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Identity, Politics and Citizenship

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ECOJUSTICE LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

Before Rachel Carson helped launch the modern global environmental movement with the publication of her landmark *Silent Spring* in 1962, Murray Bookchin published six months earlier a prophetic work entitled *Our Synthetic Environment* (under the pseudonym 'Lewis Herber'). *Our Synthetic Environment* was one of the first books to list a broad panoply of environmental problems caused by the irresponsible use of modern technology and the fanatical growth of industrialization and urbanization. This work was coupled with his publication in 1964 of "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought", one of the first modern writings to combine ecology and anarchism, leading Bookchin to found what he became famously known for, "social ecology". Social ecology, following in the long tradition of 19th-century ecological communitarianism, is a school of thought that states that the contemporary ecological crisis arises from deeply-ingrained social problems. Consequently, the ecological crisis cannot be understood, much less resolved, without addressing those problems associated with social injustice. As a philosophical approach, social ecology presented one of the first systematic attempts to bring together environmental justice and social justice, helping to explain how such social pathologies as classism, sexism, and racism, among other problems, generate and perpetuate most environmental problems.

In the field of education, an approach to combining environmental and social justice is found in the concept of "ecojustice education", promoted most vigorously by C. A. Bowers (2001) and other leading intellectual/activists such as Madhu Suri Prakash, Gregory Smith, David Gruenewald, and Frederique Apffel-Marglin, among others. Ecojustice education agrees with social ecology in critiquing the ethnocentric forces of Western global consumer culture, and argue that it can be countered by revitalizing the biological and cultural commons. The commons have historically been those aspects of life available to everyone for free that have kept communities wholesome in harmony with nature.

By combining social ecology and ecojustice education, we are able to identify seven main characteristics related to "ecojustice learning", a holistic form of learning that brings together the individual, the community, and nature in ways that respect the integrity of all three. Social ecology helps us to understand how domination of humans by humans leads to alienation of humans from nature and to its inevitable destruction, whereas ecojustice education offers a powerful critique of market capitalism by stressing the urgency of meeting our most basic needs

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through non-commodified practices in the form of the natural and cultural commons. The seven main characteristics of ecojustice learning are:

IT OFFERS A VISION WHEREBY NATURE IS RESPECTED, APPRECIATED, AND LOVED

These sentiments towards nature are found condensed in the three forms of love identified in ancient Greece: eros, philia and agape. While eros is popularly understood as the romantic affection one person feels for another, here it is used in terms of an awakening of the senses, of the experience of ecstasy felt when one is in contact with the natural world. To touch the ground with our naked feet and hands and feel the pulse of the earth, use our nostrils to absorb the scent of ripened fruit, gaze at a mountain range at sunset and distill the multiple shades of purple, red, blue, and orange, and hear the whistling and howling of the wind and rain in the middle of the night, are all sensations that if we learn to become attune to them, we can learn to inhabit the sensuality of nature. The second form of love, philia, generally understood as "friendship", is interpreted here to mean the larger connections that one feels with the biotic world, human and non-human alike. A term that brings philia to the fore is "biophilia", first coined by Eric Fromm (1964) and later popularized by Edward O. Wilson (1984). Biophilia refers to innate love and respect for everything alive. Through the biophilia hypothesis, Wilson suggested that there is an innate bond that people feel towards all living systems. Some examples are the sense of attachment and protection that people feel towards pets, the risk people take to save wild animals and natural areas, and the plants that people display to beautify their homes. As Wilson wrote, "We are human in good part because of the particular way we affiliate with other organisms. They are the matrix in which the human mind originated and is permanently rooted, and they offer the challenge, freedom [and companionship] innately sought" (1984, p. 139). The third form of love, agape, focuses on a spiritual dimension whereby nature is viewed as a sacred creation. As Tomas Estevez Bianchini (1995) reminded us, the belief that the earth is alive and sacred has been a fundamental aspect of the cosmologies of indigenous cultures from the Americas (Pacha Mama, Haba, Ita), and from the millenarian cosmologies from other parts of the world, including Cretes, Hindus, and Celts, all of which have had a version of Gaia, Mother Earth, a sacred being that has to be nurtured and which nurtures back. In this context, humans show a sense of awe towards nature in the most literal of senses, a mixed emotion of reverence, fear, and wonder inspired by the sublimity and might of the planet. The spiritual connection felt between humans and nature is acknowledged and defended by both social ecology and ecojustice education, with the difference being that social ecology does not believe that any form of spirituality should be given priority over social forces, because it can be precisely those social forces, such as capitalism, that actively erode all forms of spirituality (Bookchin, 1993).

