

# Ecological citizen!?

An ecological citizen is a citizen who is also ecological. Amen! We ought to be ecological citizens. But let's be more precise. An ecological citizen is a citizen who *resides in* an ecology. Can you be a *citizen of an ecology*? Exactly what we mean needs some analysis.

One is a citizen of a nation-state, and derivatively from that a more local citizen of a state such as California or Massachusetts, or of a city such as Los Angeles or Boston. You need a passport to leave and re-enter your nation-state. You must be a citizen to vote in elections, and you will be required to pay your taxes. You must be civilized, your nation-state is part of your culture. This is a different realm from that of your ecology. You can't be a citizen of a forest or a grassland. Or of the Earth. Or of the biosphere. They don't issue any passports.

Important people, thinking themselves too big just to be citizens of a nation-state, like to call themselves cosmopolitan. They wish to establish a *cosmopolis* or "world state" for all of humanity, and thus promote globalism and internationalism. Their cosmopolitan community might be based on a universal morality, shared economic relationships, or a political structure that encompasses different nations, like the EU. They want the nation-states to form relationships of mutual respect, despite their differing political, cultural, and religious beliefs and practices. But no one is a citizen of such a cosmopolis. These cosmopolites still need nation-state passports if they are to travel around their cosmopolitan Earth. Fortunately, whether nation-state or cosmopolitan, these are not the only ways for human beings to be 'citizens'.

Citizens, wherever they live, need 'eco-system services'. Ecosystem services are

the many and varied benefits that humans freely gain from the natural environment and from properly functioning ecosystems. These might be agroecosystems, forest ecosystems, grassland ecosystems or aquatic ecosystems. Nature is a world that runs itself, and all ecosystems need and provide water and air. They recycle materials, keeping soils fertile and oxygen and carbon dioxide levels at some equilibrium. Ecosystems supply these benefits to all the citizens of all nations, as well as to all the non-humans on Earth.

Rain falls from the skies. Carbon, oxygen, nitrogen and hydrogen – four of the elements most essential for life – are all provided in our atmosphere. One needs these endless flows of water-laden air, of oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide, if there is to be life on Earth. These goods are not provided by political or government sources, which may in fact do little to protect these freely provided vital benefits. Politics and government more typically pollute the atmosphere, the waters and the soils.

No government owns these ecosystems with their services. The air does not belong to any citizens of nation-states. The air we breathe today was in China last week, and will be in Europe next week. Half these atoms now incorporated into my body once floated in these skies above. The flow of water between Earth and sky determines the weather and the climate. Meteorology has turned out to be substantially more complex than anyone predicted. Weather has proved impossible to predict more than two weeks ahead because of the chaotic elements in the atmospheric system. Nevertheless natural systems have reliably provided weather and climate for many millennia. All this points to the imperative,

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### Citation

Rolston H III (2020) Ecological citizen!? *The Ecological Citizen* 3: 121–3.

### Keywords

Anthropocentrism; ecological ethics

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beyond political citizenship, to become ecological citizens as well. Our sustainable future depends on it.

Ecological citizens do have a major worry, namely, the rise of the Anthropocene enthusiasts. These are gung-ho cosmopolites, dominantly in the wealthy nations, that now seek to re-engineer the planet with an ecology that (so they claim) suits us better. By recent accounts human dominance is so extensive that Earth has entered a new age, the Anthropocene epoch. The mental activities of humans reshaping their agentive capacities physically to re-build their landscapes has produced technological developments giving humans vast powers for transforming ‘their’ planet through agriculture, industry, and technology. This has so dramatically escalated that we have entered the first century in life’s history on Earth in which one species can aspire to manage the planet’s future.

Human-dominated ecosystems today cover more of Earth’s land surface than do wild ecosystems. Agriculture, construction and mining move more earth than do the natural processes of rock uplift and erosion. Humans are now the most important geomorphic agent on the planet’s surface: “Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary terra incognita” (Steffen *et al.*, 2007: 614).

