



## **Ecozoic Ideas for the 21st Century**

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### **Preliminary Questions**

Does the term “ecozoic” add anything to “environmental” or “ecological”? Is it simply an identifier of those who have read and follow Thomas Berry’s work? Is it too difficult a term to promote given other terms, including environmental, ecological, ecological civilization and sustainable development? Does “ecozoic” have a meaning apart from referring to the “Ecozoic era”? Is it possible to think of an ecozoic movement? If so, is it an existing movement or one yet to be?

### **Observations about the Usage of “Ecozoic” in 2013**

Seldom will one find the term “ecozoic” used other than by those who have read and follow Thomas Berry’s work. Prior to Thomas’s death in 2009 there was a significant community of people numbering in the low thousands who had a relationship with Thomas, or a relationship with people who had a relationship with Thomas. With Thomas’s death and the passage of time, that community has lost its center. Going forward Thomas’s importance will be less dependent on his charisma and personhood and more dependent on the influence of his ideas.

One of Thomas’s key ideas was the Ecozoic era. The term “ecozoic” is used both to describe this era and also to identify actions, ideas, attitudes, and orientations that are part of the Great Work of bringing that era into being. The term, though known by many, has not gained wide usage. I performed a Google search under the term “ecozoic” on October 27, 2013, and only found three entries dated in 2013. These were 1) a new digital album titled “Ecozoic” by The Polish Ambassador;<sup>1</sup> 2) an article titled “The Ecozoic City” by John

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1. See <http://thepolishambassador.bandcamp.com/album/ecozoic> (accessed October 27, 2013). The website for this album makes no reference to Thomas Berry or the Great Work and gives no understanding of the album’s title “Ecozoic.”

Thackara;<sup>2</sup> and 3) various entries in the website:  
[www.ecozoictimes.org](http://www.ecozoictimes.org).

### **Importance of the Term**

Notwithstanding that the term ecozoic has not gained wide usage, my position is that the term is important for three reasons. First it is the only term that frames the ecological situation in terms of a change of geo-biological eras. When Thomas Berry coined the term, he made a prediction concerning the future that could not be supported by available evidence. He predicted that this time in history would be seen as the ending of the Cenozoic era (as the result of the disruption by humans of the systems that sustained life during that era and the mass extinction of many species) and the beginning of a new geo-biological era in which the role of humans will be central. If this is true, then the transition we are living through is without parallel in human history. Berry saw the resolution of this transition as an era of mutually enhancing relationships among humans and the larger community of life, but he saw this as a promise, not a certainty. Successfully navigating this transition would require tremendous effort, a work greater in scope than that which has ever been accomplished by humans. He called this the “Great Work” in which everyone is involved and from which no one is exempt.

The second reason I believe this term is important is because it names what is most distinctive about Earth as compared with any other reality of the universe of which we have knowledge. What makes Earth distinctive is life. Ecozoic comes from two words *oikos*, which means house and *zoikos*, which means of animals (*zoikos* is based on the Greek word *zoion* meaning living being). Thus ecozoic can be understood as meaning “house of life.” It is said that if Earth were the size of a table globe, the band of life on Earth would be no bigger than the lacquer on the globe. It is that fragile, it is that precious. Humans have always taken life for granted and have not had a sense that they could affect life on Earth on a large scale. Ecozoic calls people to be attentive to life, all of life. Earth is not just the place that has the right

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2. See <http://www.doorsofperception.com/locality-place/the-ecozoic-city/> (accessed October 27, 2013).

conditions for life, life on Earth creates the conditions for life.

The third reason I believe the term is important is that it calls attention to the role of humans and offers the promise of the continued flourishing of humans on Earth. For Thomas, humans are not an incidental feature of the planet and the loss of humans would not be an incidental loss. Thomas was both a humanist and a deep ecologist. In *The Great Work*<sup>3</sup> (*GW*) he wrote, “By bringing forth the planet Earth, its living forms and its human intelligence into being, the universe has found, so far as we know, its most elaborate expression and manifestation of its deepest mystery” (*GW*, 56). With regard to humans he wrote, “Human society in its beginnings would not have survived if it had not had some basic role to fulfill within the larger Earth community” (*GW*, 57). On the same page, he valued humans as “a mode of being of the universe, as well as beings within the universe.” He felt the role of humans with their special capacities was to celebrate the universe in a mode of conscious self-awareness (*GW*, 19). The current geological term “Anthropocene epoch,” calls attention to human impacts on Earth, but Ecozoic era means much more. It means a transformed human presence within the larger community of life.

