Dealing with Death

Environmental Implications of Mortality Salience

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*Finally a word of caution: Do not jump into your automobile next June and rush out to the canyon country hoping to see some of that which I have attempted to evoke in these pages. In the first place you can’t see anything from a car; you’ve got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you’ll see something, maybe. Probably not[[1]](#footnote-1).*

*-Edward Abbey*

**Prologue**

As of now, my tentative plan for the summer and possibly the fall harvesting season is to travel across the US by car and work as a member of WWOOF, an organization that pairs volunteer farmers with farms in need of volunteers. The volunteer works on a given farm in exchange for room and board. My goal is to volunteer at farms that are close enough to wilderness areas so I can spend my free time experiencing the last bits of wilderness our country has to offer. When I tell people that I am doing this, I usually accompany it with some rationalization such as “I have really wanted to go on a road trip and this is a great way to do it” or “I am not exactly sure what I want to do *for real* yet and this is the best time for me to something like this”. This is all a façade that is covering my true reasons for doing this: I really want to live and experience the wilderness that is still left on this Earth, albeit a very limited one. Also, the idea of accepting a job scares me because I fear that once I enter a lifestyle that demands a consistent supply of money and other obligations of modernity, I will never be able to escape it. My only escape will instead be the security of retirement that is accompanied by eternal boredom[[2]](#footnote-2). By then my passion for new and challenging experiences in the wilderness will be long gone as well as my physical ability to have those experiences; and by then wilderness areas may be gone.

The fragility of life that is evidently clear in the wilderness provides for a much more exciting experience than a calculated one. Knowing what the rest of my life will entail denies me the freedom of the human experience. The constant threat of death that lurks within wilderness although dangerous, brings one a deep appreciation for life. In saying this, I acknowledge that I have not have these unique and wild experiences. The closest I have gotten to this is through the documentaries of National Geographic, or through the adventures of Alex Superchamp in *Into the Wild*. Although I have visited multiple national parks[[3]](#footnote-3), I know that they don’t do true wilderness justice. The pursuit of “seeing something” as Ed Abbey would put it, is the ultimate quest. In today’s age, when the true wilderness areas continue to shrink, this challenge seems as good as any a pursuit I could have accepted.

This paper examines the ways that many people deal with death, particularly in the context of the environment. Since I was a kid, I have been a daydreamer, a thinker. The subject of death has certainly entered my thoughts. I haven’t had the fortune of coming into contact with many life-threatening experiences if at all, and perhaps that is why I am so drawn to the wilderness areas of the world. For I truly believe that with the threat of death comes experiences that test the capabilities of humans. Although I am a young man, I feel as though that I would much rather trade a lifetime of boring, planned, security for an unpredictable, dangerous, and exciting lifetime that could be cut short at a moment’s notice. My opinions may be unique and idealistic, but I believe this idealism and the use of fundamental ideology (biocentrism) as the basis of my argument gives it strength. If nothing else, this paper provides the reader with a different perspective to examine the implications of Global Climate Change and general environmental degradation. Additionally, it will question the reader’s opinions on death and the human experience.

**Introduction**

Research and scholarship on terror management theory has provided valuable knowledge regarding human behavior in response to death related thoughts or the awareness of one’s own mortality. More specifically, it has helped me better understand the ways in which humans respond to the death related thoughts associated with environmental issues. TMT says that people will react to death related thoughts or mortality salience by affirming one’s own worldview through a variety of ways, and this reaction is different when the fundamentals of someone’s worldview or source of self-esteem is different. In the context of the environment, this has led to a wide spectrum of responses, from full blown denial of ones obligation to the environment, to hard core radical environmentalists. By researching the radical environmental movement in America from the 1970s to the early 1990s—and the movement’s opponents—I was able to get a good sense of the spectrum of environmental ideology. These two different responses are so strong in their own right that they tend to stretch even more as environmental issues become even more pressing. What I found was that the most intriguing and fascinating types of people—a population base that makes up a large portion of Americans today—is the middle of the road, the independent environmental thinkers. This group is conflicted between the two schools of thought, especially in today’s world where the radical environmentalists are so reductive in their ideology and Americans today depend heavily on the advances of modern civilization.