Beyond the geology, ‘Anthropocene’ has become an ‘elevator word’, and put to philosophical use to promote the human shaping and management of planet Earth. A recent cover story of *The Economist* opines that “the challenge of the Anthropocene is to use human ingenuity to set things up so that the planet can accomplish its 21st century task.” The report envisages “10 billion reasonably rich people” on a geo-engineered Earth overhauled for happy human consumers in centre focus (*The Economist*, 26 May 2011 edition: 11, 81). Relatedly, capitalist markets and the media celebrate increased fulfilling and expanding of human wants. The Anthropocene is “humanity’s defining moment,”

according to the American Geosciences Institute (Seielstad, 2012). “Humans are the ultimate ecosystem engineers” (Ellis and Ramankutty, 2009). According to the ultimate Anthropocene hyperbole, we are “the God species” (Lynas, 2011).

We have entered, so they claim, the era of the imperial human domain. “What we call ‘saving the Earth’ will, in practice, require creating and re-creating it again and again for as long as humans inhabit it” (Shellenberger and Nordhaus, 2011: 61). Humans are now “too big for nature.” “Let us embrace the challenge to gain mastery over human engagement with the earth” (Ellis, 2015). Enter the civilized designer world. Now the citizens, at least the wealthy and high-tech ones, propose to choose and build their re-vamped ecology, their ‘synthetic Earth’.

The editors of an earlier *Scientific American* special issue, ‘Managing Planet Earth’, anticipating current trends, asked “What kind of planet do we want? What kind of planet can we get?” (Clark, 1989). The management agenda included a host of planet-scale tasks: Find ways to redistribute rainfall, stop hurricanes and tsunamis, prevent earthquakes, redirect ocean currents, fertilize marine fisheries, control sea-levels, alter landscapes for better food production, and generally make nature more user-friendly. But these Anthropoceniacs may find many, even the majority of Earth’s residents, pushing back: Is our only relationship to nature one of engineering it to make it better for us?

Ecological citizens need and yearn for a sense of place. All peoples need a sense of ‘my country’, of their social communities amidst landscapes they possess in care and in love. The English love their countryside, the Scots their highlands and lowlands, the Swiss their Alps. South Africans love their fynbos. The Japanese treasure their Zen gardens. Taiwan is Formosa, the beautiful island. In China, Confucius taught that humans and nature ought to be in harmony, and for millennia the Chinese have cultivated their landscapes in ways that were integrated with the passing seasons and the rhythms of nature – those

ecosystem services. The promised land has been central in Hebrew faith.

Americans sing, with goose pimples, *America the Beautiful*. We love our landscapes: the Shenandoah Valley, the Chesapeake Bay, Cape Cod, the Great Lakes, the Ohio rivers, the Sierras, the Adirondacks, the desert South-West, the Pacific Northwest, the Rocky Mountains. Oklahomans sing: “We know we belong to the land, and the land we belong to is grand!” (from *Oklahoma!*). Montana takes its name from its mountains. West Virginia is the “mountain mamma” – and her offspring hate to see their mountaintops blown away.

Aldo Leopold famously urged us to “think like a mountain.” Beyond that, now we must think with the Earth. Leopold celebrated “a sense of kinship with fellow-creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise” (Leopold, 1969: 109, 129). This is the biology of ultimate concern. In this pivotal and turbulent time, we are traveling deeper into ethics than ever before, as more and more human beings respond to the urgent call for respecting all life globally. This Earth ethic sounds like ecological citizenship on lands we love, not re-engineering them to fulfil a domineering stance and escalating material preferences.

Part of the needed ethic does demand a constructed sense of place of social communities; but human beings also

need an embodied sense of residence on an ecological landscape. Ought not what we do in management of such places also be sensitive to values that are already ‘in place’ before we humans arrive to dwell there? Yearning for a sense of place is a perennial human longing, of belonging to a community emplaced on more-than-human landscape. That is, and should be, the desire of every ecological citizen. ■

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