### **Dimensions of the Ecozoic**

The remainder of this essay consists of an edited version of a paper that was originally published in 2002, with the title “Ecozoic Ideas for the 21st Century,” in the Center for Ecozoic Society’s *Ecozoic Reader*. That paper has also been available on the Center’s website as one of its Foundational Documents. It covered different dimensions of meaning of ecozoic and, also, an ecozoic movement.

### **Ecozoic: First Word in the New Dictionary**

As Thomas Berry has said, we need a new language. The first word in this new language would have to be “ecozoic.” As used by Thomas, “ecozoic” most often appears in conjunction with “era.” An “Ecozoic era” would be a period of mutually enhancing relationships among humans and the larger community of Life. “Ecozoic” would also be

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3. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).

used to refer to a geo-biological period in Earth's history succeeding the current Cenozoic era, which Thomas and others believe is coming to an end due to a mass extinction of species and alteration of Earth's geosphere, hydrosphere, biosphere, and atmosphere resulting from human disruption of natural processes. As such, the Ecozoic era does not yet exist and would only come into existence as a result of increased human awareness and conscious human choices. If appropriate choices are made, humans may yet live in an integral relationship with the Earth community. If they are not made, natural disasters will sweep over Earth radically altering life in ways that are unforeseeable, but are expected to severely diminish complex webs of life and render whole species and species groups extinct.

### **Ecozoic: A Particular Strand within the Environmental Movement**

Many writers describe several phases of the environmental movement. One was the conservation movement which began with John Muir at the end of the 19th century. The second was the anti-pollution/anti-toxin movement beginning with Rachel Carson, and the third was the ecological movement (lifestyle, biodiversity, sustainability, whole-systems thinking) that began in the 1980s. In this context ecozoic is an expansion and radicalization of what the environmental movement has become.

The ecozoic focuses on the role of the human in the ecosystem. Two thoughts in *The Great Work* define the ecozoic movement: This movement proposes that (1) the "central flaw" in human development is our "mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and [has bestowed] all rights on the humans" (*GW*, 4); and (2) "[t]he historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience" (*GW*, 159).

The term, the "Great Work," is widely used by people who follow Thomas's thought, but not often with specific reference to the two clauses above. I invite you to consider the proposition that clause two above, including the three means of carrying out the Great work—

critical reflection, story and shared dream experience, is the clearest statement of what the “Great Work” is, and that the central issue to be addressed in the Great Work is clause one.

### **Ecozoic: A Particular Strand within the Humanities**

Another proposition to consider is that what distinguishes the ecozoic movement from other environmental efforts is its emphasis on the humanistic dimension—on what it means to be human and on human culture. The ecozoic understanding is that the environmental crisis cannot be solved solely by addressing the human impacts on the environment or even by focusing on human behavior as regards the environment. The environmental crisis can only be resolved when there is a broad new cultural understanding of what it means to be human. The sources of this new understanding would be (i) myth, especially stories concerning the evolutionary development of the universe, (ii) spirituality, especially spirituality based on an understanding of the universe as the primary revelation of the divine, (iii) community, especially bioregional communities, (iv) dreams, archetypes of new modes of living such as those present in dreams, both awake and asleep, within an ecological context (it is in this way that the dream of the Earth that Thomas writes about becomes known to us), and (v) rational understanding and judgment informed by ecology as the foundation of learning where the ways of nature are understood as primary teacher, healer and law giver.