What I wanted to research and find out was how the brain deals with their fear of death through an environmental context depending on one’s own prior belief system. My goal was to find ways to appeal to those who don’t show concern for the environment. My research began with the radical environmental view. Dave Foreman, founder of radical environmental group Earth First!, was my starting point. Known for being a vocal activist leader and an author of multiple opinionated books, I knew I could count on him for plenty of material on his personal views and explanations of what drove them. My research on opponents to this viewpoint was a little harder to come by because most of the conservatives were much less outspoken in their views to publicly advocate for them, whether it’s through writing or physical action. What I did find however, was the work of Ron Arnold, an American writer and activist, and an opponent of the more general environmental movement. One book in particular that I found very useful was *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature; The World of the Unabomber.* In this book, Arnold reveals his own world view, and makes a strong argument against the radical environmental movement. These two sources formed the core of my research on the applications of terror management theory onto environmental thinkers.

My ultimate goal of this research was to use these different opinions to catalyze environmental activism through specialization of tactics depending on each viewpoint. However, despite the helpful and insightful knowledge attained regarding different responses to mortality salience, I ultimately found that the human mind is far too equipped to deal with their fear of death; also, the far too entrenched social and cultural systems of capitalism in America do not provide Americans with a viable and easy enough solution to the mammoth of a task that is Global Climate Change mitigation[[4]](#footnote-4). Where do we go from this realization? From this point, I made the decision to advocate for the fundamentals of activists like David Foreman. The recognition that Earth was built for the vast array of plant and animal life and not a civilized human race as the superior animal species is the core of my resolve. One can already see the failings of human civilization on an epic scale. The fate of the human race will not be sustained through the developments of civilization, and any attempts to mitigate GCC through the systems of civilization will ultimately fail. I propose the altering of the entire mentality of the priorities of human ideology, placing the Earth First! History of the Earth is proof that a system of sustainable human life on Earth is possible[[5]](#footnote-5). Global Climate Change will be the wakeup call that humans desperately need; bring it on!

**Terror Management Theory: Context of Global Climate Change Response**

Terror Management Theory is founded on the claims that Ernest Becker makes in *Denial of Death* that most human behavior can be attributed to the realization of one’s own mortality[[6]](#footnote-6). TMT posits that this awareness induces terror in the mind, and to manage that terror, humans turn to self-esteem and a reinforcement of one’s own cultural worldview[[7]](#footnote-7). As you can imagine, the threats of the environment to the vitality of humans make TMT a relevant and consistent issue in the mind of humans, because we are constantly dependent on it for survival. Global Climate Change is almost synonymous with death in the sense that a lot of the media and academic publications often associate it with the stories of natural disasters, rising sea levels, extinction of endangered species, etc. that elucidate a clear and present danger to humans in the near future. How humans deal with this news and the more general threat of the natural world has entirely to do with these foundations of self-esteem that each individual has created for themselves. The typical response to climate change is the realization that this danger must be prevented in some way. The data and scholarship surrounding climate change increasingly indicates that the issue is predominantly an issue that has been primarily caused by human intervention. This realization is fairly common among the educated public. However, the actual response—in terms of actions to combat climate change—from others is not directly correlated with the awareness of climate change as a concept that is caused primarily by human intervention. What can be attributed to this disconnect? What factors are contributing to the lack of action?

A study done by Vail et al. (2012) analyzed the ways that different factors can influence the way someone responds to an event that increases mortality salience. This study, although mentioning the negative consequences of mortality salience, emphasized an analysis on the specific ways that mortality salience can elicit benefits for humans. One example of the ways that people think about reacting to mortality salience is the available remedies for the specific instance that created this mortality salience. According to the study, a positive response to death thoughts was contingent on the feasibility of this action. If an option to improve health “is not perceived as viable, people may manage conscious death thoughts by simply suppressing them or denying their vulnerability to factors that compromise physical health”[[8]](#footnote-8) . Therein lies the great paradox of much of climate change stagnancy when it comes to response. Although many people may come to terms with the consequences of climate change, they have not found a viable coping mechanism to combat it. Because they have not found this viable alternative course of action, they must cope with the realities in other ways, such as denial. Scholarship on the different types of responses is extensive, especially in a 2009 study by Janis Dickinson.

