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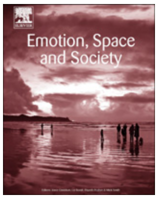

Climbing mountains, hugging trees: A cross-cultural examination of love for nature

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ABSTRACT

Developing a renewed love for nature is – some argue – a crucial component of addressing the environmental crisis. However, the connection between emotional bonds to nature and effective environmental action is not always straightforward, especially given vastly different notions of “love” and “nature” in different cultures. This article evaluates different models of “loving nature” in terms of their relationship to action and the inclusivity of their scope. In Norway, several philosopher-mountaineers advocate loving nature through *friluftsliv*, or outdoor exploration; while this approach has promoted change in a wealthy, sparsely populated country, its wider applicability and its approach to gender is questioned. In India, the Chipko movement, which aimed to save trees by hugging them, seems to provide a more inclusive form of loving nature. On closer examination, though, some Chipko advocates rely heavily on a vision of nature that is highly feminized and divorced from social realities. Alternatives to *friluftsliv* and Chipko are then examined, including Sigmund Kvaløy’s political ecophilosophy and *varkari* movements in India. Those movements that have a more practical, less idealized, view of nature-love are more likely to effect lasting, positive ecosocial change.

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1. Introduction

In the face of the current ecological crisis, many environmentalists have urged us to rediscover our love for nature. But what, exactly, is the nature of this love? And what is the nature of the nature that must be loved? In investigating these questions, I will look at the different models of “loving nature” developed by the philosopher-mountaineers of Norway and the Chipko tree-huggers of India; the contrasts and similarities between these groups will illuminate the role of socioeconomic factors in conceptualizing love for nature (as well as conceptualizing nature itself). In evaluating these models, as well as investigating alternatives, I will use two broad criteria: do the models actually encourage people to support positive ecosocial change?[1] And are these models inclusive in terms of gender and class, and thus suited to promoting broad-based change?

The use of these criteria will highlight the complicated connection between emotional attachment to nature and concrete action to address the growing ecosocial crisis. While broadly accepting the assertion, common in environmental discourse, that a love for nature can inspire people to act for change, I will question whether simplistic conceptions of “loving nature” – present in both Norway and India – are sufficiently attuned to the complex ecosocial settings in which change must take place.

Arne Næss, who coined the term “deep ecology”, is the most famous of the Norwegian philosopher-mountaineers. Næss and his colleagues philosophized about the intrinsic value of nature while scaling peaks and crossing glaciers. Not surprisingly, these thinkers, especially a biochemist-turned-mountain-guide named Nils Faarlund, saw outdoor exploration (known in Norway as *friluftsliv*) as a crucial way of rekindling a love for nature. Drawing on interviews I conducted with several of these philosopher-mountaineers, as well as their writings, I will explore the viability of *friluftsliv* as a means of loving nature. While this model has promoted ecological sensitivity and eco-activism in Norway, it is possible only in countries with vast swaths of wild land and citizens rich enough to spend leisure time in the wilderness; further, while the Norwegian philosophers-mountaineers certainly have not excluded women, men are still the main actors in the more rugged forms of outdoor exploration.

The Chipko tree-huggers of India, by contrast, come from a socio-economically disadvantaged group within a densely populated country. Further, according to some accounts, women

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[1] I follow the lead of Norwegian philosopher Sigmund Kvaløy (discussed in greater detail in Section 4.1 of this article) in using the terms “ecosocial” and “ecosocial crisis” to emphasize the interdependence of ecology and society. This reflects a main argument of this article: a focus on “nature”, divorced from society, is too narrow in scope to produce effective change.

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played a leading role in the Chipko movement, which involved non-violent protests to oppose felling of timber by outside contractors. For instance, ecofeminist Vandana Shiva emphasizes the role of women in Chipko, and stresses women's emotional and metaphysical connection to "Mother Earth". She draws on Indian philosophy to do so, citing the long association of women with the divine feminine principle. Shiva's views are problematic, not only because they downplay men's very real contribution to Chipko, but also because they overlook the fact that the linking of women with nature has long been used to denigrate both.

There are daunting challenges when comparing two vastly different cultures and their conceptions of loaded concepts like "love" and "nature". Further, the *friluftsliv* and Chipko movements have multiple voices, and these voices often have conflicting perceptions of what nature is, and what it means to love this kind of nature. As I explore these movements, I will be sensitive to the differences between them as well as the differences within them. Still, it is not fruitless to seek connections between these far-flung movements, in part *because* of the multiplicity of voices within them. In fact, one of the dominant Chipko narratives actually shares much with a particular strain of *friluftsliv* thinking that idealizes mountain culture and advocates a hands-off approach to environmentalism.