IT ARGUES THAT MOST ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IS CAUSED BY SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Integral to ecojustice learning is the concept of distributive justice. Unlike procedural justice that focuses on fair processes, distributive justice focuses on just outcomes. One of the areas of concern of distributive justice is the fair allocation of material goods and natural resources to individuals and communities (Wenz, 1988). This means that environmental concerns involve relationships and actions among not only people from the same or different societies in the present, but also among people from the present and those from the future, between human and non-human beings, and between people and larger environmental systems in general. A clear example of an absence of distributive justice was visible when Hurricane Mitch hit Central America in 1998, the most destructive natural disaster in the region's modern history. Despite affecting people from all walks of life, it was the poor who suffered the most. Grinding rural poverty had forced peasant families to migrate to urban areas; because of a lack of access to adequate land, poor families cut down trees along eroded mountainsides and unprotected riverbanks to build their homes. Poverty forced them to take over terrains woefully unfitted for human habitation. When the hurricane hit cities like Tegucigalpa, the denuded forests could not absorb the increased levels of water, and floods and mudslides of biblical proportions ravaged the slums, killing thousands of people and leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Thus, the consequences of an environmental problem were magnified by endemic economic injustice.

To understand distributive justice, we must analyze the environmental values embedded in capitalism, the most widespread economic system in the world. Martin O'Connor in *Is Capitalism Sustainable?* (1994) identified three sets of values that undergird capitalism: First, nature is treated as capital. Water, air, land, soil, trees, minerals, landscapes are treated as goods and services to be bought and sold in the market. These are considered basic means to obtain more wealth. Inevitably, nature becomes desanctified and loses its aura of awe. Second, according to classical liberal economic theory, the pursuit of the private good eventually leads to a greater public good. The community serves its purpose only insofar as it prepares the terrain for the satisfaction of the needs of individuals and private entities. In this scheme, all too often social and environmental costs are externalized. And third, humans have the right and even the obligation to use natural resources for the ever-increasing accumulation of wealth. Capitalism creates a culture that privileges the maximization of wealth with the highest rewards being accrued by those who adopt strategies that most efficiently exploit marketable natural goods. As Franz Broswimmer (2003, p. 89) stated, "as part of the capitalist creed, the imperative of systematic growth is probably its most destructive dimension." To mitigate the degradation of nature and community, social ecology pushes for the establishment of an economic and social system that does not privilege profit and limitless accumulation over human dignity and environmental integrity. Social ecology believes that part of the answer is found in the creation of loosely coupled autonomous municipalities that derive their most

basic needs from the local bioregion, and where face-to-face grassroots democracy ensures ample and meaningful participation from the population (Bookchin, 1985). This will help to remove hierarchy and domination from the social equation.

IT FOSTERS AN UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATION OF PLACE

The word "place" comes from the Latin *planta,* meaning both "plant" and the "foot's sole". In this way, *place* becomes a useful metaphor for understanding that communities are actually grounded and rooted in an specific time and place and over time become an integral part of the landscape. Although the history of human kind as been characterized by constant migrations, these mass movements of people occurred mostly after many centuries of a certain group inhabiting the same region. In that period of time, to guarantee its survival, a human group had to learn the unique characteristics of the local flora and fauna, the soils, and the climate, and how these interacted together. In other words, they had to embrace the bioregion as their most important home to ensure the prosperity of the community. In *Dwellers in the Land* (1985), Kirkpatrick Sale made an eloquent plea in defense of the bioregion as a key political entity towards which people should develop a sense of identity. In modern societies, people's allegiance beyond the family or clan is extended mostly to the nation-state, and depending on a person's particular circumstances to other sociological dimensions as well, such as social class, religion, ethnicity, or sexual identification. Very seldom, however, is there a deep attachment to the bioregion. Those groups that prior to Western contact were able to subsist for centuries in the same region without destroying it, did so only by developing an intimate understanding of and respect for the distinctive topography, climate, plants and animals of their bioregion. Caring for their bioregion meant caring for themselves. As the archeological evidence attests, however, not all premodern groups displayed the sense of care and respect necessary to protect the bioregion. Nonetheless, we can still derive valuable lessons based on the experiences of premodern groups that did engage in environmentally sustainable practices.