According to Dickinson, there are two different types of responses, proximal and distal defenses. Proximal defenses are reactions that “use rational thinking and deploy immediately after conscious thoughts of death are triggered; they involve both active suppression and cognitive distortions that relegate the problem of death to the distant future”[[9]](#footnote-9). Her study analyzes these responses to mortality salience under the assumption that individuals are aware that Global Climate Change is causing this mortality salience. Individuals use rational arguments to deny the threat of death, whatever that may be. Table 1 taken from Dickinson’s article, breaks down how each different cognitive recognition to Global Climate Change elicits a different response[[10]](#footnote-10). Dickinson says that these proximal defenses are the initial reactions to news of the dangers of climate change. However, once the effects of climate change are increasingly present, as well as the consensus that humans are the cause of it, individuals switch over to distal defenses to combat the fear of death.

Distal defenses are responses that are not necessarily immediate and they do not meet the issue presented head on; they consist of behavior that is indirectly dealing with the threats to an individual’s mortality. The distal defenses to mortality salience are wide ranging, but all attempt to reinforce that one’s self-esteem is somehow derived from their place in their cultural world view. Whether it is in the form of defending their own world-view, antagonizing out-groups, or placing more faith and valuation in a group leader, each of them serve to bolster the self-esteem of the individual. The traditional American cultural world view is one that is predicated on consumerism and the unending quest for status through material wealth and/or physical attractiveness. Although this is a broad generalization of American culture, it serves as a viable explanation for the distal defenses in Dickinson’s study. An individual who finds comfort and derives self-esteem from their place in American culture will respond by reinforcing the tenets of that culture[[11]](#footnote-11). Additionally, reinforcing the tenets of one’s own culture may also involve the firm defense of their world view, often through antagonism and discrimination towards other viewpoints.

Much of the awareness and activism surrounding Global Climate Change is done by young and/or liberal minds that have high self-esteem and therefore can sufficiently deal with issues such as death[[12]](#footnote-12). However, Dickinson proposes that the activism of these young creative minds will not be enough to create social change. What she says is that because our society doesn’t value the health of the environment sufficiently, it is not providing a good enough education program to create an environment for healthy environmental activism. “We currently lack the basic understanding required to design educational structures to support leadership, resilience, and courageous responses to the problem of global climate change… the inability of environmental education projects to promote behavioral change may rest with their failure to provide a social context for self-esteem”[[13]](#footnote-13).

Research on terror management theory was helpful in the process of building a foundation for my specific research into the minds of different thinkers, especially on how different sources of self-esteem elicit different responses to mortality salience. Despite the fruitfulness of my findings on TMT, it became clear to me that the findings indicate a flaw in the way the mind responds to thoughts of death. Instead of dealing with the problem of death head on through various ways available to us, humans have the tendency to deflect this terror in ways that don’t necessarily involve the solution to the problem of our own mortality. One example of this issue was found in a study that tested the response to death in the form of self-esteem affirmation. Subjects who derived self-esteem from their driving skills responded to death thoughts by increasing their driving speed and drove more recklessly[[14]](#footnote-14). This study has severe implications on the future of our planet: If someone derives self-esteem from the materialistic possessions they own like the subjects of a 2000 study by Tim Kasser and Kennon Sheldon, the reaction to death thoughts provoked by GCC may result in destructive behavior toward the environment. Subjects in this study “exposed to death became more greedy and consumed more resources in a forest-management game”[[15]](#footnote-15).

I believe that a majority of the problem with our ineffective reaction to GCC is our unwillingness to face the mortality of human nature, and this issue is not only found with conservative Americans that are primarily concerned with material wealth. It is also found with American environmentalists. Matthew Vess and Jamie Arndt (2008) conducted a study analyzing the reaction to mortality salience depending on one’s own belief system. They found that “existential insecurities about death” and its effect on environmental concern is dependent on whether one derives self-esteem from environmental action. For those who derive self-esteem from evironmental action, the experiement increased their level of environmental concern, and it did the opposite for those who do not derive self-esteem from environmental action[[16]](#footnote-16). Understanding where someone derives their own self esteem is crucial to understanding their motives. However, despite these results that seem to indicate that the basis of individual self-esteem is reflected in environmental concern, this environmental concern often times does not translate into environmental action! What can this lack of action be attributed to? For one, although many people derive self-esteem from environmental action, people also have multiple ideologies that drive their behavior in their daily lives. When the self-esteem that one can receive from environmentally altruistic behavior is undermined by another form of ideological belief, it can affect whether or not the person actually takes action. For example, someone who values the environment and derives self-esteem from its preservation but also derives self-esteem from material wealth will not make the essential steps to fully commit to environmental action. Although they may internally support the health of the environment and the mitigation of climate change, their actions do not reflect it. Many environmentalists fall victim to this trap.

