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DEEP AND DARK ECOLOGY: PARADIGMS OF CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract. The article offers a comparative analysis of two paradigms of contemporary ecological thought: Arne Naess's deep ecology and Timothy Morton's dark ecology. It explores the main points of convergence and divergence between these approaches through their philosophical premises, concepts of nature, declared aims, and the concrete strategies they suggest for addressing ecological challenges. The study relies on theoretical, comparative, contextual, and critical methods, paying particular attention to Naess's idea of "self-realization" and Morton's notion of "hyperobjects." A special focus is placed on how these concepts challenge anthropocentric perspectives, reconsider the position of the human being in ecological systems, and propose different interpretations of ecological crisis. Deep ecology is interpreted as a normatively and practically oriented perspective based on biocentrism, ecological equality, and recognition of the intrinsic value of all forms of life. Dark ecology, in turn, is characterized as a more critical and ambivalent current that underscores uncertainty, entanglement, and the unsettling dimension of nature. The article evaluates the strengths and limitations of both frameworks and outlines possible ways of combining their insights for reflection on the global ecological crisis. This makes clear their joint contribution to contemporary ecological philosophical debates.

Keywords: deep ecology; dark ecology; Arne Naess; Timothy Morton; anthropocentrism; ecological crisis; hyperobjects; self-realization

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ТЕРЕҢ ЖӘНЕ ҚАРАҢҒЫ ЭКОЛОГИЯ: ҚАЗІРГІ ЭКОЛОГИЯЛЫҚ ОЙДЫҢ ПАРАДИГМАЛАРЫ

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ГЛУБИННАЯ И ТЕМНАЯ ЭКОЛОГИЯ: ПАРАДИГМЫ СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ЭКОЛОГИЧЕСКОЙ МЫСЛИ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақалада қазіргі заманғы экологиялық ойдағы екі парадигманың салыстырмалы талдауы берілген: Арне Нэссің терең экологиясы және Тимоти Мортонның қараңғы экологиясы. Онда осы тәсілдердің философиялық болжамдарына, табиғат туралы түсініктеріне, қойылған мақсаттарына және қоршаған орта мәселелерін шешу үшін ұсынылған нақты стратегияларына негізделген конвергенциясы мен алшақтығының негізгі нүктелері зерттеледі. Зерттеу теориялық, салыстырмалы, контекстік және сыни әдістерге сүйене отырып, Нэссің «өзін-өзі тану» идеясы мен Мортонның «гиперобъектілер» ұғымына ерекше назар аударылады. Бұл ұғымдардың антропоцентрилік көзқарастарға қалай қарсы тұратынына, экологиялық жүйелердегі адамдардың орнын қайта қарастыратынына және экологиялық дағдарыстың әртүрлі түсіндірмелерін ұсынатынына ерекше назар аударылады. Терең экология биоцентризмге, экологиялық теңдікке және барлық тіршілік формаларының ішкі құндылығын тануға негізделген нормативтік және практикалық бағдарланған көзқарас ретінде түсіндіріледі. Қараңғы экология, өз кезегінде, табиғаттың белгісіздігін, өзара байланыстылығын және мазасыздық тудыратын өлшемдерін баса көрсететін неғұрлым сындарлы және екіұшты ағым ретінде сипатталады. Бұл мақалада екі ұғымның да күшті және әлсіз жақтары бағаланады және жаһандық экологиялық дағдарысты түсіну үшін олардың идеяларын біріктірудің мүмкін жолдары көрсетілген. Бұл бізге олардың қоршаған орта мәселелерін қазіргі философиялық талқылауларға қосқан үлесін айқын көрсетуге мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: терең экология; қараңғы экология; Арне Несс; Тимоти Мортон; антропоцентризм; экологиялық дағдарыс; гипернысандар; өзін-өзі іске асыру

Аннотация. В статье представлен сравнительный анализ двух парадигм современной экологической мысли: глубинной экологии Арне Несса и темной экологии Тимоти Мортон. Исследуются основные точки соприкосновения и расхождения между этими подходами на основе их философских предпосылок, концепций природы, заявленных целей и конкретных стратегий, предлагаемых для решения экологических проблем. Исследование опирается на теоретические, сравнительные, контекстуальные и критические методы, уделяя особое внимание идее Несса о «самореализации» и понятию Мортон о «гиперобъектах». Особое внимание уделяется тому, как эти концепции бросают вызов антропоцентрическим взглядам, переосмысливают положение человека в экологических системах и предлагают различные интерпретации экологического кризиса. Глубинная экология интерпретируется как нормативно и практически ориентированная перспектива, основанная на биоцентризме, экологическом равенстве и признании внутренней ценности всех форм жизни. Темная экология, в свою очередь, характеризуется как более критическое и амбивалентное течение, подчеркивающее неопределенность, взаимосвязь и тревожное измерение природы. В статье оцениваются сильные и слабые стороны обеих концепций и намечаются возможные способы объединения их идей для осмысления глобального экологического кризиса. Это позволяет ясно показать их совместный вклад в современные философские дискуссии по вопросам окружающей среды.

