provide him with more food, he felt, was to behave like a robber or murderer. Even simply shaking a tree in order to obtain its fruits should be done gently, "with a certain humble gratitude." To learn the true secrets of nature, Thoreau wrote, the would-be learner must "practice more humanity" than others. "I was robbing myself by injuring the tree ... I was affected as if I had cast a rock at a sentient being" (J 7:514-515).

Many incidents related to the misuse of land or life for economic purposes met with criticism from Thoreau, who wrote that business "postpones life and substitutes death" (J 5:446). Because it takes humans away from a direct relationship with nature, he felt that business is injurious to nature and to the human spirit. "Wealth will not buy a man a home in nature. The man of business does not by his business earn a home in nature but is denaturalized rather," he wrote (J 5:496-7). Questioning the good of using the Concord River for economic purposes (though he didn't state what those purposes were) when that use resulted in the disappearance of many of its fish, Thoreau asked,"In what sense now does spring ever come to the river, when the sun is not reflected from the scales of a single salmon, shad, or alewife?" (J 9:327)

In his later years, when he was studying trees and the forest ecosystems they belonged to, Thoreau's discovery that many wood-lot owners managed their trees in an extremely short-sighted fashion made him irate. "With the present management, will there always be a fresh stump, or a

nut in the soil, think you?" Tree species which bear relatively few seeds, Thoreau predicted, would become more and more scarce, a phenomenon that he already saw happening with the chestnut (J 11:50-51).

While modern wood-lot owners would doubtless reply that, unlike their predecessors, they are being foresightful by replanting tree seedlings to replenish the supply of trees, Thoreau would see a problem in the large-scale manipulation of a forest ecosystem for profit. Such manipulation does have a great ecological cost: because a "cash crop" is constantly being hurried through, the soil of a modern wood-lot is never allowed to replenish, and as a result becomes depleted--not to mention the loss to humans and to the land itself of having only one or two predetermined tree species instead of many.

In addition to criticizing destructive human uses of nature, Thoreau supported what he considered to be constructive uses of it. He described how he noticed "one-eyed John Goodwin, the fisherman," (regarded by most as a vicious character) collecting driftwood in his boat and bringing it home in a hand-cart. Thoreau was "charmed unspeakably" with such simple and direct employment, which provided Goodwin with just enough wood to keep himself warm over the winter. Thoreau compared this kind of work with the work of a broker, who "makes haste to Boston in the cars" in order to earn the money he will use to provide himself with his winter's wood. In contrast to the feeling Thoreau had when he saw Goodwin out wood-collecting, Thoreau was not at all "charmed" to meet the broker rushing off to Boston. He called this kind of employment an

> artificial and complicate business...It does not harmonize with the sunset...For if I buy one necessary of life, I cheat myself to some extent, I deprive myself of the pleasure, the inexpressible joy, which is the unfailing reward of satisfying any want of nature simply and truly. (J 9:444-5)

Leo Stoller traced an evolution in Thoreau's opinions on economics and human rights in his book After Walden: Thoreau's Changing Views on Economic Man. Around the time he was at Walden, Stoller wrote, Thoreau held to the idea that every individual is responsible for him or herself. He urged people to cultivate their inner selves through contact with nature, and advocated an ascetic material life. His ideal of work was for everyone to work just enough to directly provide for their material needs of food, clothing, shelter, and warmth. Stoller explained,

> It seemed to Thoreau that the "complex" way of earning a living...introduced...a whole series of unnecessary intermediate activities. The farmer is poor, he wrote in Walden, because he is "endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle. (Stoller, 13)

Thoreau himself, however, did not practice his own ideal even when he lived at Walden. Stoller wrote that he set himself up as a "marginal commercial farmer"--growing beans as a cash crop--and had to hire himself out as a day laborer to make ends meet (31). Gradually, Stoller claims, and in part because of his "failure" at Walden, Thoreau abandoned his completely individualistic approach to economics and began to address the situation of people in an industrializing country in a more realistic way.

Acdording to Stoller, Thoreau came to accept industry as part of "impersonally dictated necessity." Stoller compared journal entries that Thoreau made in the 1850's after touring a gingham mill and a steel mill (in which he expressed an unmitigated admiration for their efficiency and ingenuity) with his trip down the Merrimack River in 1839, when he and his brother John had rowed as auickly as possible past the factories, "as if anxious to escape contamination" (Stoller, 109).

Stoller felt that Thoreau, believing still in the essential goodness

of a life lived close to nature, came to a kind of impasse which he was never able to resolve regarding how best to live in a society where industrialization was undeniably happening. Believing still in the importance of simplicity and self-culture, Thoreau asked what the use was in "trying to live simply, raising what you eat, making what you wear, building what you inhabit, burning what you cut or dig when...The fellow-man to whom you are yoked is a steer that is ever bolting right the other way" (Stoller, 111). Stoller cited a few examples of what he considered to be Thoreau's way of coming to terms with industrialization: his examination of the site of an explosion at a powder mill, made, Stoller claimed, with the eye not of an idealist, but of "a man interested in reducing the extent of further explosions" (Stoller, 126). Stoller also described Thoreau's suggestion that "the murderous Lincoln Bridge," site of numerous accidents, "be moved about four feet over...by a little resolution in the legislature" (Stoller, 126-7).

After Walden gives one the impression that Thoreau had to come to terms with industrialization, and that he did so by figuring out some ways that it could be made slightly more humane. But this was not the only way in which Thoreau attempted to deal with the changes that were going on in his world.

