

Ecozoic = Within the Community of Life-Systems: Taking Thomas at His Word

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We must consider ourselves in these early years of the twenty-first century as also experiencing a threatening historical situation, although our situation is ultimately beyond comparison with any former period in Europe or in Asia. For those peoples were dealing with human adjustment to disturbances of human life patterns. They were not dealing with the disruption and even the termination of a geobiological period that had governed the functioning of the planet for some 67 million years. They were not dealing with anything comparable to the toxins in the air, the water, and the soil, or with the immense volume of chemicals dispersed throughout the planet. Nor were they dealing with the extinction of species or the altering of the climate on the scale of our present concern.

—Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 10

Nor were they dealing with an economic system that had rendered them dependent on it for every necessary good and service, had addicted them to unnecessary goods and services, had spent down much of the natural capital that would allow them to become self-dependent again, and had in the process become too big *not* to fail because it had “failed to align its functioning with the functioning of the planetary forces”—those old-beyond-comprehending geobiological forces—“on which it depends.” (157)¹

We *are* dealing with these things. Or rather we are failing to deal with them, which has led to what Thomas described understatedly as “extensive disarray.” (3)

Articles and papers in recent issues of *The Ecozoic Reader* and *The Ecozoic* have explored and expanded on Thomas Berry’s summation in *The Great Work* of our current status as a dominant species exceeding the capacity of a finite planet to support it. They have positioned us at

1. Page references are to Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999)

the end of what Thomas called “the terminal phase of the Cenozoic Era.” Whether Thomas intended it to be or not, that “terminal” is a double entendre. It signifies a termination that may prove fatal to most humans and many other species.

I doubt that most of us have really internalized what it means for all of us and future generations that, along with the prevailing economic system, the political, social, energy and natural systems that most of us rely on for our existence are in serious decline and vulnerable to collapse. Heads of “governments, corporations, universities and religions” clearly have not internalized this. They remain committed to business as usual and perpetual growth economics and therefore remain “committed consciously or unconsciously to a radical discontinuity between the human and the nonhuman,” and between the human and too much reality. (4)

The fact that despite the best efforts of hundreds of visionaries, writers, prophets, futurists, scientists, systems analysts and social critics over several decades, we have *not* internalized these things is preventing us from making the dramatic systemic changes we need to make in order to slow or halt the decline and prevent the collapse. Tweaking the systems and symptoms that brought us to this pass will not suffice, though that’s as much as the world’s leaders are so far willing to attempt, and apparently as much as the people are willing to demand or accept. Tweaking systems and symptoms piecemeal, as if they were not inextricably connected, will continue to worsen some conditions while seeming to address others.

So our task in this issue of *The Ecozoic* is to think beyond tweaking, to begin to lay out a vision of—or more precisely a protocol, blueprint or curriculum for—the Ecozoic. We are called upon to say what we think “Ecozoic” means, what behaviors, systems, principles and practices might manifest an ecological era, a future in which, in Thomas’s terms, “humans become present to the planet in a manner that is mutually enhancing.”

Thomas’s Word

The word Thomas Berry coined for what should come after the Cenozoic gives us a clue as to what the late master geologist believed would constitute an ecological age. “Ecozoic” means Earth’s life, life



on Earth. In the Ecozoic, we are to put Earth's life—the continuation and continuity of life on Earth—first. Everything else is subsidiary. Failing to make everything else subsidiary leads, inevitably, in due course, to catastrophe.

But more particularly we are to put first life as it has evolved without our help or hindrance through most of the now-imperiled Cenozoic. For life is not any more at risk than it was when the great reptiles went extinct 67 million years ago at the end of the Mesozoic era. Life will go on. Life as we know it may not. A biosphere we can live with is what's at risk. For this reason I define "Ecozoic" this way:

eco = home, home planet, Earth

zoic = life

Ecozoic = supportive of life on Earth, preferably life as we know it

For us to live, produce, consume and organize ourselves in ways that would be supportive of life as we know it would mean, in Thomas's framing of it, learning how to make our lives both *with* other-than-human beings and "*within* the community of living-systems" they create, maintain and govern together.