It is this finding that is the most crucial to my research on the relationship between Terror Management Theory and the ineffectiveness of Global Climate Change mitigation. Americans are aware of the dangers of Global Climate Change, but actually taking the necessary steps to changing their behavior doesn’t occur because as Dickinson argues, people are realize that these steps are very difficult to take, and more importantly, they conflict with their own worldview, including the worldview of many “environmentalists”. For example, many who claim to be an environmentalist also consume way too many resources to actually be considered an environmentalist. Just because they sacrifice an inefficient lightbulb for a green lightbulb, a Hummer for a Prius, or a plastic water bottle for a reusable one, that doesn’t make them an environmentalist. All that is doing is making them feel better about themselves without having to change their cultural world view. They are not really sacrificing anything! They still have a car, still use electricity, etc.[[17]](#footnote-17) Dickinson describes these types of people as “materialistic environmentalists”[[18]](#footnote-18).

An examination of the debate in issues of environmental philosophy as well as general cultural world views is an appropriate application of my findings in Terror Management Theory. Understanding the variations of ideological belief among environmental thinkers is crucial to understanding one’s justifications for not making pro-environmental decisions. By getting into the minds of proponents and opponents of the environment—and more specifically Deep Ecology—I will be able to make inferences as to whether one’s awareness of death will elicit pro-environmental behaviors, and if not, why the response are not beneficial to the environment. Getting to the root of the issues among each opinion is important to understanding the wide range of thought on environmental philosophy. The findings of this debate will help me to make decisions as to how to approach climate change mitigation.

**Ed Abbey & Dave Foreman**

Men like Edward Abbey and Dave Foreman (radical environmentalists) are men who were unsatisfied with the current state of society. The foundations of the group Earth First! involve the complete support of the philosophical view of Deep Ecology or biocentrism. Arne Naess coined the philosophy of Deep Ecology. Deep Ecology posits that all life on earth has intrinsic value[[19]](#footnote-19). Naess argues that although life is manifested in different ways on earth, the equality of the living organism is justification for the argument that each living organism has intrinsic value. Naess and other environmental activists that have adapted these philosophical arguments advocate for the reduction of the human influence on the environment and destruction of it. The awareness of this inflexible set of ideological principles is crucial to the understanding of the overall radical environmental movement as a whole. This argument discusses and advocates for the intrinsic value of life. “All things have intrinsic value, inherent value, inherent worth”. He goes on to assert that the philosophy of biocentrism and Earth First! is an acceptance of all plants and animals. Within this view, each organism has its place and although some may see some species as enemies, they all play a part in the prosperity of the Earth[[20]](#footnote-20).

Experts on TMT talk about the cognitive distancing of animals as a common strategy humans use to cope with their own mortality. They affirm that humans go to great lengths to distance themselves from “mere animals”[[21]](#footnote-21). Just as religions and cultures are sometimes threatened by the thought of other ideologies and beliefs, humans are threatened by the thought that they are just an evolved version of these animals; instead of entirely separate entity that is clean, sophisticated, intelligent, etc. They say:

We think of ourselves as special, unique, and superior to all other living things. We are God’s special creatures, the crown of creation, certainly deserving of dominion over all other animals… Human culture and religion elevate our species above other animals; for example, we maintain the sanctity and dignity of places of worship and study (and fine dining) with signs warning ‘no animals allowed’[[22]](#footnote-22)

By distancing the human race from animals through consuming them and mistreating them, we are able to supress our anxiety of our own mortality; the same can be said for the destruction of the environment and the discrimination of others. This fact is why Foreman and other radical environmentalists are so passionate about their mission. They are profoundly aware of their mortality and their animal nature; this awareness is part of the fabric of their calling. This acknowledgement grounded them and reminded them of the equality of all life forms. One of Foreman’s fundamentals of Earth First!: “An awareness that we are animals”:

Human beings are primates, mammals, vertebrates. EF!ers recognize their animalness; we reject the New Age eco-la-la that says we must transcend our base animal nature and take charge of our evolution in order to become higher, moral beings. We believe we must return to being animal, to glorifying in our sweat, hormones, tears, and blood. We struggle against the modern compulsion to become dull, passionless androids. We do not live sanitary, logical lives; we smell, taste, see, hear, and feel Earth; we live with gusto. We *are* Animal.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Foreman harps on a systemic issue in our society’s normative principle thought and denies it with great conviction and persuasion. Who is to say that we must “transcend our base animal nature and take charge of our evolution in order to become higher, moral beings”? Who can make the claim that transcending our base animal nature can make us become higher, moral beings? I, as well as many others like Foreman, and Abbey would argue the exact opposite. “My concern for wilderness is not aesthetic but physical, sensual, empathetic, spiritual, political, but above all moral: all beings are created equal”[[24]](#footnote-24) The awareness of our base animal nature can afford us the ability of moral reasoning and decision making with regard to fundamental environmental decisions moving forward.

But what drove these men to these decisions about the world? What influential moment changed them into the men they are today? Additionally, what role does death play into their general decision making? For Aldo Leopold, watching the green fire leave a wolf’s eyes was the epiphany for him. For these two, it seemed that there was no specific moment that transformed their views. Ed Abbey had been a philosophy major at the University of New Mexico. His master’s thesis was based upon anarchism and the mortality of violence; his disdain for all things technology and capitalist can be found within his interest in anarchism. During Abbey’s time as a park ranger in Arches National Park, Moab, Utah, he developed a deep love for the American Southwest and its creatures. Dave Foreman also worked for a government organization (The Wilderness Society) to help preserve wilderness areas. However, the ineffective nature of these career positions is likely a major reason for their push to more radical forms of activism.

Like Foreman, Abbey argues for biocentrism. He embraces the natural forms of the world and the natural and animalistic forms of the human being. His research in college made him the anarchist that built the foundation of the radical environmental movement. Like many environmentalists, he sought ways to help preserve the wild areas. In some instances, he resolved that a distancing from the system causing this destruction was the answer: “If the world of men is truly as ugly, cruel, trivial, unjust and stinking with fraud as it usually appears, and if it is really impossible to make it pleasant and decent, then there remains only one alternative for the honest man: stay home, cultivate your own garden, look to the mountains. (*Withdraw! Withdraw! Withdraw!)*”[[25]](#footnote-25). He detests technology and materialism, and advocates for a withdrawal from it, because he sees no way to fix it.

But did Ed Abbey fear death? There wasn’t necessarily the heightened threat of environmental factors such as Global Climate Change, but Abbey nonetheless had to deal with death. For Abbey, death is a complex topic. He mentions it often, and he goes back and forth in his opinions of it. Ultimately though, he embraces it as the life giving gift that it is. Abbey praises the mortality of the human race for the purpose it gives us. Death gives humans agency, purpose, motivation, and prevents against boredom.

Furthermore, without death, life would lose half its drama. Joy would seem pallid, beauty pale, danger insipid, adventure empty. Our existence would become merely spiritual—off-white and ghostly. Sort of—idyllic but boring… Boredom, in fact, would become the *terror[[26]](#footnote-26)*

It is this reason that Abbey shuns religions and other defenses against death that promise form of immortality. He argues that this immortality serves nothing more than to mediate the fear of death, and after this realization we are left with a dull and boring life. His version of death then is a dull state of boredom without new adventures and novel experiences. For him, monogamy in all forms is unhuman, or at least not masculine. Abbey talks extensively in his many journal entries about this need for new experiences, including sexual partners. So to answer the question, yes, Abbey fears death as all do. However, he does not fear his own mortality. Instead, he fears the boredom of a controlled and planned future. Death is the absence of life, and new human experiences are his source of life.

Most men fear death, and resist it, and invent pathetic, vain consolations to outwit death. But it is possible to accept the idea of one’s own death, without embracing it, by seeing the death of the individual as an intrinsic, essential, natural part of the great life process[[27]](#footnote-27)

Abbey is not fearful of his own mortality, and that fact enables him to make decisions holistically, on the behalf of the Earth. This ability is not commonplace; as a matter of fact, it is very rare. Abbey’s ability to overcome the fear of death is rooted in his ability to realize that he is merely a member of the Earth community, and not a divine being for who the Earth was built to provide for. Ron Arnold, an author and activist against the environmental movement, struggles with the notions of death that Abbey and Foreman do, and his perspectives on the environmental philosophy debate provide an excellent contrast to the monkey-wrenchers.