The connection between people and land is experienced most pronouncedly and painfully when groups of people are forcibly removed from their homeland. When the Navajo from the US were dragged away from their ancestral lands in 1864, in what infamously became known as the "Long Walk," hundreds died in the 300-mile walk and thousands more in the four years that lasted their displacement due to hunger, cold, and sadness (e.g., see Cheek, 2005). The experience of relocation to Bosque Redondo (New Mexico) endured in the oral stories that were passed on from generation to generation. Frank Mitchell, the famous Navajo leader and Blessingway singer—Blessingway is the group of Navajo rituals and songs concerned with creation, harmony, healing, and peace—whose own parents were taken to Bosque Redondo before he was born, wrote a poem partly in remembrance of the Long Walk about the Navajo's sacred connection to their ancestral land (Mitchell, 1978, p. 338).

Blessed, my country will always be there, this I say,
Blessed, my mountain ranges,
With pollen they will be blessed, this I say,
Blessed, the running waters,
With pollen they will be blessed, this I say,
According to all things, I shall live, this I say,
According to these things, we shall live, this I say!

In modern times, the forced displacement of people—indigenous and non-indigenous alike—occurs largely as a result of wars and large-scale development projects such as dams. In the latter case, governments of 140 countries authorized the building of some 45,000 large dams in the 20th century, which often led to humanitarian and environmental disasters (Leslie, 2005). In their zeal to bring the fruits of modernity to growing numbers of people, governments and international agencies have often disregarded the negative consequences that channeling freshwater ecosystems have had on the livelihoods of the millions of people and other ecosystems found downstream of dams. When the Kariba dam in Zambia was completed in 1959, it was then the biggest in Africa and created one of the world's largest reservoirs. The reservoir forced the resettlement of some 60,000 Tongas, who had lived there for centuries in sustainability with nature. Mwindaace Siamwiza, a Tonga resettler and a chemist at the University of Zambia, described his experience this way (cited in Leslie, 2005, p. 200–201):

> When we were told that we should abandon our ancestral lands and move to lands we knew were barren hills, we were incredulous and contemptuous. First came bewilderment followed by anger which gave way to despair. It is not easy to describe this despair but sufficient to say that my paternal grandmother Buyuni wondered aloud how she could die in peace knowing fully well that she would be buried in the strange and hilly land of Mulungwa where our village was to be relocated. [In] our culture...on death one becomes a citizen of the interconnected and interdependent worlds of both the living and the dead; [we harbor] the strong belief that on death one joins the ancestors who protected you in life while remaining, unseparated, an integral part of living. Relocation [thus] was like walking out on one's spiritual protectors; it was insanity personified.'

This sentiment of attachment to one's mountains, rivers, forests and deserts was captured by the term *topophilia,* coined by Yi-fu Tuan in 1974. Topophilia, or love for place, includes all the emotional connections that humans have towards their physical environments. The sense of being and belongingness to place that bioregionalism fosters is unique to ecologically-centered cultures, as exemplified by the Navajo and the Tonga.

IT IS BASED ON THE WISDOM OF ELDERS

The wisdom of elders has been passed on from generation to generation mostly through face-to-face oral communication. It has withstood the pressures of time, having been refined for generations to keep the community together and in harmony with nature. It should be noted that old age is not synonymous with being an elder. Distinguishing one from the other is a complex task, given that not uncommonly older folk forgot or never learned the sustainable practices of their ancestors. C. A. Bowers (1995, pp. 172–173), one of the main intellectual forces behind ecojustice education, helped us to untangle this issue when he wrote,

> [An] elder understands the linkages between human experience, culture, and ecosystems—and can communicate this understanding through narratives, song, and dance… [The] elder speaks and models behavior in ways that help the new generation recognize and experience the connections between their own lives and the accumulated wisdom being handed down from the past.