Thoreau focussed on the importance of the commons--land kept wild or partially wild for use by everyone--in the "Wild Apples" and "Huckleberries" essays, in the essay "Walking," and also many times in the later years of his Journal. Not only did he wish for meadows with berries or trees in them to be kept wild so that anyone could go and pick fruit--he also felt that each township should keep a large tract of wild land for the aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment of its citizens.

Thoreau did not say in his "Wild Apples" or "Huckleberries" essays

that he got all his food, or even all his fruit, from wild bushes and trees--in fact, he wrote in the "Huckleberries" essay that the berries "seem offered to us not so much for food as for sociality" (Natural History Essays, 241). What he did discuss in these two essays was the peculiar appeal of wild fruit--and when, and to whom, it had this appeal. Of the apples (which were originally cultivated but had returned to a wild state since no one had cared for them), Thoreau wrote, "They belong to children as wild as themselves...to the wild-eyed woman of the fields...who gleans after all the world" (Natural History Essays, 196). If you bring a wild apple indoors, "The palate rejects it...and demands a tamed one, for there you miss the November air, which is the sauce it is to be eaten with" (Natural History Essays, 199). Those who choose to eat wild huckleberries are rewarded with "Slight and innocent savors which relate us to Nature, make us her guests, and entitle us to her regard and protection" (241).

If the experience of finding and picking it makes such a dramatic difference in the appreciation of wild fruit, what happens when it can no longer be gathered commonly in the wild? Thoreau brought up this question in "Wild Apples" when he remarked that the rights of the gleaner--in this case, of one who gleans a once-cultivated tree that was now wild--"have come to be an institution in some old countries, where they have learned how to live" (197).

Thoreau discussed at length the problem of ownership in his "Huckleberries" essay. He was horrified, he wrote, that some of the owners of huckleberry fields around Concord had begun driving in stakes around their fields with signs saying "no picking," and ordering the pickers out. Some had actually rented their fields out to pickers. "We are not grateful enough," wrote Thoreau, "that we have lived a part of our lives

before these things occurred" (249).

The disappearance of wild fruits that were readily available for the picking was, Thoreau believed, a truly ominous sign of the direction in which civilization was headed. "It is true," he wrote,

> we have as good a right to make berries private property, as to make wild grasses and trees such--it is not worse than a thousand other practices which custom has sanctioned--but that is the worst of it, for it suggests how bad the rest are, and to what result our civilization and division of labor naturally tend, to make all things venal. (250)

Thoreau believed that putting a price on things in nature and viewing them only in a monetary way leads to personal impoverishment. Eventually, he said, it leads people to put a monetary value on themselves, and see themselves as no more than a sum in dollars. He noticed many a neighbor saying, "I will make so many dollars by such a time, or before I die," and realized that "that is his price, as much as if he were knocked off for it by a Southern auctioneer" (J 14:284). In a world where nature, as well as the poorer classes of humankind, were increasingly being viewed as commodities by those exercising financial control, Thoreau pleaded that all people not lose sight of the spiritual dimensions of wilderness--or of themselves.

Today, more than one hundred and thirty years after Thoreau's death, the amount of wild land has shrunk dramatically in the United States and all over the world. At the same time, most of us have gotten further away from a direct connection with land in our working lives, and more of us are affected by the ways in which big businesses have chosen to operate. As someone who cultivated a direct and personal relationship with the land where he lived, Thoreau, through his writings, can help us cope with these problems in several ways.

First, Thoreau gives us many eloquent arguments for preserving wild

land, telling us over and over again why such preservation is important. The countless groups and individuals who are now giving expression to the same kinds of ideas can use his backing to give them additional weight.

Second, Thoreau teaches us to value our immediate environments through his unflagging ability to find beauty and newness in his home, the Concord area. By maintaining for a period of many years the rhythm of his daily walks, he learned to love areas not commonly regarded as lovely and appreciate places not seen by most as special.

The world has shrunk in the years intervening between him and us; it is now possible to travel to an exotic, faraway environment in a matter of hours. But the possibility of such trips is not available to all people, a fact which can make appreciation of the environment seem like a symbol of wealth. Perhaps even more importantly, a faraway environment is not our own. We do not walk in it day after day, month after month, seeing the seasons--and the property lines--change, seeing the land itself and the way humans relate to it evolve, for better or worse. Living with land in a day-to-day way gives our feelings for it depth.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, Thoreau teaches us to value ourselves. He tells us that we are valuable not because of how many dollars we can make (or pages we can write) in a week, not because we can exude intellectual brilliance or figure out how to get a workplace to run more efficiently, but because we are human beings. In the day-to-day struggles of living in a culture that places immense importance on production--whether one produces material goods, art, or even social change--it is all too easy to forget the importance of our capacity to appreciate.

The years to come may be difficult ones for environmental activists

and others who love the wild. We may experience losses even greater than those we have already experienced. Appreciating what we have, and deriving strength from the nature around us, no matter how little it seems like there is, will be critical.

Thoreau wrote of a walk he took during the barest time of winter, a time when he was feeling dejected because it seemed as if all life were gone from the world. Just then he happened to notice a snowflake on his coat-sleeve, The beauty and complex form of the snowflake reminded him that even at this dreariest of times, nature had not lost her creative vigor, and neither had he lost his (J 10:239).

ENDNOTE

1 Journal, Vol. 13, pp. 77-78. All subsequent quotations are from the edition in the Works Cited and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

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