Ключевые слова: глубинная экология; темная экология; Арне Несс; Тимоти Мортон; антропоцентризм; экологический кризис; гиперобъекты; самореализация.

Introduction

Ecological philosophy has taken on heightened significance amid escalating ecological breakdown – ranging from climate change and biodiversity decline to pervasive pollution and the overuse of natural resources. These developments show that the ecological crisis is not merely a matter for science or politics, but also a philosophical challenge, as it calls into question entrenched views of nature, human action, and moral responsibility. Against this backdrop, Arne Naess's deep ecology and Timothy Morton's dark ecology emerge as two influential, yet significantly divergent, attempts to reconsider how humans relate to the more-than-human world. Deep ecology, rooted in biocentrism, ecological interdependence, and the idea of intrinsic value, advocates a shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric outlook and highlights self-realization, ethical duty, and concrete ecological engagement. Dark ecology, on the other hand, rejects romanticized notions of a harmonious "Nature" and foregrounds ecological entanglement, uncanniness, ambiguity, and the unsettling presence of hyperobjects such as climate change and plastic waste.

Although both perspectives question anthropocentrism and consumerist relations to the environment, they diverge markedly in their philosophical premises, ethical focus, and practical orientation. Deep ecology is typically linked to a clearly articulated normative and action-focused program, whereas dark ecology is more strongly connected with conceptual critique, ecological aesthetics, and reflection on the ambiguity of ecological existence. This article, therefore, offers a comparative examination of deep ecology and dark ecology, aiming to elucidate how each understands nature, human subjectivity, responsibility, and appropriate forms of ecological response. The novelty of this study lies in developing a structured comparative framework that examines deep and dark ecology through five analytical dimensions: ontology of nature, conception of subjectivity, ethical foundations, practical orientation, and aesthetic mediation.

Materials and methods

In order to juxtapose "deep ecology" and "dark ecology," this research turns mainly to a detailed theoretical reading of Arne Naess's *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (1989) and Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016). Analysis of these foundational works allows for the reconstruction of the core arguments of each position and the identification of their principal lines of divergence.

The study presents a comparative table that places their philosophical assumptions, views of nature, and recommended responses to ecological challenges in direct juxtaposition. In addition, contextual analysis is employed to locate both notions within the historical and cultural circumstances of their formation and to clarify how they have shaped ecological movements.

Critical analysis was applied to identify the key strengths and weaknesses of each framework – for instance, the inclination toward idealisation in "deep ecology" and the limited amount of concrete practical guidance in "dark ecology." In addition, an interpretive method was used to unpack conceptually complex notions such as Morton's "hyperobjects" and Naess's idea of "self-realization."

At the final stage, the results were brought together to systematise the findings, emphasise areas of complementarity between the two concepts, and indicate potential trajectories for their

integration. This multi-step strategy allows for a more nuanced comparison of deep and dark ecology and helps to clarify the specific contribution each makes to contemporary ecological philosophy.

Literature Review

Arne Naess's deep ecology, developed in the 1970s, advances a radical rethinking of the human relationship with the natural world. It seeks to overcome anthropocentrism by expanding the notion of the "self" to encompass identification with non-human beings and ecological wholes. Grounded in biocentrism, holism, and ecological egalitarianism, deep ecology asserts that the natural world has inherent value and that all living beings have an equal right to exist and flourish. According to Naess, personal identity is inseparable from ecosystems and the broader community of life, so ethical responsibility involves recognizing interdependence and fostering a sense of care toward all forms of life (Naess, 1973; Naess, 1985). This philosophical perspective has influenced ecological movements and organisations, such as Greenpeace, Earth First!, and Friends of the Earth, by encouraging environmental activism, sustainable lifestyles, and reflective engagement with nature. Deep ecology thus combines normative principles with practical guidance, advocating both ethical awareness and concrete action to restore and sustain ecological balance (Naess, 1989; Devall & Sessions, 1985).

Extending Naess's ideas, Devall and Sessions note that "spiritual growth begins when we stop seeing ourselves as isolated egos and start identifying with other people and the non-human world" (Devall & Sessions, 1985, p. 34). The focus here is on a shift away from an ego-centred perspective toward a holistic view of the biosphere, an orientation that has shaped the discourse and practices of a number of ecological organisations. Deep ecology has influenced groups such as Earth First!, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, and the Rainforest Action Network in promoting sustainability and ecological justice, but it has also been the object of sustained critique. Therefore, any evaluation of deep ecology in relation to ecological movements must consider not only its practical impact but also the coherence of its philosophical foundations and the scope of its limitations.

Their divergence goes beyond differing attitudes to harmony and balance, encompassing contrasting ways of addressing ecological problems and relying on different philosophical and ethical foundations. Deep ecology, developed by Arne Naess, is grounded in a view of nature as an integrated, interdependent whole in which all elements exist in a state of equilibrium (Naess, 1973). From this standpoint, humans are seen as one component within a larger ecological system and are assigned responsibility for restoring disruptions to that equilibrium. The approach underscores reverence for the natural world, recognition of its intrinsic value, and a firm refusal of anthropocentric perspectives. Restoring a harmonious relationship between human activity and the natural environment is thus framed as a key goal (Naess, 1989).

