POLITICAL THEORY

Ecologism

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • June 16, 2026 • 7 min read

Ecologism, frequently referred to as Green Political Theory, has been recognized as a distinct ideological tradition since the 1970s. The ideology's development is largely attributed to three main theoretical shifts: the rise of an ecocentric worldview, a critical focus on anthropocentrism (human-centered bias), and the emergence of "deep" ecology.

The term "ecology" was coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in his 1866 work, *German Morphology*. By the 1960s, the burgeoning green movement began adopting the term for political use. As a political ideology, ecologism is grounded in the belief that the non-human world is deserving of moral consideration and must be integrated into our social, economic, and political systems.

Several foundational texts were instrumental in drawing public attention to the developing ecological crisis:

- Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is widely considered the first major book to highlight these environmental threats.
- Ehrlich and Harriman's *How to be a Survivor* (1971).
- Goldsmith et al.'s *Blueprint for Survival* (1972).
- The unofficial UN report *Only One Earth* (1972).
- The Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* (1972).

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Key Components of Ecologism

The political view of ecologism is built upon several interconnected concepts, including ecology, sustainability, holism, and environmental ethics.

- **Ecology**: This is the study of the relationship between living organisms and their environment, emphasizing the intricate network of relationships that sustains all life forms. Ecologism introduces a political framework where humans are considered just one part of this vast natural network.
- **Holism**: Coined by Jan Smuts in 1926, holism is the belief system asserting that the whole is of greater importance than its individual parts. It implies that true understanding is achieved by studying the relationships among the parts. In the context of ecologism, the environment (the whole) takes priority over individual human interests (the parts).
- **Sustainability**: This refers to a system's capacity to maintain its health and persist over time. Thinker Herman Daly argued that "growth mania"—the pursuit of unlimited prosperity and material wealth—leads to massive environmental disasters. In *Small is Beautiful* (1973), E. F. Schumacher noted that humans mistakenly treat natural energy as an income rather than a finite capital. He advocated for "Buddhist economics," which prioritizes people and the principle of "right livelihood".
- **Environmental Ethics**: Ecologists argue that the current trajectory of human development is fundamentally unethical. They argue that in the pursuit of development, the current generation is excessively exploiting resources and degrading the environment. This compromises the future needs of human generations as well as other living species, which also possess an inherent right to life.
- **From Having to Being**: This concept acts as a critique of materialism and consumerism, which are seen as the cultural biases fueling environmental degradation. Therefore, ecologism is closely tied to the ideas of post-materialism and anti-consumerism.

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Types of Ecologism

Ecological political thought branches into several distinct categories:

- **Eco-Socialism**: The central theme of eco-socialism is that capitalism is the enemy of the environment, while socialism is its ally. Often associated with Marxism, thinkers like Rudolph Bahro (1982) argued that the root cause of the environmental crisis is capitalism itself. This ideological variant was notably influential amongst the German Greens.
- **Eco-Anarchism**: Anarchists advocate for a stateless society where harmony naturally arises from mutual respect and social solidarity. Eco-anarchists champion the creation of decentralized societies structured as highly self-sufficient communes or villages. Murray Bookchin's *Our Synthetic Environment* (1975) is a prominent publication outlining this vision.
- **Eco-Feminism**: The foundational premise of eco-feminism is that ecological destruction is fundamentally rooted in patriarchy. In *Gyn/Ecology* (1979), Mary Daly argued that women could liberate themselves from patriarchal constraints by aligning with "female nature". A common argument within this branch is that women are inherently creatures of nature, whereas men are creatures of culture who construct a synthetic, man-made world driven by human ingenuity rather than natural creativity.

Shallow Ecology vs. Deep Ecology

The following table contrasts the core philosophies, worldviews, and key figures associated with Shallow Ecology and Deep Ecology.

Feature	Shallow Ecology	Deep Ecology
Primary Motivation	Supports environmental conservation strictly for human interests and needs.	Argues that environmental conservation is in the best interest of all living species.
Ideological Stance	Rejects ecocentrism and biocentrism.	Favours ecocentrism or biocentrism.

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Feature	Shallow Ecology	Deep Ecology
Worldview	Supports an anthropocentric (human-centered) worldview.	Rejects anthropocentrism completely.
Ethic of Protection	Believes the environment should be protected primarily because harming it will consequently harm humans.	Believes the interests of other living beings must be treated with the same seriousness as the interests of humans.
Core Focus Areas	Focuses on environmentalism, limited holism, animal welfare, and sustainable growth.	Focuses on ecologism, radical holism, value-in-nature, biocentric equality, animal rights, and anti-growth.
Key Supporter	Anthony Weston.	Arne Naess.

The Gaia Hypothesis

The Gaia Hypothesis was formulated in the 1970s by James Lovelock, a UK atmospheric chemist, inventor, and environmental thinker.