Along with Thomas’s work, the work of E. Maynard Adams is an important source of the needed new cultural understanding.<sup>4</sup> Adams has produced an extensive critique of the development of the modern mind and culture during the period beginning in the sixteenth century to the present. In his view, scientific naturalism (a/k/a scientific materialism or mechanistic science) became the guiding human philosophy. He argued that in scientific naturalism, existence is factually constituted and lacks a normative dimension. “Reality was understood as imposing factual limits on our will, limits that could be pro-

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4. Adams is the author of, among other books, *The Metaphysics of Self and World* (Temple University Press, 1991) and *A Society Fit for Human Beings* (SUNY Press, 1997).

gressively pushed back by advances in science and technology.”<sup>5</sup> With such a view, the quests for wealth and power became the overriding concerns of the human community, and the moral and meaning dimensions of humanity were subverted. In response to this situation, Adams called for a humanistic revolution.

Adams’s critique of modernity, his analysis of the distinctness and unique role of humans and his exposition of the humanistic categories of value and meaning are important for the success of the ecozoic movement. While Adams writes primarily about human affairs, his overarching argument is that the humanistic categories of value and meaning are part of the descriptive-explanatory structure of the universe. By establishing the philosophical basis for this position, he has provided grounding for ecozoic writing on the psychic-spiritual dimension of existence. Adams’s work is consistent with that of Thomas’s and he felt that Thomas in writing, for example, about “the dream of the Earth” or the “unfolding” of the universe story, used humanistic categories that are outside the range of the explanatory categories of scientific naturalism that so dominate the modern mind.

Adams’s work complements Thomas’s. Adams wrote at length about what it means to be human, he provided a philosophical anthropology. Thomas called for “re-inventing the human” at the species level and Adams’s work provided much insight into what this means. Adams’s critique of modernity and his philosophical argument for value and meaning categories are distinct and important. Both Thomas and Adams agreed that humans are the central problem in nature and on the importance of developing a new understanding of humans in relation to nature and of addressing the current ecological crisis.

### **Ecozoic as a Philosophical/Metaphysical Concept**

Thomas’s understanding of the nature of reality is dependent on several key concepts:

1. ***The Unity of the Universe.*** The universe as a whole is an interacting community of beings inseparably related in space

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5. *A Society Fit for Human Beings*, xvi.

and time. From its beginning, the universe has had a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical dimension. The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.

2. ***Modes of Expression.*** The universe expresses itself at all levels through communion (intimacy, interrelatedness), differentiation (diversity), and subjectivity (interiority, self-organization).
3. ***Cosmogensis.*** The universe is a creative, emergent, evolutionary reality that has developed and is still developing through a sequence of irreversible transformations.

The development and exposition of these understandings of the nature of reality are essential aspects of the ecozoic movement. This set of concepts has profound philosophical/metaphysical meaning. Teilhard de Chardin, drawing on his knowledge as a paleontologist, articulated these concepts. Another important, and philosophically more extensive exposition of these concepts, was given by Alfred North Whitehead. Thus I propose that the ecozoic movement would be constructively informed by Whitehead's process philosophy.

While I believe that these understandings of the nature of reality are very important, I also believe that, in the ecozoic movement, no one line of thought or set of understandings should become doctrine, not even Thomas Berry's. There are those who will disagree with the formulation of the nature of reality given above. For some these understandings are contrary to their understandings of emergence. Others may object on other grounds.

Right living (orthopraxy) is far more important to the ecozoic than right thinking (orthodoxy). Yet, as humans, our actions are influenced by our thinking. Therefore, as a movement, we cannot ignore dealing with our thinking, including those parts of our thinking that may be labeled "philosophical." Philosophy examines the basic presuppositions out of which humans operate and certainly those are in question and subject to examination and development in the move to the Ecozoic era.

## **Ecozoic as the Name of a Human Historical Period to Succeed the Modern Period and as a Positive Name for Constructive Post-Modernism**

The achievements of modernity are extremely significant—democracy, human rights, modern science, the industrial revolution, and so forth. The way to the future is through modernity. While some advocate returning to the past, there is probably no way back, if that were desirable, other than as a result of major catastrophes. Yet, the limitations of modernity are increasingly evident. Modernity is creating problems that modernity cannot solve. We need a perspective that is constructively post-modern.<sup>6</sup> The term “constructively post-modern,” however, lacks content. It simply says a constructive period beyond the modern. The term “ecozoic” gives positive meaning to constructive post-modernism and captures the idea that humans and other-than-human nature must move into the future together as a single community.