**Ron Arnold**

Ron Arnold, the author of *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature; The World of the Unabomber* is not the staunch conservative who is against environmental values that I assumed him to be. Although his book attacks radical environmentalists and the destructive vigilantes that sprouted from the birth of their movement, he conducts an intelligent and thought provoking conversation with the fundamentals of deep ecology, which the radical environmental movement is derived from. Arnold is also clear about his own ideology and worldview:

‘My worldview is to preserve the project of modernity,’ I said. Asked what this means and how it plays out, I went through the very intellectual storehouse of science and technology that supports modern industrial civilization. Modernity is more than just the technology, it is also the science, the knowledge that undergirds it. And it’s more than that: the spirit of adventure, curiosity, daring and achievement it excites. I acknowledged that industrialism as presently constituted is not working—it still needs to make more breakthroughs, close more loops in its systems, create more zero pollution plants for heavy industry, find materials that stretch resources, bring people into direct control. Unlike many radical ecoactivists, who believe it is time to abandon industrialism in favor of a profoundly different system[[28]](#footnote-28)

Arnold’s argument is well thought out, intelligent, and supported by facts and high level thinking. He is objective enough in his analysis to get down to the root of the radical environmentalists’ mental processes. He sees their desire for primitivism. Their actions of activism are essentially a response to their disgust with industrial civilization. They see primitive societies as ideal because they put the health of the earth first. Primitivists value the struggle that one had to overcome for the basic needs of life: food, water, shelter, etc. Arnold eloquently diagnoses the hierarchy of needs with help from psychologist Abraham Moslow, and how these needs have transformed through the trajectory of industrial advancement. Moslow says that the structure of capitalism has not only made our basic needs too readily available, in the process, it has allowed us to become numb to these needs and make us desire a higher set of needs: “These new higher level needs are non-material and arise in a more or less regular order. They progress from the need for love, for a sense of belonging, for self-esteem, and for ‘self-actualization’—to be all that one can be”[[29]](#footnote-29). Arnold goes on to talk about how it then transforms into a need for the aesthetic once these secondary needs are met. The flaw that I see in Arnold’s argument is the argument that civilization is necessary for these higher classes of needs. He thinks that civilization is an undeniably better lifestyle than primitive societies.

However, Marshall Sahlins would argue the opposite in his *Stone Age Economics.* Sahlins describes in great detail the ways that a hunter gatherer society thrived. He does a great job discrediting the notion that the hunter gatherer lifestyle was a lifestyle that was stuck and was limited by their constant search for food. Sahlins analyzes the physical hours that Paleolithic groups actually put into the hunting and gathering of food. He used the example of the Dobe Bushmen to illustrate this point. “For each adult worker, this comes to about two and one-half days labor per week… A ‘day’s work’ was about six hours; hence the Dobe work week is approximately 15 hours, or an average of 2 hours and 9 minutes per day”[[30]](#footnote-30). Despite popular opinion, most Paleolithic societies not only are not constantly in a search for food and in fact have plenty of leisure time, they also have a surplus of food. “The daily-per capita subsistence yield for the Dobe Bushmen was 2,140 calories. However, taking into account body weight, normal activities, and the age-sex composition of the Dobe population, Lee estimates the people require only 1,975 calories per capita… ‘The conclusion can be drawn that the Bushmen do not lead a substandard existence on the edge of starvation as has been commonly supposed’”[[31]](#footnote-31). Sahlins’ article not only diagnoses the leisurely hunter gatherer lifestyle, he also through his argument reveals the true benefit that separates them from modern capitalistic lifestyle: a lack of need.

Not only did a “primitive” hunter gatherer society provide the basic needs of the human existence, it also brought all of the secondary and tertiary needs that Moslow talks about. Instead of getting satisfaction from material wealth that often is never satisfied because wealth has unlimited potential, hunters and gatherers were able to achieve high levels of self-esteem. They were not only responsible for their own food production, but they also were an integral part of a cohesive community that depended on each other for basic needs and beyond. Together, they provided each other and themselves a sense of community, self-esteem for group and individual achievements, not to mention the ability that this society had to achieve the need of the aesthetic. These societies depended on nature and were constantly immersed in it. Their intimacy with the natural flora and fauna is something our generation will never be able to fathom or ever experience in our wildest dreams. This need for the aesthetic that Moslow talks about is a legitimate need, and hunter gatherers shared an abundance of it and lived among it! Sander Koole and Agnes Van den Berg mention the benefits that humans get from nature: “Wilderness often elicits very positive reactions in people. People generally find wilderness much more beautiful than cultivated nature (Hartig & Evans, 1993; Van den Berg, 2003). Moreover, exposure to wilderness can promote both physical and psychological well-being” [[32]](#footnote-32).