Comprehending the web of linkages that bring together a group of people and the ecosystems on which they depend is an essential characteristic of elders. They need to show how each action by individuals has consequences on those around them, both in the present and in the future. In an anecdote that highlights the role of the elder, Oscar Kawagley and Ray Barnhardt narrated an encounter between a group of western scientists and elders belonging to the Minto tribe of Alaska in the US (1999, p. 122). The scientists wanted to convey to tribal elders their efforts to track the pike, a fish that had displayed greatly reduced numbers in the region. Rather than consulting the elders about the causes for the decline, the scientists simply informed them of their research study, which included records that went back 30 years. In frustration, the chief of the tribe, 90-year old Peter John, scolded the scientists by saying (cited in Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1999, p. 124),

> If you want to know where the pike spend the winter, come and ask me. How do you think I came to live this old? I can tell you exactly where we go to get the biggest pike and where the pike spend the winter. You are talking about 30 years. Our record goes back 300 years. We know how many pike were around 300 years ago, and how many it took to feed our families and dogs.

As imperfect as oral communication is when handed down from generation to generation—content changes and is forgotten over time, and more abstract and complex thought is difficult to transmit—it serves as an invisible thread that assists with transgenerational unity and solidarity. Whereas in modern societies older people tend to be ignored or treated as a nuisance by the larger society, oral cultures tend to bring together several generations through storytelling, dancing, singing, and other communal activities, and in general, older people are treated with dignity and their input becomes valued and respected.

IT SEEKS TO REVITALIZE VERNACULAR AND NON-COMMODIFIED KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICES

Many individuals and communities labeled as "poor" according to such measurements as annual income or GDP per capita, are in fact wealthy when one considers the cultural commons that they have safeguarded and enhanced for centuries. The rescuing of the cultural commons is one of the main theoretical contributions of ecojustice education. The cultural commons are the symbolic resources that belong to all in a community, including knowledge about dances, songs, music, poetry, agriculture, construction, hunting and gathering, religious rituals, reciprocity and mutual aid practices like the minga, astronomy, ethnobotany, and the myriad other ways in which traditional cultures have learned to live as members of the cosmos (Bowers, 2004).

While not all of these traditional forms of knowledge have been sustainable, many groups have engaged and still do so in practices that allow them to live in a harmonious relationship with nature and take advantage of its enormous diversity. Take, for instance, knowledge related to ethnobotany. Of the estimated 250,000 to half a million plant species in the world, modern science has taken advantage of 122 distinct chemical substances derived from 94 species of plants (Fabricant & Farnsworth, 2001). In contrast, the Kallawayas, traditional healers from Bolivia, use 600 medicinal herbs; in South Asia 6,500 plants are used in vernacular medicinal lore; and in South East Asia and China, close to 10,000 plants are known to have medicinal properties. NAPRALERT, considered one of the world's largest databases on ethnomedical uses of plants, contained information on 14,317 species as of 2005, which easily dwarfs the drugs derived from the 94 species mentioned previously (Cordell & Colvard, 2005). Knowledge on how to deal with the more common illnesses or conditions is available to everyone, it is part of the cultural commons of the community. Even more specialized medical knowledge, as in the case of the kallawayas, has not been turned into a private good that is passed on to some one else through the exchange of money, that is, has not been turned into a commodity to be bought and sold in the market.

Another example of non-commodified practices is found in forms of conviviality based on mutual aid and reciprocity. Whereas atomized and self-interested behavior have become the norm in industrialized and urban societies, and as Ferdinand Toennies' *Gemeinshaft* has yielded to a *Gesellschaft* in which modern peoples live next to one another in virtual anonymity and lacking in any meaningful sense of solidarity, traditional cultures attached to the land have been—and many still are—characterized by kinship, neighborhood, and friendship. The *minga,* for instance, still practiced today in Andean countries, is a well established community institution that originated with indigenous groups but later on adopted by mestizos. The minga refers to solidarity work in the community in which neighbors and friends get together to help one another to do the harvest, build a home, or set up an irrigation canal. Customarily, the beneficiary returns the favor by hosting a party to celebrate the work and friendship. The minga expresses volunteer work in which no pecuniary reward is expected or solicited, and where no bosses exist; only the more experienced workers guide the rest. At a future date,

it is expected that the beneficiary (along with other community members) will help out another person in need, and thus a cycle is completed. The minga represents a labor of love that brings community members together and improves the well being of everyone.