### **The Ecozoic Movement**

#### **The Ecozoic Movement as It Resembles the Modern Movement.**

We must think of the ecozoic movement as being like the Enlightenment or as the modern movement as a whole, which began in the 16th century. Hundreds of years and systematic development of key ideas were required for the modern movement to take full effect. We are now at the end of the modern period. A politician may say, without controversy, “We must protect freedom and democracy.” At the beginning of the 16th century, however, this mandate would have seemed strange. Here’s a short history of the philosophical journey from then to now:

By moderns we mean the intellectual and psychic inheritors of the civilizational movement, which began in the West but is now influential throughout the world, that began in the sixteenth century with (i) the scientific revolution initiated by Copernicus,

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6. Acknowledgment is due to David Ray Griffin of the Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California, for the term constructive post-modernism. It is the title of a series of books edited by him and published by SUNY Press.





1473-1543—the separation of theory from observable phenomenon; Galileo, 1564-1642—“the separation of physical science from philosophy, the abandonment of authority as a criterion of scientific truth, the distinction between objective and subjective qualities in observable phenomena and the introduction or reintroduction of empirical and skeptical elements into philosophical investigations”; Bacon 1561-1626—the father of the scientific method who separated metaphysics, as that which is concerned with final causes, and physics which was concerned with physical and efficient causes, i.e., cause-and-effect relationships based on the observed regularities of nature; and Isaac Newton 1642-1727—who established mechanistic science as the study of objects in motion where transformation in the natural world was based on the laws of locomotion with absolute space and time, and in doing so doing relegated metaphysics and God to the beginnings of the cosmos; (ii) the Protestant Reformation (1517) that separated individual consciousness and choice from metaphysically authoritative social systems; and (iii) the philosophical transformation led by René Descartes, 1596-1650, who separated human consciousness from the mechanistic natural world, and within the human, mind and spirit from body. From this beginning, and partly coincident with it, rose the modern nation state (Machiavelli, 1469-1527; Thomas Hobbes 1588-1679; John Locke 1623-1704 and secular historical developments) with the requirements of the state to maintain order, establish the public good, and defend human rights. This was followed by the Enlightenment in the late 17th and 18th centuries with the declaration of human rights (for example, Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, 1792), capitalistic enterprise (Adam Smith 1723-90), democracy (the American Revolution, 1776, and the French revolution, 1789), and the belief in progress (for example, the Marquis de Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, published in 1795 expressing “an extraordinarily optimistic utopia of indefinite progress toward... a doctrine of ‘natural salvation’—the attainment by everyone of immortality in this flesh on this earth”).<sup>7</sup>

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7. This summary is based on and the quoted passages are taken from essays appearing in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (McMillan 1967).

The ecozoic movement will require this same kind of effort and development through time. Because of the urgency of the ecological crisis, however, the time period must be reduced. This may be possible given modern communications. Still, it is important to note that historically a long time lapses, often centuries, between the early promotion of ideas and their broad inclusion in culture and human behavior. It is not clear how or whether such a transformation in culture can occur in a short time-period. An additional challenge is that the changes that are needed must occur on a global basis.

One leading commentator, David Orr, believes that the needed transition will take a long time. He writes:

The news about climate, oceans, species, and all of the collateral human consequences will get a great deal worse for a long time before it gets better. The reasons for authentic hope are on a farther horizon, centuries ahead when we have managed to stabilize the carbon cycle and reduce carbon levels close to their preindustrial levels, stopped the hemorrhaging of life on Earth, restored the chemical balance of the oceans, and created governments and economies calibrated to the realities of the biosphere and to the diminished ecologies of the postcarbon world. **The change in our perspective from the nearer to the longer term is, I think, the most difficult challenge we will face.** We have become a culture predicated on fast results, quick payoffs, and instant gratification. But now we will have to summon the fortitude necessary to undertake a longer and more arduous journey. Rather like the builders of the great cathedrals of Europe, We will need stamina and faith to work knowing that we will not live to see the results.<sup>8</sup>