Ron Arnold’s *Ecoterror* comes to terms with the philosophy of deep ecologists and the fundamentals of most radical environmentalists. Although much of his book directly attempts to discount the radical environmentalist movement, his conclusion talks about the vision of their cause and we find out that Arnold is not very different from these activists:

We can see the roots of Deep Ecology clearly in primitivism, as well as the behavior of radical environmentalists, including animal rights activists. But primitivism is not the exclusive domain of radicals. Primitivism dwells in all of us. We each wear civilization more or less uneasily. Change is the most difficult aspect of existence of many. It is not difficult to feel what the radical environmentalist feels[[33]](#footnote-33)

Arnold acknowledges the reservations he has with a capitalistic society. He is clear that civilization isn’t perfect and hasn’t reached a level of sustainable compatibility with the environment. Arnold recalls his experience discussing his personal philosophy on environmental issues at a 1995 Public Interest Environmental Law Conference near the campus of the University of Oregon:

The project of modernity, I reminded them, created the sciences of genetics, ecology and evolution that brought them to their policies of biocentrism, biodiversity and the unmaking of industrial civilization. By destroying modernity, they would destroy their own frame of reference. The project of modernity has to do with how to make industrial civilization benign or helpful. We are learning ways to do more with less, to be more careful in supplying our needs, to think in new ways that put it all together in productive harmony. However, I admitted, ‘We don’t know how to do that yet. But I don’t want to give it up for something less. We will learn—and I don’t believe that civilization is destroying the world’[[34]](#footnote-34)

Despite this admission of civilization’s faults, and the inability of civilization to come up with solutions for this existential issue, yet he still maintains that civilization provides a higher quality of life! I don’t understand how Arnold can be so objective and reasonable about the failings of society and continue to defend it. Why does he need “electricity and airplanes and highways and pharmaceuticals and cities and agriculture and written language”[[35]](#footnote-35)? What do these technological and industrial products of civilization do for Arnold? His extensive knowledge of the arguments of deep ecologists and radical environmentalists seem to indicate that he is aware of the threat of civilization. Instead, he seems adamant that civilization is still being perfected and will eventually be at a point where we can have the best of both worlds; the technological value of civilization as well as the sustainable practices that will ensure for the continued prosperity of the Earth’s inhabitants.

However, in what world can we assume that this scenario is a reality? The amount of changes that would have to be made to the way people live their lives would have to drastically change in order to comply with sustainable practices in the purest sense of the word. Even as it is now, with the continuous efforts to reach the maximum efficiency in the exploitation of the Earth’s resources, we are still not able to feed everyone. Arnold argues that civilization is still a work in progress, and although it has its flaws, he is not yet willing to sacrifice it for “something less”. There is clearly something more to Arnold that is driving this need for the fruits of the modern world, and he seems to reveal it in his final thoughts of *Ecoterror.*  He first frames his final message in the guise of a similar world view. He references Sigmund Freud’s words against the individuals bent on the destruction of civilization and industrialization. Freud argues that without civilization there would be just nature, “and that would be far harder to bear”[[36]](#footnote-36). Freud specifically talks about the ways that Mother Nature limits us and restricts us. He claims that for those reasons, we created civilization… “For the principal task of civilization, its actual *raison d’etre,* is to defend us against nature”[[37]](#footnote-37). Arnold uses the words of Freud as a segue into his final claim:

Freud considered civilization as ‘a process in service of Eros,’ of life, whose purpose is to combine individuals, families, races into one great unity, ‘the unity of mankind’… And now, I think the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of, and the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species… The wise use movement has arisen to question environmentalism and defend civilization. It says we should not give in to hate. What if civilization is not the destructive evil we think it is? What if civilization is ‘a process in service of Eros?’ What then?[[38]](#footnote-38)

Arnold is struggling to navigate a life that involves the abandonment of material possessions. Facing the cold, unforgiving world that is nature seems like the absence of life. He is not ready to come to grips of his own mortality. The world of materialism and consumerism has afforded him pleasures and luxuries, but more importantly the security against his one true enemy: Nature, and the mortality it symbolizes. Why is this sense of security so lauded in modern society? With security comes the boredom and lack of meaning in one’s life. The absence of certainty and security is the foundation of the true human experience of life.