The ways these theories propose to respond to ecological problems differ significantly. Deep ecology gives special weight to activism and spiritual practice. Naess calls for a profound shift in human consciousness, in which people come to see themselves as inseparable parts of an ecological whole. This stance involves developing an ecological ethic, recognising the interconnection of all living beings, and rejecting consumerist relations to the natural world (Naess, 1989). Within deep ecology, activism is oriented toward ecological protection through political participation, social movements, and individual efforts.

The philosophical and ethical bases of the two approaches likewise differ. Deep ecology rests on a holistic conception of the world in which humans and nature form a single integrated whole. Ethically, it maintains that every living being has an equal right to exist, regardless of its usefulness to humans (Naess, 1973). In this respect, the perspective is close to ecocentrism, upholding the intrinsic value of nature rather than interpreting it in merely instrumental terms.

These concepts also lead to different practical outcomes. Deep ecology calls for concrete measures such as protecting forests, cutting back on consumption, and embracing sustainable lifestyles. It has found broad application in ecological activism and education, where it helps cultivate a sense of responsibility for the natural world (Naess, 1989).

In more recent ecological humanities, many researchers have tried to move past the traditional deep ecology framework, shifting the focus toward ambiguity, mediation, and the limits of how humans can access ecological reality. In this context, Timothy Morton's work has emerged as one of the most influential efforts to rethink ecological thought.

At the same time, a number of recent authors have sought to move beyond the framework of classical deep ecology. Timothy Morton (2007), for instance, argues that ecology should not be restricted to "material nature" but must also take into account cultural, philosophical and aesthetic dimensions, thereby broadening the scope of ecological reflection (Morton, 2007, p. 90). A related emphasis can be found in David Abram's work, where sensory involvement with the more-than-human world is presented as crucial because it reveals layers of complexity that cannot be fully grasped through strictly rational or abstract categories (Abram, 1996, p. 78).

Timothy Morton, a British philosopher and cultural theorist, develops "dark ecology" as a critique of established ecological paradigms, including "deep ecology." While deep ecology, in Arne Naess's formulation, ties ecological consciousness to an expanded sense of self and holds that "our 'self' is as extensive as our identifications... Our 'self' is that with which we identify" (Naess, 1985, p. 260), Morton rejects the idea of nature as a harmonious and ordered whole. He challenges the romantic notion of "Nature" and instead directs attention to its darker aspects – suffering, mortality, decay and chaos. In his words, "Dark ecology is ecology without nature, an ecology that recognizes that nature has always been strange and alien" (Morton, 2016, p. 45).

Morton likewise proposes the concept of hyperobjects – extensive entities distributed across vast stretches of time and space, such as climate change, plastic debris or radioactive contamination. These entities have far-reaching ecological consequences yet can never be fully apprehended within the bounds of human perception (Morton, 2013, p. 112). In his view, hyperobjects force a reconsideration of conventional understandings of temporality, spatiality and ethical responsibility, and they call into question any straightforward reliance on technological or political solutions to contemporary ecological crises (Morton, 2013, p. 115).

Morton assigns a particularly important role to cultural and aesthetic dimensions, suggesting that standard scientific or political language often cannot convey the full complexity and ambiguity of ecological reality. He observes that "Art is capable of conveying the complexity and strangeness of nature, evoking an emotional response that dry scientific reports cannot" (Morton, 2010, p. 76). From this angle, art and aesthetic experience function as key means of reflecting on the ecological crisis, since they make visible the deep entanglement of humans with hyperobjects rather than presenting them as external observers (Morton, 2017, p. 134).

Unlike approaches that portray nature as a harmonious, well-ordered totality, Morton disputes this romantic image, arguing that it oversimplifies ecological reality and, ironically, strengthens the perceived divide between humans and the more-than-human world.

Morton's "dark ecology" represents a significant reorientation in ecological thought: it rejects idealised depictions of nature and foregrounds its inherent ambiguity. At the same time, critiques associated with Callicott, Boulton and Warren indicate that abandoning utopian narratives inevitably raises the issue of how aesthetic and cultural perspectives can be linked to political action so as to inform practical responses to the global ecological crisis. In applied terms, "dark ecology" is valuable for the distinctive perspective it brings to ecological issues, one that can encourage activists, scholars and artists to pursue more complex, flexible and intellectually rigorous ways of approaching human–environment relations.

Dark ecology, formulated by Timothy Morton, stands in sharp contrast by questioning the very idea of stability and harmony, treating it as a misleading construct. Morton argues that nature is, at its core, chaotic, unstable, and riven with internal contradictions (Morton, 2007). He employs the notion of "strangeness" to highlight that the natural world can never be fully grasped or brought under complete control. Instead of aiming at equilibrium, dark ecology takes chaos and uncertainty as built-in and inescapable features of ecological existence (Morton, 2016).

Dark ecology, by contrast, takes a more intellectual and aesthetic path. Morton contends that standard forms of activism and familiar ecological discourses are insufficient for grasping the full complexity of the ecological crisis (Morton, 2007). He suggests that this crisis is better approached through philosophy, art, and literature, which can convey the experience of "strangeness" and the sense of human estrangement from the natural world. Instead of formulating specific measures, dark ecology insists on rethinking humanity's relationship with nature, based on an awareness of its fundamental unknowability and an acceptance of its inherent disorder (Morton, 2016).

