

Eden in the Service of Humanity

(Misnamed: "The Ecology of Eden")

By Evan Eisenberg

Reviewed by [J. Stan Rowe](#)

First came the doom-sayers proclaiming the death of Nature and then, in reaction, the technologic optimists poo-pooing prophecies of imminent environmental disaster. Inevitably the extremes invited a somewhere-in-between view, and this Evan Eisenberg has provided in his book, **The Ecology of Eden** (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1998, 632 pages). It is a critique and synthesis of the contrasting beliefs of those who think humans are controlling the planet too much, and those who believe environmental problems signal insufficient control.

The book is important because, with philosophic and religious undertones, it illuminates in a very modern way the ancient question: How can humanity live well in this world?

Eisenberg's central proposition is that humanity needs to nurture, geographically and psychologically, both the wild and the civilized. Wild nature is the source of life; it is "Eden" as exemplified in wilderness areas. The civilized is the source of culture, exemplified by large cities with their cultivated artifacts and activities. Arcadia is the in-between state, half wild and half civilized, people's attempt to have it both ways.

Can we in the Western culture bring it off?

Eisenberg thinks we can and he pins his faith on sweet reason. He does not challenge traditional values and apparently assumes that, on their foundation, we can think our way out of present and future environmental crises. We do not necessarily have to live poorer, he says, just smarter. Thus the book implies that appropriate political and economic action will result once humanity's needs for both wild nature and tame culture are widely recognized.

Is there a misconception here that society's main motivating force is reason? What about the subtle promptings of conventional faiths and values, the legacy of non-ecocentric philosophers and theologians? Are they not powerful in determining how, if at all, we balance the wild and the civilized?

Eisenberg does not dig down to expose these underpinnings of thought and action, perhaps because he is too busy defending their source. He is particularly upset by the notion that the old biblical texts have justified humanity's war on the world.

Ever since Lynn White Jr. in 1967 attributed "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" to the Judeo-Christian tradition, theologians have been frantically searching for ecological needles in scriptural haystacks. In joining the searchers, Eisenberg turns up interesting but irrelevant odds and ends, such as: Hebrew monotheism inspired a faith in nature's harmony; the biblical Hebrews were not nature-haters and they had, in von Humboldt's words, a "profound sentiment of love for nature;" a good deal of animism persists in the Bible; and although God is not in nature He is to nature as Shakespeare is to The Tempest (the designer-from-the-design argument).

Such facts and theories are beside the point. The virtues of religions do not compensate for their deficiencies any more than a criminal wins pardon on the evidence that he has always been kind to his mother. In one way or another all faiths have sponsored a war on the Ecosphere. No religions challenge agriculture: the earliest and still the major battle field where ecodiversity and biodiversity are the adversaries. No religions challenge human population over-growth, a fundamental sin against the rest of creation.

Casting about for arguments that might take the heat off theologies-in-general, many have confuted White's thesis with the happy thought that Sumerians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Buddhists, Hindus, Taoists, as well as Aboriginal Peoples, have mistreated their wild lands (along with wild animals and/or their domestic animals) as badly as adherents of the revealed religions. If everybody has done it, from the beginning of recorded history, surely religious faiths are not to blame for ecological misconduct.

In all this scrambling to justify the unjustifiable the point is overlooked that religions--ancient and modern, whether Western, Eastern or in-between--are necessarily unecologic because they are human-centered. That fact controls their form and function and their inability to change. Their primary concerns are Man (in the gendered sense) and, by paternal extension, God (or gods), usually involving some form of covenant or salvational bargain. Their chief value, of undoubted merit for our species, is their teaching of justice and mercy toward each other. Religious scriptures are sociological texts focused narrowly on the spiritual and material welfare of humanity. Ecological texts they are not, nor were they ever meant to be.

Were religions ecologic at their roots, they would be focused outward on the Ecosphere: the surrounding reality that evolved humans, surrounds humans, sustains humans, and includes humans along with 30 million other organic species. They would have a penetrating vision of this nurturing Earth as senior partner, with people as junior partner. They would take seriously the Judaic insistence on the importance of survival in the here-and-now through a regimen of plain living, rather than carelessly eating up the Earth while obsessing about such fantasies as original sin, reincarnation, and soul-salvation in a fancied hereafter. Eden-wildernesses would be the recognized creative centers, and the humanized surroundings would daily pay tribute to them.

