

Environmental Ethics

Environmental Ethics is an area of philosophy that attempts to establish that we have a moral obligation to protect the environment. One of the most radical forms of environmental ethics is deep ecology which was first advocated by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. The alternative to deep ecology is often referred to as shallow ecology.

Deep Ecology

The core theme of deep ecology is the claim that all living things have the **same** right to live and flourish. This means that the interests of other living beings have to be treated as seriously as the interests of humans. A rainforest, for example, can no longer be regarded as a valueless wood resource. Instead, it is a collection of living things, all of which have a right to live and flourish.

Nature is said to have *intrinsic* value. It is valuable even if humans can find no use for it.

From a deep ecological perspective, climate change is wrong because it will affect the wellbeing of billions of living beings. Even if we could provide a way of protecting humans from climate change, it would still be a bad thing because many other living beings would suffer.

Another aspect of deep ecology is the idea that we should expand our idea of who we are so that it includes the natural world. This is known sometimes as the expanded self. If we harm nature then we are really harming ourselves.

Deep ecology rejects anthropocentrism in favour of ecocentrism or biocentrism.

Shallow Ecology

Shallow ecology rejects ecocentrism and biocentrism. Shallow ecologists claim that there is nothing necessarily wrong with the anthropocentric worldview. Nature is only valuable insofar as it serves human interests. This is sometimes known as *instrumental* value.

From this perspective, climate change is bad because it will affect human interests. It is humans that will ultimately suffer if climate change is allowed to occur.

Even if there was a way of protecting humans from the effects of climate change, shallow ecologists would still think it was a bad thing. This is because the damage caused to other life forms would adversely affect humans. Damage caused by climate change might, for example, mean that it is difficult to obtain natural resources. The extinction of species may mean that food supplies become harder to find. It might also be that humans would simply not like to live on a damaged planet.