Dark ecology, in turn, is rooted in postmodern thought and takes issue with mainstream ecological theories for what it sees as their naïve and idealised treatment of nature. Drawing on object-oriented ontology, Morton contends that nature and objects have an existence of their own, not dependent on human perception. From this angle, dark ecology holds that human alienation from nature is unavoidable and should be recognised and accepted, rather than viewed as a problem to be overcome (Morton, 2016).

Dark ecology, on the other hand, primarily stimulates contemplation rather than prescribing concrete interventions. It calls into question received ideas about nature and ecology, inviting attention to the complexity and inner contradictions of the ecological crisis. This approach can be especially relevant for artists, philosophers, and researchers interested in exploring ecological issues at a deeper theoretical level (Morton, 2016).

In contrast, Timothy Morton's philosophy of dark ecology, developed by the American theorist, places emphasis on chaos, complexity, and the ambivalence of nature. Morton rejects the romantic portrayal of the natural world and focuses his analysis on "hyperobjects" – phenomena such as climate change and nuclear waste that surpass human perceptual limits and disrupt established assumptions about human–nature relations (Morton, 2013). At the same time, dark ecology has been reproached for its pessimistic outlook and for lacking clear practical prescriptions, which makes its translation into concrete ecological practice more difficult.

Consequently, the existing literature treats deep ecology and dark ecology not only as two significant ecological paradigms, but also as approaches that have given rise to ongoing critical discussion. This discussion addresses both their philosophical consistency and their practical significance in the context of the current ecological crisis.

Its more utopian and abstract premises need to be supplemented by concrete, socially embedded strategies capable of addressing pressing ecological, economic and social problems. At the same time, the way deep ecology has been taken up by ecological organizations testifies to its significant role in shaping new value orientations centred on sustainability and ecological integrity.

At the same time, the approach has been faulted for its strong idealism and for paying insufficient attention to socio-economic realities such as poverty and inequality. John Baird Callicott contends that a narrowly biocentric focus overlooks the practical importance of nature for human communities and its possible contribution to resolving social issues (Callicott, J. B. (1999). *Beyond the Land Ethic*).

At the same time, dark ecology has been reproached for its pessimistic outlook and for lacking clear practical prescriptions, which makes its translation into concrete ecological practice more difficult.

Critiques of both perspectives point to the necessity of integrating social, cultural, and political factors into ecological philosophy. Elizabeth Boulton faults both deep ecology and Morton's approach for their strong theoretical abstraction, arguing that they fail to account adequately for concrete socio-political conditions and the nuanced character of human-nature relations in contemporary society (Boulton, E. (2016). *Climate change as a 'hyperobject': a critical review of Timothy Morton's reframing narrative*). From an ecofeminist perspective, Karen Warren maintains that both theories overlook the overlap of multiple forms of oppression, including racism and sexism, which limits their ability to effectively promote social justice within ecological policy and practice (Warren, K. (2000). *Ecofeminist Philosophy*).

Although deep ecology and dark ecology propose different readings of nature and the ecological crisis, they can be seen as complementary rather than incompatible. Deep ecology formulates ethical principles and points toward concrete forms of ecological action, while dark ecology offers a conceptual lens for understanding the complexity, ambiguity, and instability embedded in ecological issues. Further development of ecological philosophy thus calls for incorporating social and political factors to build a more comprehensive and practically relevant response to global ecological challenges.

Comparative Analysis

Both frameworks demand a radical reconsideration of human-environment relations, yet they begin from different premises and stress different aspects. The discussion that follows develops the comparison by first identifying their main points of overlap and then tracing the lines along which their arguments part company. In this regard, a number of common commitments can be discerned in deep ecology and dark ecology.

To begin with, both frameworks advance a critique of anthropocentrism. They call into question the belief that humans occupy the central position in reality and that the non-human

world exists chiefly for human ends. In Naess's deep ecology, this critique appears as a direct value claim: every living being has intrinsic significance, irrespective of its usefulness to humans (Naess, 1989). Morton's dark ecology develops this idea along a different line, emphasizing that humans are not detached onlookers of "nature" but are already enmeshed within it, so that the boundary between human and non-human is neither clear-cut nor stable (Morton, 2016).

Second, both perspectives insist that the more-than-human world possesses value that cannot be reduced to serving human interests. In deep ecology, this is expressed through the principle of biocentric equality: every living organism has an equal claim to live and develop (Naess, 1973). Dark ecology approaches the question not as a ranking of living beings but as an ontology of entanglement, emphasizing the interweaving of all components of ecological reality – including non-living elements such as mountains, rivers and the atmosphere, as well as diffuse entities described as hyperobjects (Morton, 2013).