This is significant. Thomas is not proposing, as many others have, that we simply take other-than-human species, natural communities and ecosystems into account. He's not advocating for merely accommodating them, allowing a few more of them to live in our fields and forests and waters, inviting a few more of them into our towns and cities, planting a few more of them along our sidewalks and medians and in clear cuts and vacant lots. He is not counseling us simply to minimize our trespasses or include living systems and their inhabitants in our considerations, which we might well be able to do whilst still growing the now-viral global economy.

Thomas states unequivocally that if the human species is to persist, humans must learn to live, not just in less harmful proximity to, but actually *within* the community of living systems. By inference, for us to succeed in living within the community of living systems we will need to live, produce, consume, relate to each other and the worlds around us, and organize and govern ourselves in ways that are like life's ways of doing those things. We will need to engage in biomim-

icry on a comprehensive scale. To do so would be authentically *ecological* and would lay a foundation for the Ecozoic. “We can do very little” Thomas advises, “until we have some idea how the life systems of Earth function in producing the food and shelter and energies we need” and by extension how they organize and comport themselves in order to be able to produce food, shelter and energy despite the inevitable vicissitudes. (93)

“Ecozoic,” by implication, means not just life supportive but also *lifelike*. Life itself would seem to offer the proper context and model for the Ecozoic.

Let’s consider these two premises separately.

(1) What is Lifelike?

It would seem, if I understand Thomas correctly, that to ask “What is Ecozoic?” is to ask “What is lifelike?”

What does Thomas suggest are some of the aspects of lifelike life-ways? Thomas and Brian Swimme make it plain in *The Universe Story*, that diversity, subjectivity and communion—bonding and interdependence—are chief among them. But Thomas offers several other clues that get us even closer to the heart of Ecozoic as follows (emphases added):

In recent times what industrial civilizations have failed to realize is *that in the particular place of their dwelling*, the well-being of Earth was a necessity for their own well-being and fulfillment. (88-89)

Now, however, we need a much more comprehensive type of understanding and a more extensive human *adaptation to the various bioregional contexts* of our dwelling. (93)

The study of Earth *and its regions* becomes more critical. Economic geography needs to discover where the living resources of Earth are located in each bioregion, how abundant are these resources, how they are best sustained in their capacity for unlimited renewal. (94)

When we hear corporations speak of “feeding the world” as a global enterprise, we can only reflect that *feeding themselves belongs to each local community*. It belongs to any people to be



intimately related to the region of their dwelling. The land and all its living components nourish each other under the all-sustaining guidance of natural forces that bring us together, sustain us in being, and guide us to fulfillment *of our diverse roles* in the larger pattern of the planet on which we live. (134-135)

The people of the world need the assistance of each other, but only such assistance that enables them to *fulfill their own responsibility for doing the essential things themselves*. Village peoples everywhere, indeed all of us, need assistance within the pattern of our own inventive genius. (135)

As regards economics we need not simply a national or a global economy but *local subsistence economies* where the [various] human groups become acquainted with the other species in the local bioregion. (160)

I would argue with Thomas only on one matter. Thomas was well aware that both national economies and the global economy are extractive, extravagant and, if unchecked, unsustainable. “An extractive economy is by its very nature a terminal economy.” (138) (There’s that word again!) Like the human immunodeficiency virus that puts itself out of business along with the body it kills, the viral global economy—a global economy cannot be other than viral—bids fair to put itself out of business and us and Earth’s immune system of natural communities with it.

Both national economies and the global economy into which they have been absorbed have proven themselves to be unwise and probably incapable of wisdom, whether the wisdom of experience or the revealed and encultured “wisdom of the classical traditions.” (185) On that account, I think that if Thomas were still alive and given all that has transpired in the decade and more since he wrote *The Great Work*, we might be able to persuade him to leave global and maybe even national economies out of that final sentence so that it would read “As regards economics we need local and regional subsistence economies where the [various] human groups become acquainted with the various species in the local bioregion.”

Aside from that national/global reference, Thomas made the case in these excerpts for (a) what others call localization or, since all econ-

omies were local until the industrial period—relocalization, and (b) substantial local-regional eco-literacy and self-reliance. This economic—or more accurately, *eco-nomic*—vision is profoundly *eco-logical* and therefore fundamental to our framing and manifestation of the Ecozoic. Economies, and by extension governance, in an Ecozoic period would be, to the extent possible or necessary, place-based. Every *eco-zoic* human community would be as unique as every natural community, *eco-system* and *bio-region* is. This was the wisdom, or at least the way, of indigenous peoples who lived first of necessity and later by choice “within the community of living systems.”