Equivalents of the minga are found around the world. *Tequio* (a Nahuatl word) in Mexico and Guatemala, *bayanihan* (a Tagalog term) in the Philippines, *ubuntu* (a Zulu and Xhosa word) in southern Africa, *harambee* (a Swahili word) in Kenya and Tanzania, *touiza* in the Arab world, *yui* and *moyai* in Japan, *hitaguhu* in Papua New Guinea and other regions of the Pacific, and *sarvodaya* (a Sanskrit, Hindi, and Gujarati term) in India and Sri Lanka, all denote the accomplishment of tasks that involve mutual aid and reciprocity. While the emphasis of each term may vary—ubuntu also includes respect for one's ancestors and sarvodaya self-determination—they all imply the unselfish spirit of giving to one's family and one's neighbors. Fundamentally, they all mean that one reaches one's humanity by helping out others.

One of the advantages of non-commodified knowledge and practices is that they make individuals more self-reliant on local resources to satisfy their most basic needs. When individuals can take care of common illnesses through plants growing up in their vicinity without having to go to the local pharmacy, or cultivate some of their own food in their backyard or community garden, or do construction work with the aid of neighbors, the previously enclosed resources of modern pharmaceuticals, canned foods, or private contractors are suddenly transformed into open-access resources available to everyone regardless of socioeconomic background. It ensures that resources found locally are used in ways that strengthen community ties. Resources that in industrial societies have been ignored and marginalized start to occupy center stage, and individuals who do not have educational credentials to demonstrate proficiency in the formal economy are treated with respect and dignity.

The defense of non-commodified practices also seeks to resist the consumeristic habits of modern citizens. Consumerism designates the tendency to find personal happiness in the purchasing of material goods and services beyond the satisfaction of basic needs. While historically consumerism has not been limited to modern societies, it was only with the rise of industrialism that people of all social classes could afford to buy and accumulate goods and engage in ostentatious consumption that previous generations could not fathom. From an ecojustice perspective, the increasingly complex nature of the production process—with produce and manufactured goods coming from increasingly distant places and different levels of embodied energy—hides the social and environmental impact of goods and services, allowing consumers to be ignorant and ultimately indifferent to any damage their extraction, production, shipping, consumption, and eventual disposal may cause.

IT EMPHASIZES THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD WORK IN PEOPLE'S LIVES

The Buddhist concept of "right livelihood" was at the basis of E. F. Schumacher's development of Buddhist economics as set forth in his 1973 classic *Small is*

Beautiful. Right livelihood means doing work out of a desire to improve the lives of others. It is part of an spiritual path in which people engage in forms of paid or unpaid work to the best of their ability to contribute towards a more harmonious and just universe. This larger societal dimension should be accompanied by a personal dimension in which the work that people engage in is adequately compensated economically, inherently safeguards the dignity of the worker, and that allows for a person's creativity to flourish. These two dimensions, the personal and the societal, should go hand in hand (Arenas, 2003). While procedural justice seeks to ensure that workers are compensated fairly, treated with dignity and not taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers, there are no laws to ensure that jobs be creative and stimulating, or even that they pursue the common good. As a result, people often end up doing work that exploits others, excessively uses natural resources, and manufactures and manipulates artificial needs. As Theodore Roszak (1979, p. 220) wrote,

> Work that produces unnecessary consumer junk or weapons of war is wrong and wasteful. Work that is built upon false needs and unbecoming appetites is wrong and wasteful. Work that deceives or manipulates, that exploits of degrades is wrong and wasteful. Work that wounds the environment or makes the world ugly is wrong and wasteful.