The point here is that the ecozoic movement is, in part, a movement to deal with immediate environmental problems, but, more broadly, it is a movement based on ideas that will be developed and taught with great care and effort over a long period of time. Probably most of the ideas for the transition to the Ecozoic era came into being in the 20th century. They have not, however, been put in the service

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8. David Orr, *Down to the Wire: Confronting Climate Collapse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiii (emphasis added).



of a guiding and unifying vision. A catchword or meme is needed, like “democracy!” or “freedom!” for which we can hoist a banner, fly a flag, and march off into the fray. The term “ecozoic” could be such a catchword or meme. Its use can weave strands of thought into a broad historical movement with a transformative set of ideas.

### **The Ecozoic as a Religious Movement**

Probably the greatest parallel to what would be needed to bring the Ecozoic era into being is a religious movement, like the movements attendant to the birth and spread of the classical religions, Hinduism, Daoism, Judaism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam and others, and of the indigenous traditions before and after these religions.

Thomas believes we are being led by the dream that gave form to the universe, the dream of the Earth. He and others also believe we are hearing the cry or voice of the Earth. Thus, Thomas also speaks about a “metareligious movement” (*GW*, 85). In so doing, he is not talking about a new creed or set of practices. He is referring to a universal awakening to Earth as a single, sacred community of being. It is by means of such a metareligious movement that a rapid transformation of culture will occur, if at all. Such a breakthrough may be coming into being in a million, often confusing and divergent and sometimes disconcerting, ways—from eco-tourism, to the new paganism and goddess worship, to blessings of animals and animal rights...to conservation movements and the widespread interest in gardening, especially organic gardening, and natural living. Anselm thought of Christian theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Perhaps the ecozoic is the awakening to the dream of the Earth seeking understanding.

### **The Ecozoic Movement as a Transformation of Human Civilizational Presence**

“Ecozoic” has special meaning when used in conjunction with society or societies. Ecozoic societies are human societies based on organic understandings of nature, rather than mechanistic or extractive/use understandings. The transition to ecozoic societies will involve changes in government, business and education, the arts, religion... changes in all aspects of human societies.

## **The Ecozoic Movement as Environmental Movement**

In the end we return to the ecozoic movement as an environmental movement. Throughout the coming into being of the Ecozoic era and in its full manifestation, a fundamental concern of the ecozoic movement must be the health of non-human species and natural processes. Action to this end will include pollution control, preservation of natural areas and many other things, and will be accomplished through protest, remediation and transformational activity. Each of these activities is an important part of the ecozoic.

### **Summary**

In this essay I have reviewed current usage of the term “ecozoic,” a term coined by Thomas Berry. It is not widely used, yet I argued for its importance based on its connotations that 1) we humans are, for the first time, living in a transition of geo-biological periods, a disturbance not just of human history but of the functioning of the planet itself; 2) we must attend to life as the most precious aspect of Earth, and 3) we humans have a special role in the care of life.

I reviewed different dimensions of the ecozoic: first word in the new dictionary, a strand within the environmental movement, a strand within the humanities, a philosophical/metaphysical concept, and the name of a human historical period to succeed the modern period and a positive name for constructive post-modernism.

And I looked at the ecozoic as a movement: one like the modern movement, a religious movement, a transformation of human civilizational presence, and finally an environmental movement.

The Great Work is the work of bringing into being the Ecozoic era. The term “ecozoic” identifies both the Ecozoic era and actions and directions of the Great Work. With these understandings I discussed how “ecozoic” may be a catchphrase or meme for a guiding or unifying vision of the future.

The Center for Ecozoic Societies, of which I currently serve as President, recognizes that ecozoic may be a difficult term to introduce and thus far has spread only a little. Yet we of this center believe that no other word contains the breadth of meaning and relevance of the ecozoic. From the very beginning of this association, we have listed as our first task: “To provide education concerning the “Ecozoic era”

and the “Great Work,” so that these terms and their meanings may become part of the global lexicon.

What else could we do, what else could ecozoans do, that would make such a difference?