Third, Naess and Morton alike maintain that the current ecological crisis is too profound to be resolved through small, incremental changes; it requires a radical shift in how we conceptualise the world. Deep ecology advocates an ecocentric mode of awareness in which the more-than-human world becomes a core reference point for ethical decisions and everyday behaviour (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Dark ecology, in turn, calls for abandoning comforting illusions – such as belief in "pristine nature" or the myth of complete mastery over ecological systems – and demands that we confront the complexity, uncertainty and experiential "strangeness" of ecological entanglement (Morton, 2007).

Fourth, both perspectives propose ethical stances aimed at transforming humanity's relationship with the environment. Deep ecology highlights modesty, deference toward the more-than-human world, and the rejection of exploitative ways of treating nature (Naess, 1989). Dark ecology, in turn, stresses an ethics grounded in entanglement: since humans are woven into ecological networks, responsibility also covers the indirect and cumulative consequences of actions that might seem insignificant when taken separately (Morton, 2016).

At the same time, deep ecology and dark ecology diverge significantly, and these distinctions are just as crucial for grasping how each addresses the ecological crisis.

First, the two perspectives differ markedly in tone and overall orientation, often described in terms of optimism versus pessimism. Deep ecology tends to be more upbeat, maintaining that shifts in awareness and everyday practice can lead to a more harmonious form of coexistence with the more-than-human world (Naess, 1989). Dark ecology, by contrast, operates in a more somber key: Morton underscores the irreversibility of many ecological developments and urges a candid acknowledgment of this "darkness" as an inherent aspect of ecological reality (Morton, 2016).

Second, the two frameworks conceptualise interconnectedness in distinct ways. Deep ecology tends to describe interdependence in terms of an ideal of balanced, mutually sustaining coexistence among living beings (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Dark ecology, by contrast, treats relatedness as bound up with disruption, decay, and "strangeness," so that ecological ties appear more ambivalent and resist overly idealised readings (Morton, 2013).

Third, the two perspectives also part ways in their attitude to technology. Deep ecology tends to regard technology with mistrust, seeing it as a primary tool for dominating and exploiting the natural environment (Naess, 1989). Dark ecology, by contrast, does not treat technology as

something alien to “nature”; it views technological systems as another thread in the dense web of human and non-human relations that constitute ecological reality (Morton, 2016).

Fourth, the two perspectives vary in how far they go in offering concrete guidance. Deep ecology more readily converts its ethical principles into specific recommendations – reducing consumption, protecting biodiversity, and adopting ways of life oriented toward sustainability (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Dark ecology is more focused on philosophical analysis and cultural critique and, for this reason, its insights are less frequently expressed in the form of clear, action-oriented programmes (Morton, 2016).

These broad similarities and differences become clearer when the comparison is organised around several core analytical dimensions: the ontology of nature, the status of the subject, the grounding of ethics, the practical logic of ecological response, and the role of aesthetic and technological mediation. A comparative summary of these dimensions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of the Notions of “Deep Ecology” and “Dark Ecology”

| Aspect | Deep ecology | Dark ecology | Similarities | Differences |
|---------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Philosophical basis | Grounded in biocentrism, ecological egalitarianism and holistic thinking; attributes intrinsic worth to nature that does not depend on human utility | Informed by postmodern philosophy and object-oriented ontology; understands nature as opaque and non-orderly, with entities that exceed human perception | Both criticize anthropocentrism and affirm the nonhuman world as valuable in its own right | Deep ecology foregrounds unity and harmony; dark ecology highlights contingency, opacity and unpredictability |
| View of nature | Conceives nature as an interconnected, self-regulating whole oriented toward balance and stability | Sees nature as a domain of instability and disruption; rejects a comforting, romanticized image of “nature” | Both underscore that humans are entangled within broader ecological relations | Deep ecology stresses balance and integration; dark ecology stresses disturbance, ambiguity and ecological “strangeness” |
| Aim | To bring about ethical and practical reorientation toward ecological balance and respect for all living beings | To foster acceptance of ecological ambiguity and the unsettling character of the more-than-human world | Both call for a radical reconsideration of human–nature relations | Deep ecology posits harmony as a normative goal; dark ecology insists on dwelling with uncertainty rather than resolving it |
| Main approaches | Ecological activism, educational work, spiritual and ethical practice, and sustainable lifestyles | Philosophical critique and artistic/literary engagement with ecological crisis | Both seek to transform human consciousness and sensibilities in relation to the environment | Deep ecology gravitates toward concrete action programmes; dark ecology prioritizes critical, theoretical and cultural work |

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|------------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Critique of anthropocentrism | Denies human exceptionalism; regards humans as one species among others within a broader whole | Rejects human centrality while emphasizing ongoing separation and alienation from “nature” | Both oppose consumerist, human-centered conceptions of the environment | Deep ecology is overtly biocentric and integrative; dark ecology accepts irreducible distance and discomfort as integral to ecological awareness |
| Practical guidance | Advocates lowering consumption, safeguarding biodiversity, limiting ecological damage and reducing intrusive interventions | Encourages cultivating ecological awareness through reinterpretation, critique and aesthetic/philosophical engagement | Both aim to reconfigure human-environment relations for the better | Deep ecology proposes specific behavioural and policy-oriented measures; dark ecology offers interpretive frameworks rather than direct prescriptive guidance |