The complexity of industrial life does not always make for easy answers regarding if one's work is wrong and wasteful. Nonetheless, ecojustice learning advocates the pursuit of occupational alternatives that seek to protect and regenerate human and natural environments. The deterioration of current urban and rural habitats is such that there are plenty of job opportunities that would qualify as altruistic occupations. Some examples are working at organic farms, renovating dilapidated homes, recuperating eroded natural areas, beautifying neighborhoods and parks, designing and building energy-efficient homes and other constructions, promoting the use of renewable energies, setting up businesses that meet real community needs, becoming an activist that promotes pro-social and pro-environment legislation, and, more generally, teaching people of different ages, especially children, the theory and practice of good work.

IT SUPPORTS MORE LEISURELY, ACTIVE, AND HEALTHIER LIFESTYLES

The complementary side of work is leisure, both indispensable for healthy living. Contemporary societies are literally and figuratively eons away from Marshall Sahlins' classic *Stone Age Economics* (1972) argument that in subsistence based societies, people satisfied their basic needs by working at most 3 to 4 hours per day and spending the rest of their day with family and friends, relaxing, playing games, singing, dancing, making arts and crafts, flirting, and sleeping. Some groups, like Australian Aborigines or Kalahari Bushmen, worked even less, an average of 2.1 hours per day. In contrast, in 2003, in such modern societies as the US and Mexico, people worked on average 5.5 and 6 hours daily, respectively (OECD, 2007). While the average modern person does live longer and more protected from the

vicissitudes of nature than in the past, he or she also tends to work more, spend more time in a sedentary position away from nature (either because of work, school, or in front of audiovisual electronics), sleep less, spend less time with loved ones, and in general, spend less time just being (either alone or with loved ones) and more time consuming. A study found that the average person in the US in 2004 had no more than two close friends, a drop from three friends reported in 1985, and an astounding 25% of the population reported having no close confidants at all, outside family members (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). Similar declining trends in friendship have been reported in the Netherlands and Hungary.

These trends have brought with them a series of modern diseases: heart disease, stress, depression, stroke, type-2 diabetes, cancer, and obesity. The latter problem is worth considering further given that it is one of the problems most directly linked to a sedentary lifestyle and a substandard nutrition (Popkin & Gordon-Larsen, 2004). The trend in both developed and developing countries is for a convergence of a lifestyle characterized by lower levels of physical activity and diets high in saturated fats, sugar, and refined foods, but low on fiber. In terms of physical activity, there is a shift away from higher-energy expenditure activities such as farming and forestry, and more towards lower energy-expenditure ones, such as the service sector. Additionally, within each of these occupations there is a reduction in physical activity. Popkin and Gordon-Larsen (2004) presented China as an interesting case study. China is not only experiencing the previously mentioned occupational changes, but the average income per capita has also increased, making it more likely for the average Chinese to own a car and a TV, two high-status material goods that have a negative impact on people's health. The change has been so drastic that Chinese households that have a car are 80% more likely to show obesity than those that do not possess one. In terms of diets, these are also changing rapidly, even more so in the developing world than in developed countries (Popkin & Gordon-Larsen, 2004, p. S3). The diet of the average person in countries as diverse as Mexico, Egypt and South Africa have all become saturated with fats, caloric sweeteners, and animal source foods. Again, China presents an interesting example. The rate of obesity in China increased 97% in 10 years, from 1992 to 2002 (Chinese Concern, 2004). The biggest increase was experienced in Chinese cities, were 12% of adults and 8% of children were classified as obese in 2002, and these percentages are expected to increase in the future.

In sum, the worldwide incidence of obesity is increasing, with a new term, "globesity", entering public awareness. Obesity is just one example of a new constellation of modern diseases. From an ecojustice perspective, mitigating these diseases will have social benefits—because these modern diseases are being found in greater ratios among the poor—as well as environmental ones—because a decrease would entail a more sustainable use of natural resources.

CONCLUSION

Ecojustice learning borrows concepts from both social ecology and ecojustice education to make the case for the importance of fostering a new form of learning

that brings together environmental and social justice. To make ecojustice learning a reality, one would be amiss not to stress the importance of emphasizing the critique of the dominant contemporary economistic society, as both social ecology and ecojustice education do. Creating a socially and ecologically responsible system of production and consumption is perhaps the main challenge for the 21st century. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into the details of a new ethically-based economic system (for a detailed explanation, see, for instance, Tokar, 1992), but it is clear that without it, ecojustice learning will remain an elusive goal.

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