Key Tenets of the Hypothesis:

- **Self-Regulating System:** The hypothesis posits that the Earth's biosphere, encompassing its atmosphere, oceans, and soil, exhibits the precise kind of self-regulating behavior that characterizes other forms of life.
- **A Living Entity:** James Lovelock developed the concept that the planet itself is a living organism, inclusive of its stones, rivers, and mountains.
- **Origin of the Name:** Often conceptualized as "Mother Earth," Lovelock gave this living planetary system the name "Gaia," inspired by the Greek goddess of the Earth.
- **Animate and Inanimate Synergy:** Gaia introduces a revolutionary vision regarding the interconnected relationship between the animate (living) and inanimate (non-living) worlds.
- **Planetary Priority:** The theory ultimately suggests that the overall health of the planet is of greater importance than the health or survival of any single individual species

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currently inhabiting it.

Books and Authors Related to Ecologism

Rachel Carson

- **Core Philosophy & Impact:** Rachel Carson developed an increasing interest in the wide-ranging effects of various pesticides. In her landmark work, she gathered and presented evidence demonstrating that long-lasting pesticides, such as DDT, were highly destructive to many different types of living beings, humans included.
- **Major Publications:**
  - *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941)
  - *The Sea Around Us* (1951)
  - *The Edge of the Sea* (1955)
  - *Silent Spring* (1962)
  - *The Sense of Wonder* (1965)

Ernst Friedrich Schumacher

- **Core Philosophy & Impact:** Schumacher is widely recognized for his advocacy of ‘Buddhist Economics’. He fiercely attacked conventional economic theories for their obsession with “growth for growth’s sake”. Furthermore, he condemned the underlying value system of modern economics for being divorced from nature, stressing instead the paramount importance of morality and “right livelihood”.
- **Major Publications:**
  - *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As if People Mattered* (1973)
  - *A Guide for the Perplexed* (1977)
  - *Good Work* (1980)

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Arne Naess

- **Core Philosophy & Impact:** Naess is best known for his philosophy called “Ecosophy T,” which centers on ecological harmony and equilibrium. The ‘T’ in this philosophy stands for the Tvergastein hut, where he lived in solitude high on a mountain in Norway. His framework was significantly influenced by the philosopher Spinoza (spelled ‘Sponzia’ in the text), M. K. Gandhi’s ethic of non-violence, and Taoist thought. The foundation of his belief system is the assertion that “the Earth does not belong to human beings”.
- **Major Publications:**
  - *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* (1974)
  - *Thinking like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (1988)
  - *Ecology of Wisdom* (2008)

Murray Bookchin

- **Core Philosophy & Impact:** Bookchin was a leading proponent of the concept of ‘social ecology’. He drew a direct link between the modern environmental crisis and the breakdown of the organic fabric that holds both society and nature together.
- **Major Publications:**
  - *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962)
  - *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971)
  - *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982)
  - *Re-enchanting Humanity* (1995)
  - *The Politics of Social Ecology* (1998)

Caroline Merchant

- **Core Philosophy & Impact:** Recognized as a prominent figure among eco-feminists, Merchant’s work highlighted the deep connections between gender oppression and the ‘death of nature’. She developed a feminist critique of the scientific revolution, arguing

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that environmental degradation can ultimately be explained by men applying a purely mechanistic view to nature.

- **Major Publications:**
  - *The Death of Nature* (1983)
  - *Radical Ecology* (1992)

Rudolf Bahro

- **Core Philosophy & Impact:** Bahro is best known for his intellectual attempts to reconcile socialism with ecological theories. In his work, he presented capitalism as the fundamental root cause of the environmental crisis and positioned socialism as its necessary solution. He later argued that the ecological crisis had become so urgent and pressing that it needed to take absolute precedence over traditional class struggle.
- **Major Publications:**
  - *Socialism and Survival* (1982)
  - *From Red to Green* (1984)

Books and Authors

Author / Organization	Books (Publication Year)
Ernst Haeckel	• *German Morphology* (1866)
Rachel Carson	• *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941) • *The Sea Around Us* (1951) • *The Edge of the Sea* (1955) • *Silent Spring* (1962) • *The Sense of Wonder* (1965)

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Murray Bookchin	• *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962 / 1975) • *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971) • *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982) • *Re-enchanting Humanity* (1995) • *The Politics of Social Ecology* (1998)
Ehrlich and Harriman	• *How to be a Survivor* (1971)
Edward Goldsmith et al.	• *Blueprint for Survival* (1972)
Unofficial UN Report	• *Only One Earth* (1972)
Club of Rome	• *The Limits to Growth* (1972)
Ernst Friedrich Schumacher	• *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As if People Mattered* (1973) • *A Guide for the Perplexed* (1977) • *Good Work* (1980)
Arne Naess	• *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle* (1974) • *Thinking like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (1988) • *Ecology of Wisdom* (2008)
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