First, deep ecology and dark ecology start from different ideas about what “nature” is. In deep ecology, nature is typically understood as an interdependent, self-regulating whole whose wholeness can and should be safeguarded – and, at least partly, restored – through a change in human values and forms of life. From this angle, “nature” is not just a pool of usable resources, but a living community with intrinsic worth; ecological crisis is therefore seen as a breakdown of this community’s balance brought about by anthropocentric and consumerist lifestyles. Dark ecology, on the other hand, calls this conciliatory picture into question and treats “Nature” as a suspect construct that frequently masks real ecological situations with comforting images. For Morton, ecological existence is marked by insecurity, disruption and uncanniness: there is no pure, external realm to which humans might simply go back, because they are always already entangled in ecological and socio-technical networks. This difference becomes clear in a concrete case. When faced with a polluted city river, deep ecology would prioritize restoring ecological integrity – reducing emissions, repairing habitats and encouraging a view of the river as a living system deserving respect. Dark ecology, by contrast, would insist that any such restoration must also confront the river’s irreversible entwinement with infrastructure, industrial residues and ongoing pollution, rejecting narratives of a “return to pristine nature” and redefining responsibility as the task of learning to inhabit a damaged, hybrid world.

Second, these perspectives differ in how they conceptualize the subject and selfhood. In deep ecology, the self is understood as capable of expansion through identification, and ecological responsibility is grounded in self-realization, understood as a widening of one’s identity beyond a narrowly ego-focused sense of self. On this basis, moral motivation is framed in such a way that care for nonhuman beings is not merely a matter of external duty, but an expression of who a person becomes once they recognize their relational involvement in broader ecological wholes. Dark ecology, by contrast, does not rely on the ideal of a broadened, harmoniously integrated self. It proceeds from the assumption that humans remain, to some extent, alienated from ecological reality and cannot fully master or transparently comprehend the complex systems within which they are entangled. In this view, the self is not an agent who “merges” with nature,

but a participant situated in networks, whose perception and agency are limited, context-dependent and often accompanied by discomfort. This difference is visible in educational practice: a deep-ecological pedagogy might engage students in reflective exercises that cultivate identification with the more-than-human world – for example, sustained contact with local ecosystems or ethical consideration of consumption habits; a dark-ecological approach, in turn, would encourage students to confront ecological unease – recognizing how everyday practices are intertwined with climate processes, waste infrastructures and extended temporal horizons – without resolving that unease into a narrative of unity or purity.

Third, these positions also differ in how they shape ethics. Deep ecology proposes a normative framework based on intrinsic value and biocentric egalitarianism – the claim that all living beings have an equal right to exist and flourish – and from this basis formulates specific ethical guidelines. Here, ethics functions primarily as reorientation: its aim is to replace anthropocentric hierarchies with ecocentric forms of responsibility. Dark ecology, in turn, approaches ethics less as a set of distributive rules and more as a practice of coexistence within entanglement: responsibility arises from being caught up in processes that exceed one’s ability to control them or even to clearly delimit the “object” of one’s own actions, especially in relation to hyperobjects. A practical illustration brings out this difference. Faced with a consumer choice such as fast fashion, deep ecology frames the situation as a moral imperative to reduce harm – buying less, prioritizing durable products, and rejecting wasteful lifestyles. Dark ecology does not dismiss the importance of the consumer chain, but emphasizes that this chain is embedded in hyperobject-like formations – global greenhouse emissions, microplastic dispersion, cycles of toxic dyes – so that responsibility involves recognizing systemic entanglement and questioning comforting narratives about fully “clean” options, while still having to act within existing constraints.

Fourth, the difference between the two perspectives becomes especially clear when considering practice and activism. Deep ecology more readily translates its philosophical position into concrete courses of action, ranging from personal lifestyle changes to ecological education and engagement in ecological movements. It proceeds from the assumption that a transformed worldview can – and should – lead to definite protective and transformative measures. Dark ecology, by contrast, remains suspicious of “solutionist” orientations and of activist discourse that relies on reassuring narratives, such as the idea of “saving nature” understood as something outside of human society. Its practical influence is more indirect: it aims to reshape the conceptual and cultural lenses through which ecological crises are perceived and addressed, stressing that activism risks becoming merely symbolic if it ignores ecological ambiguity and immense spatial-temporal scales. A familiar activist setting makes this contrast more concrete. In a campaign against single-use plastics, deep ecology supports clear behavioral recommendations and policy objectives (eliminating plastics, reducing consumption, safeguarding marine ecosystems). Dark ecology does not dismiss such measures, but underscores that plastics are part of a wider hyperobject assemblage – petrochemical infrastructures, global supply chains, persistent pollution – so the campaign should avoid suggesting that a single ban “solves” the ecological problem and instead encourage a continued sense of responsibility for ongoing entanglements.