If Earth is a place in the larger community of celestial objects (the universe) on which the “numinous presence” has become both conscious and conscious of itself, then—taking it down a level—each of the places in which we dwell and make our lives within the larger community of places on Earth (the biosphere) may be where we can become most conscious of ourselves as expressions of that presence. Diversity, subjectivity and communion were first and are most effectively practiced at the local and regional scale. The biosphere, Earth’s life—the Ecozoic—comes into being one location, ecosystem, and region at a time, all of them at the same time.

Thomas would seem to have suggested this when he wrote:

Earth, we might say, is a single reality composed of a diversity beyond all understanding or description. This diversity in its arctic and tropical regions, its oceans and its continents, in its mountains and valleys, its forests and deserts, its rivers and their floodplains, all give to Earth both its endless wonder and its functional integrity. These landscape features and these living forms have come into being as some self-woven tapestry or some self-composed symphony or some self-designed painting. To experience this wonder and enter into *intimate relations with the various life communities of these regions* seems to be the high purpose of human presence on Earth.” (86-87)

(2) Life as the Proper Context for Envisioning the Ecozoic

For two billion years bacteria were the only living things on Earth. Each bacterium was an entity unto itself, but together, in inconceiv-



able numbers, they were the dominant species and their economy was fiercely competitive and genuinely global. Three times in that two-billion-year period they almost put themselves out of business. After they had induced a global energy crisis, a climate crisis and a worldwide pollution crisis, they caught on. They gave up economic globalization. They downsized, diversified, localized, balanced competition with cooperation, and got organized. In effect, they went local. In the process of evolving a set of universally adaptable *economic* rules for living within Earth's means, they created life's first *ecological*, Earth-smart economies.

Ecologists, eco-economists, Earth scientists, biologists, complex-systems theorists and others are constantly adding to our understanding of those rules. I offer a simplified synthesis of them here, adapted from my book, *Life Rules*.²

Elements of a Protocol for an Ecozoic Era: A Ten Commandments of Sustainability

1. Ecozoic economies would waste nothing and produce no waste they cannot consume or sequester.
2. They would run directly or indirectly on inexhaustible forms of energy, primarily solar energy.
3. Ecozoic economies would be relatively equitable, common-good economies.
4. The basic units of economic activity in an Ecozoic Era would be locally/regionally self-reliant, interdependent, mixed-species communities.
5. Ecozoic communities would organize, regulate and govern themselves within limits set by their environments and the needs of the larger communities of which they are a part.
6. They would exchange information—the one appropriately globalized natural asset—and pool intelligence in real time.
7. They would distribute leadership according to task.
8. In hard times, ecozoic economies would cut back.
9. Ecozoic communities would operate in ways that are organi-

2. Ellen LaConte, *Life Rules: Nature's Blueprint for Surviving Economic and Environmental Collapse* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers 2012), 134.

cally democratic.

10. Ecozoic communities would seek economic stability rather than perpetual growth and expansion.³

To adopt these rules, I suggest, would be to fulfill Thomas's preliminary vision of the Ecozoic and do the Great Work.

Realism and Resilience

The singular strength of life's methods of living within Earth's means is that they operate in real time, responding to challenges, changes and crises on the ground, where they are. Other-than-human species and the systems they co-create to support themselves are profoundly realistic. This, and the protocol life has evolved over the past two billion years since bacteria induced the third of their global economic crises—which taken together, were equivalent to our present all-encompassing one—make living systems resilient.

Already in the years since Thomas offered his vision of “ecozoic” our circumstances have changed to the extent that we have many fewer human and natural resources to work with. Every day, month and year that we cling to the status quo, we spend down more of what we would need to make a congenial transition to an Ecozoic era, perhaps to make that transition at all. Looking forward from the end of his life Thomas could say fairly that “we have been given the intellectual vision, the spiritual insight, and even the physical resources we need for carrying out the transition that is demanded of these times. . .” (11).

We still have the vision, or at least the visionaries, and we have the insight or at least the possibility of it. Very soon we will not have the resources. Any vision we advance of the Ecozoic must take into account the reality of what on Earth remains, what the circumstances are in the place where the end of the Cenozoic finds us.

3. The concept “organic democracy” is developed extensively and given a context in living systems in *Life Rules*.