It is a cliché that we live in a globalized world, but an awareness of the sometimes surprising reach of different discourses illuminates the connections between the two movements. Both, for example, draw significantly on Gandhian thought. However, it would be misleading to look to Gandhi for a theory of "loving nature" that informed both the Chipko and *friluftsliv* movements. While well-known Norwegian philosopher-mountaineers like Næss, Faarlund and Sigmund Kvaløy were deeply inspired by Gandhi – Næss and Kvaløy even undertook an epic road trip from Norway to India in order to attend a conference on Gandhi held in Varanasi in 1969 (Randall, 2007: 59) – the biggest lesson drawn from Gandhi was his theory of non-violent action. Although Gandhi had interesting views on nature (which have been explored by many environmentally-minded thinkers, including Vinay Lal (2000) and Larry D. Shinn (2000)), the Norwegians were most influenced by his radical approach to peaceful protest and political action.[2]

In terms of models for "love" and "nature", the Norwegian philosophers turned, not to Gandhi, but to the Himalayan communities – largely in Nepal – with which they interacted during their climbing trips. Næss and Kvaløy met with Sherpa communities in the hills after leaving Varanasi. They were so enamored of the simple life that they returned to the region in 1971, this time with Faarlund, who was especially impressed by the way these communities used joyful play to build serious "nature wisdom" (1993a, 165).

If the Norwegians under discussion drew significant inspiration from the subcontinent – Gandhi in India (in terms of practical techniques) and Sherpa communities in Nepal (in terms of interactions with the non-human world), then influential Chipko promoters drew heavily on the language of Western environmentalism. For example, Vandana Shiva, though heavily critical of Western philosophy and Western capitalism, nonetheless employs a Western-influenced narrative of simple, nature-loving hill people fighting environmental destruction. Much like Faarlund and his compatriots, Shiva idealizes the strong emotional bond between mountain people and nature.

Such idealization depends on a definition of nature that excludes (modern-day, industrial) humans and therefore obscures the many meaningful interconnections between such humans and the more-than-human world.[3] Against this supposed alienation of humans from nature, some *friluftsliv* and Chipko proponents romanticize temporally or spatially distant communities. Such nostalgia, while comforting, is unlikely to provide a productive, grounded model for loving nature and for promoting positive ecosocial change through that love. However, alternative models exist in both Norway and India. I will conclude the paper by giving examples of such alternatives, which can – I argue – serve as potential guides for constructing a more inclusive, practically-oriented conception of loving nature.

2. *Friluftsliv*

While American deep ecologists like Joanna Macy et al. (1988) have developed elaborate rituals meant to reconnect humans to their ecosystemic homes, the Norwegian philosophers closer to the roots of deep ecology have encouraged a more informal love of nature through outdoor exploration. Næss, for instance, speaks with enthusiasm of his childhood days marveling at the diverse life forms in shallow coastal water and exploring Norway's mountains (Reed and Rothenberg, 1993b: 67–8). As an adult, he became one of Norway's foremost mountaineers. Even as a philosophy professor, he spent many of his days in a mountain cabin on the stark Hardangervidda plateau.

This sense of "loving nature" – more rugged than ritualistic – is worth examining because of its pervasiveness in countries like the U.S. and Norway. Many who are turned off by the supposed primitiveness or sheer unfamiliarity of Macy's Gaia meditations still find value in a walk in the woods. In Norway, for instance, a full quarter of Oslo's population journeys to the surrounding forests during the weekend (Reed and Rothenberg, 1993a: 20). Faarlund has emphasized the cultural resonance of *friluftsliv*, which literally means "open air life", and more generally refers to outdoors pursuits. As Faarlund reports, "Recent polls document that 9 of 10 Norwegians…state that they are actively taking part in *friluftsliv*" (2009). While *friluftsliv* currently enjoys a wide audience, an examination of the term's history reveals its cultural specificity and its sometimes-exclusive nature. While Faarlund and his colleagues have done admirable work elaborating a more socially-conscious, inclusive conception of *friluftsliv*, some remnants of its elitist history remain.

2.1. A brief history of friluftsliv

Norway's geography and demography underlie its population's penchant for *friluftsliv*. Like the U.S., Norway is relatively sparsely populated, with large tracts of land not obviously influenced by human activity.[4] Also like the U.S., Norway was home to a vibrant Romantic movement that was both a reaction against industrialization and an affirmation of the cultural value of the wild. Both countries – seen as culturally "backwards" by most of Europe – embraced wide-open spaces as a central part of their cultural

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[2] Næss is somewhat of an exception to this, as he was also heavily influenced by Gandhi's metaphysics and his emphasis on self-realization; indeed, Næss wrote three whole books on Gandhi's philosophy. But as a whole, the Norwegian eco-philosophers focused on Gandhi's political and social tactics more than his underlying philosophy.

[3] I take the phrase "more-than-human world" from Abram (1996), who emphasizes that humans are deeply embedded in their ecosystemic communities.

[4] I use this careful wording because areas described as "untouched" wilderness have often been affected – in both minor and major ways – by human populations. For instance, Cronon (1983) shows how the "pristine" land encountered by the colonists arriving in the United States had actually been significantly influenced by native populations.

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