

Ecology and 'Ecologists'

For some years past we have been worried about the emergence of a new meaning for the name of our revered science, but now we have come to the happy belief that the 'classical' scientific and modern 'popular' senses are quite reconcilable. Indeed, as indicated in the following comments, it seems to us that they should be solidly reconciled—for their mutual benefit and, above all, the world's.

Originally under its antique title of 'oecology', our subject was well defined long ago in the great *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'The science of the economy of animals and plants; that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings, their habits and modes of life, etc.', while in the 1972 reprinting of the latest edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, it is given as 'Branch of biology dealing with living organisms' habits, modes of life, and relations to their surroundings'. In our other main source of authority of this kind, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (1966), ecology is similarly defined as 'a branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments. . .', and yet other standard works of reference support this usage without indicating any alternative. Meanwhile in general *scientific* use with many of us for more than half-a-century on both sides of the Atlantic, and indeed throughout the world, it has scarcely varied from being 'the study of living organisms in relation to their environment (including one another)'.

How, then, has the popular meaning of the now familiar word 'ecology' become so changed in recent years that to the general public it commonly means what we used to refer to as 'cleaning-up-the-campus stuff'? And how is it that ecology does not seem to be popularly considered as a science—or, if it is, as more than the merest innovation? The answer appears to be that the environmental militants, and the general public whose interest they did the world a major service by invoking, had, and indeed still have, precious little understanding of the science of ecology but know of no more suitable word-image to turn to; and now that their 'ecology' has become a fixed theme and attitude-based movement or political lobby in the western world's eye, it might be wiser not to try to change either of those usages but to accept them as a logical bifurcation into scientific and 'popular' ecology. For this we might derive some solace and support by noting the derivation of the operative word as capable of applying to both factions.

If we accept the existence of two different but allied types of ecology *sensu latissimo*—the scientific and the 'popular'—what do we term their respective proponents? At present each group is tending to give the other a bad name—the scientific ecologists are doing so to their popular counterparts by charging ignorance, preaching moderation, and so seemingly weakening their resolve for action that they often do not appear to know where to turn, while the popular 'ecologists' are giving the scientific ones a bad name for militancy which is not at all of their making but that of the politically agitating faction of the popular 'ecologists'. So even more importantly than with ecology as a science or an approach, it seems necessary to recognize two groups of proponents—on one hand of the science and, on the other, of the approach—and find names to distinguish them. These could be 'scientific' ecologists or ecologists without qualification (but, we would trust, appropriate scientific qualifications!) on one hand and, on the other, popular 'ecologists' (*sic*) or, simply, 'environmentalists'. The latter group often have nothing to do with the science of ecology and rarely have any knowledge of it*; if they had, they would realize that it commonly takes years of *ad hoc* study, following prolonged multidisciplinary academic training, to pronounce ecologically, and would scarcely be militants any more!

Yet some degree of militancy, or at least an effective approach to politicians and decision-makers, is needed by scientific ecologists, if their work is to have any real chance of becoming effective towards saving the biosphere from destruction through the ever-increasing pandominance of Man. This is where the popular 'ecologists' come in. At present it is painfully obvious that scientists in general, and perhaps ecologists in particular, are woefully deficient—or often not interested, to their shame—in getting political and industrial action in directions which they, and often they alone, know to be right and sometimes vital. This emerged time and time again in our Second International Conference on Environmental Future, on 'Growth Without Ecodisasters', which was held recently in Iceland, and the proceedings of which we are currently editing for early publication on both sides of the Atlantic. Being scholars rather than militants ourselves, our best recourse may yet be through militants who, given the proper scientific basis, will then know how best to act.

We said in our opening paragraph that the benefits of this most desirable reconciliation should be mutual. The popular 'ecologists', whose support for due action is needed by the scientific ecologists, will be constrained to heed the advice of the latter if they are to retain credibility with the general public and especially with the increasingly enlightened governmental and other authorities from whom they are commonly seeking action. We should do our utmost to guide these 'ecologists' patiently in the right direction for the benefit of Man and Nature. At present they seem little if any more enlightened than they were nearly a decade ago when, during the eleventh International Botanical Congress at Seattle, Washington, having heard us pronounce on human population increases as posing probably the greatest problems with which the world (including its plant population) has ever been faced, they elicited our help in drafting a petition to that effect to the United Nations. Later we met with some of them on the Berkeley campus of the University of California, 'where it all began', and they persuaded us to ask the Librarian of the United Nations Office in Geneva to house the huge volume including the many hundreds of supporting signatures often of eminent people which they had gone to great pains to collect. Yet subsequently they wrote us that we were absolved: they had burned the whole collection as they really did not know what to do with it!

So it seems clear that, for enlightened decision and timely action, each faction surely needs the other. Indeed the sooner they can get together and work in unison, the better will be the chances for Man's and Nature's survival.

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* Except in the case of a gratifyingly increasing number of mostly younger scientific ecologists and trainees who, being all-too-aware of the widely deteriorating state of the biosphere, are turning firmly militant in a dignified way.