Typical of intellectuals, Eisenberg is homocentric, not ecocentric. The accurate title of his book should be "Eden in the Service of Humanity" rather than "The Ecology of Eden." Two selections reveal his leanings. It is a shade ironic, he says, that neopagans have taken up the Gaia hypothesis (Earth as alive) for it restores the faith in nature's harmony that moved the great Christian ecologists: von Humboldt, Gilbert White, Louis Agassiz, George Perkins Marsh. Indeed, he continues, in its pop form the Gaian faith is as monotheistic as Moses' (faith). "It merely shifts metaphysical gears (from transcendence to immanence) and changes gender." The adverb "merely" is hardly the appropriate descriptor for recalling divinity to Earth and rescuing it from patriarchy!

A second example is approval of Hasidic master Simcha Bunin of Pzhysha's advice to carry two slips of paper, one in each pocket, reading: "For me the world was made" and "I am but dust and ashes." The second slip is demonstrably true but the first, for any student of cosmology, geology, evolutionary biology and ecology, is laughable nonsense. Yet it expresses the common view of humanity's extraordinary importance in the eyes of God. It is repeated, for example, in the 1994 Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II as he explained the significance of the year of Jubilee: "If in his providence God had given the earth to humanity, that meant that he had given it to everyone; therefore the riches of creation were to be considered as a common good of the whole of humanity."

Neither ecology nor any other rational field of knowledge offers evidence that Earth was made for the pleasure of humanity and gifted to us. The idea that only people matter is absurdly arrogant. How on Earth can humanity value, cherish, and let-be the wildness of this planet without renouncing as ridiculous these and related value-propositions that motivate much of Western culture?

In Eisenberg's view, large swatches of wilderness ought to be preserved for purely utilitarian reasons, to serve humanity, rather than valued and protected so that they can evolve according to their four-and-a-half-billion-year nature for another term of equal length. His focus, narrow and short-term, is on people and little else, as if here and now *Homo sapiens* is the ultimate end-point and pinnacle of evolution.

And so, with luck, people will preserve some small fraction of the entire globe (while humanizing and plundering the greater part) because that is likely to keep their cities alive and themselves healthy. Thus the common opinion, stated several times in Eisenberg's text, that nature offers humanity no ends, only means to whatever ends we choose.

The message is selfish: Eden is to be preserved because of its pay-off--clean air, clean water, gene pools--for the one species deemed to be God's special pet. Other-than-human Nature will not be cared for because it is inherently valuable, an end in itself, offering itself as a worthy colleague for human collaboration. No imaginative glimmering appear in this book as to what Earth might produce in the way of sensitive, emotive intelligence if humans and post-humans decided to partner with Earth and let it lead, say for the next 5 million years: a mere fifth of one percent of its remaining time span!

The fundamental cause of global ecological disaster is homocentrism, and the best environmental ethic the homocentric faiths have been able to muster is stewardship as defined in the Genesis text: "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." Stewardship puts humans firmly in charge as dressers and keepers, as managers tending Earth's assets in such ways as keep the goods flowing for the one preeminent species, perhaps saving a bit but only because it may be useful some rainy day. Eisenberg is a steward in the Planet Managers camp, not overly concerned with pressing problems of human over-population, economic over-growth, and city-based despoliation of the Ecosphere.

Stewardship fails as the guardian of Eden and Arcadia because, sooner or later, those in political power lack the good sense to see ahead, or are forced by hard times to liquidate Earth's "resources" for the gratification of the moment. Humans fixated on their own welfare, whether on their bodies in this world or their souls in the next, cannot help but be injurious to the rest of Creation. History shows that, rather than gratefully accepting the golden eggs, people have again and again killed the fabled goose for the best of all reasons: to make busy-work jobs, to make a minority rich, to satisfy frivolous wants far beyond the provision of necessities. The message is writ large in the current

economic system that discounts the future and encourages grabbing what you can, because "For me the world was made" and I want my slice of it right now.

Clearly a new faith is needed, a faith in other-than-human Creation, a faith in planet Earth, the Home-globe, the Eco-sphere. It has sponsored the emergence of primates and then humans, bringing the latter to their present self-conscious state. It is the source of life and of creativity.

The beginning and the ending, at least for humanity, is right here in this palpable matrix of air-water-soil: our inspiration and our expiration. Call it the Ecospherics Faith, a New Animism, a New Pantheism, Ecotheism, Hylotheism, Hylozoism, Theological Naturalism, or whatever, as long as it places the source of spiritual values in Earth from which we came and to which we all return.

[Other Ecocentric Texts](#)