Fifth, the two views also differ in how they use language and in their aesthetic sensibilities, and this is not a superficial detail but part of their philosophical foundation. Deep ecology typically adopts a normative and ethical vocabulary that highlights intrinsic value, respect and ecological

harmony, often employing expressions designed to motivate moral commitment and ecological engagement. Dark ecology, by contrast, argues that standard moral and scientific discourse may be insufficient for articulating ecological reality, since such discourse frequently tames, simplifies or abstracts away complexity. Accordingly, Morton gives a central role to aesthetic and cultural forms – such as irony, ambiguity and the uncanny – as ways of rendering ecological entanglement both perceptible and affectively resonant. This difference is evident in public communication. Deep ecology may promote narratives that cultivate care and solidarity with living systems (for example, stories of community stewardship or reverence for biodiversity). Dark ecology, in turn, is more likely to support artistic and narrative strategies that confront audiences with the disquieting nearness of ecological crisis – for instance, works that show how climate change permeates everyday objects and routines – thereby shifting ecological awareness from a distant problem to an experienced condition of involvement.

Sixth, the disagreement also encompasses their attitudes toward technology. Within deep ecology, technology is often treated with suspicion, understood as a tool of domination and extraction that reinforces anthropocentric control and accelerates ecological degradation. From this standpoint arise appeals to reduce consumption, embrace simpler ways of living, and place strict limits on far-reaching technological interventions. Dark ecology, by contrast, rejects the idea that technology is merely an external layer imposed on an otherwise separate “nature.” For Morton, the very split between nature and technology belongs to ideological misrepresentation: technological infrastructures themselves function as ecological actors within the mesh, and their effects must be examined in a context where “pristine nature” can no longer serve as a fixed point of orientation. A policy debate around geoengineering illustrates this difference. Deep ecology typically emphasizes ethical caution and criticizes the hubris of attempting to exercise large-scale climatic control, instead promoting changes in behavior and social structures. Dark ecology likewise questions fantasies of mastery, but frames the discussion in terms of hyperobjects – recognizing that climate change already exceeds local measures and plays out across vast temporal spans, and therefore insisting that geoengineering be assessed as introducing further layers of entanglement rather than providing an external technological “fix.”

As indicated in Table 1, the distinction between deep ecology and dark ecology cannot be reduced to a straightforward opposition between optimism and pessimism. Each is based on a specific philosophical framework that determines how ecological reality is interpreted, how responsibility is grounded, and which forms of ecological response are viewed as most appropriate. Deep ecology tends to be more convincing when a clear normative framework is required, particularly when ecological thought is expected to offer ethical guidance, support motivation, and convert values into relatively concrete courses of action. Dark ecology, on the other hand, is especially relevant when ecological crisis is treated as a question of scale, obscurity and ambivalence, and when comforting narratives of harmony, purity and restoration need to be subjected to critical scrutiny.

Deep ecology and dark ecology offer significant lenses for understanding the ecological crisis. They share a common rejection of anthropocentrism and consumerist approaches to the more-than-human world, but they part ways in their philosophical premises and in the forms of practical orientation they propose. Taken together, these perspectives form a productive conceptual space for reimagining how humans might relate to – and exist within – the ecological conditions of the Earth.

Discussion

The comparison undertaken above shows that deep ecology and dark ecology are united by a common effort to displace anthropocentrism and to reconsider the place of the human within a more-than-human world. In both cases, ecological thought begins from the rejection of the assumption that nature exists primarily for human use. Deep ecology expresses this through the language of intrinsic value, biocentric equality and ecological self-realization, while dark ecology arrives at a related decentring of the human through the concepts of entanglement, strangeness and hyperobjects. In this sense, both approaches challenge consumerist and instrumental attitudes toward the environment and call for a profound transformation of ecological consciousness.

At the same time, the comparison also demonstrates that their shared anti-anthropocentric orientation should not obscure their deeper philosophical differences. Deep ecology remains committed to a holistic and ecocentric framework in which nature is understood as an interconnected whole possessing intrinsic worth and normative priority. Its ethical thrust is constructive and action-guiding: it seeks to cultivate respect, restraint and responsibility through a transformed sense of self and a more harmonious mode of coexistence. Dark ecology, by contrast, problematizes the very idea of “nature” as a stable or harmonious whole. Rather than grounding ecological thought in unity and balance, it emphasizes opacity, disruption and the inability of human beings fully to comprehend the systems in which they are entangled. As a result, its orientation is less programmatic and more diagnostic, foregrounding ambiguity and the limits of moral and conceptual mastery.

First, the difference between the two approaches is not simply one of tone, but of philosophical orientation. Deep ecology tends to preserve a normative image of ecological harmony and presents ecological crisis as a disruption of that balance that can, at least in part, be corrected through ethical and practical reorientation. Dark ecology resists this framing by rejecting the ideal of a recoverable harmony and insisting instead on the irreversibility, uncertainty and uncanniness of ecological reality. What is at stake here is not only optimism versus pessimism, but two distinct ways of understanding what ecological crisis is: for deep ecology, it is largely a crisis of values and relationships; for dark ecology, it is also a crisis of scale, representation and ontological insecurity.

Second, the divergence also concerns the status of the human subject. In deep ecology, the self can expand through identification and self-realization, so that moral concern for non-human beings becomes an expression of enlarged identity. This provides a strong motivational basis for ethical action, but it also presupposes the possibility of meaningful integration between human subjectivity and the more-than-human world. Dark ecology places this assumption under pressure by stressing that human beings remain only partially aware of the systems they inhabit and cannot overcome estrangement through a simple broadening of consciousness. From this perspective, ecological awareness does not culminate in unity, but in an often-unsettling recognition of complicity, limitation and dependency.

Third, the practical implications of these perspectives also diverge. Deep ecology lends itself more readily to activism, ecological education and behavioural change because it provides a clearer moral vocabulary and a more direct normative horizon. Dark ecology, on the other hand, offers fewer concrete prescriptions and instead contributes by unsettling familiar ecological

narratives, exposing the inadequacy of solutionist thinking, and drawing attention to the temporal and spatial scales of ecological crisis. This makes dark ecology especially valuable as a critical and interpretive framework, though at the same time it raises legitimate questions about how far aesthetic and philosophical insight can be translated into political or institutional practice.

For this reason, the value of comparing the two lies not only in registering their differences, but also in bringing to light the specific strengths and limitations of each. Deep ecology provides moral clarity, motivational energy and a more solid ground for practical engagement, yet it may seem overly idealised when faced with socio-political inequality, technological mediation and irreparably damaged environments that cannot realistically be returned to harmony. Dark ecology, on the other hand, is particularly effective in describing complexity, irreversibility and systemic entanglement, but it risks becoming politically unfocused if it remains confined to critique and aesthetic sensitivity.

As stated above, the data presented in the table demonstrate that the difference between deep ecology and dark ecology is not simply a matter of optimism and pessimism. Each approach is grounded in a distinct philosophical configuration that shapes how ecological reality is conceived, how responsibility is justified, and which modes of response are considered appropriate. Deep ecology tends to be most persuasive in contexts where a clearly defined normative horizon is required – where ecological reflection is expected to provide ethical orientation, sustain motivation, and translate values into relatively concrete lines of action. Dark ecology, by contrast, becomes especially salient when ecological crisis is treated as a problem of scale, opacity and ambivalence, and when it is necessary to scrutinize reassuring narratives that portray “nature” as harmonious, separate, and fully recoverable.

Seen from this angle, the two perspectives are more usefully read as complementary than as straightforwardly competing. Deep ecology supplies normative focus and motivational force: it clarifies why ecological concern carries moral weight and how value commitments can be converted into specific patterns of behaviour. Dark ecology, for its part, draws attention to the limits of representing ecological realities, to long temporal horizons, and to dense systemic interconnections that undercut comforting narratives and quick-fix solutions.

Taken together, they broaden the conceptual tools available for responding to ecological crisis. Deep ecology strengthens the ethical and practical dimensions of responsibility, whereas dark ecology highlights the complexity, uncertainty and ambivalence that characterize existence in a more-than-human world.

Although deep ecology and dark ecology propose different readings of nature and the ecological crisis, they can be seen as complementary rather than incompatible. Deep ecology formulates ethical principles and points toward concrete forms of ecological action, while dark ecology offers a conceptual lens for understanding the complexity, ambiguity, and instability embedded in ecological issues. Further development of ecological philosophy thus calls for incorporating social and political factors to build a more comprehensive and practically relevant response to global ecological challenges.

At the same time, their complementarity has clear limits. The two approaches do not collapse into a single coherent model, because they rest on irreducibly different views of nature, subjectivity, and responsibility. Taken together, they provide not so much a strict theoretical synthesis as a broader frame that allows firm normative commitments to coexist

with sensitivity to uncertainty, harm, scale, and entanglement. In the context of the ecological crisis, this combination is particularly important, since current ecological challenges demand both ethical guidance and a clear awareness that ecological reality cannot be reduced to simple notions of balance, purity, or control.

Conclusions

A comparison of deep ecology and dark ecology suggests that both mark important moments in the evolution of ecological philosophy, since each advances a far-reaching rethinking of the human–nature relation. Despite differences in their philosophical foundations and methods, they converge in their rejection of anthropocentrism and in their effort to break with consumerist patterns of engaging the environment. Yet the routes they outline toward that aim are not the same, and they diverge in several key respects.

Deep ecology, with its emphasis on harmony, biocentrism, and engaged practice, frames ecological renewal as a realistic and ultimately hopeful project. It calls for concrete commitment to ecological protection, reduced consumption, and recognition of the value of all living beings. Dark ecology, by contrast, emerging from postmodern currents, stresses the environment’s disorder, density, and ambiguity, and refuses any idealized picture of “nature.” Rather than offering a set of prescribed remedies, it sustains a philosophical and aesthetic confrontation with ecological crisis, foregrounding estrangement and the disturbing alterity of the more-than-human world.

These differences do not mean that one perspective outweighs the other. Instead, they can be read as complementary, widening the range of ways to respond to ecological challenges. Deep ecology offers practical guidance for reshaping everyday habits and modes of engagement with the more-than-human world, while dark ecology clarifies the complexity and indeterminacy of ecological processes – an insight that becomes especially important in the context of a global ecological crisis.

Both approaches deepen ecological discussion by insisting that humanity’s place in the natural world must be reconsidered. Read in combination, they can support a fuller grasp of ecological problems and encourage responses that join practical action with sustained philosophical reflection.

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