Arnold is adament that in the battle between life and death, civilization gives life while nature gives death. It is true that with nature come the risks of death. However, I would argue that the template for survival in this world is imbedded in our genetics! We need no security from our own home! We are human beings who are well equipped to survive in the wild. Industrial civilization made life easier and more calculated for humans. They were no longer concerned with the dangers that mother nature can inflict on humans, and that I am sure is a bad thing.

**Consequences of Differing Worldview**

Now that Global Climate Change is knocking on our door with threats of catastrophic damage, people are panicking. As Dickinson articulated, we are dealing with climate change in many ways, and a lot of those ways are very ineffective and are not helpful to solving the solution. Sander Koole and Agnes Van den Berg (2005) discuss the dilemmas that even the most environmentally friendly come across. Despite one’s view on climate change, Dickinson’s article tells us that by now all have come to terms with the mortality salience that is brought about by the realities of climate change, albeit in different ways. For many, widening the gap between man and nature is very effective in suppressing the negative thoughts associated with death because by elevating humans above animals, one can achieve a status of “symbolic meaning” through the establishment of cultural world views that transcend the mere animalistic behavior. In times where we are reminded of our mortality (i.e. imminent Global Climate Change), our instinct is to cling onto the moral and ethical behavior that separate humans from other walks of life.

In support of TMT, research has shown that individuals who are reminded of death are more likely to distance themselves from their biological functions (Goldenburg & Roberts, 2004) and are more prone to support beliefs that humans are distinct from animals and to report being disgusted by animals[[39]](#footnote-39)

This separation gives us dignity and avoids totally coming to terms with the brutal reality of the uncivilized natural world. Those who are aware of our dire situation and want to stop the suffering that climate change will inflict have realized the importance of activism and become invested in the mitigation of the consequences from climate change. However, what does that say about them? Are they really worried about the suffering of others or are they worried about the destruction to the civilized world and themselves? Assuming that environmentalists are able to avoid the common occurrence of conflicting ideologies, many fall victim to the hopelessness that surrounds climate change as a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. “with today’s growing list of environmental problems, the ideal of striking a perfect balance between civilization and nature seems ever more difficult to attain”[[40]](#footnote-40). Even more puzzling is a world that perfectly does balance these two opposites. Have environmentalists even stopped to imagine a world that succeeds in climate change mitigation?

That world would not be the ideal world that environmentalists envision. All that this world would do was enable the ideology of anthropocentrism to persist and thrive at the expense of the biodiversity of the planet. Industrial systems would become more entrenched, the only difference being we would reduce the impact on the environment. A world of unlimited sustainable electric power where modernity can continue to persist and prosper is a haunting image. Humans would continue to expand to every corner of the Earth, only bringing along the few species that are absolutely necessary to the survival of humans. How can this be Eros, as Arnold argues? It seems to me that Arnold is internally conflicted as Dickinson indicated can happen with people that have multiple existing ideologies. It seems that Arnold is well aware of the validity of the deep ecologists argument, but the threat of the uncertain and unforgiving nature pushes him away from a commitment to nature and towards the security of civilization. The unpredictability of the natural world is what breathes life into us all. Yes there is a cost to human behavior reverting back to its more primitive forms, but it is undeniable that it is the way that the Earth can continuously support life within its means.

**Conclusion**

It is not my place to tell the modern human race what to think and what to do; after all, I am only a privileged college student who has adopted these well established philosophies while benefiting from the technologies and systems of capitalistic culture that I am advocating against. But my argument is based on the foundations of ideological arguments made by influential intelligent thinkers. However, even the voices of these influential and charismatic leaders were not effectively heard, and nothing has been done. Yes, you may argue that great strides in climate change mitigation have taken hold, and significant progress is being made. However, this progress is not towards the primary goal of a “primitive” sustainable society devoid of civilization. For that fact, it is clear that we are not making true progress. The primary goal of efforts to mitigate climate change is to avoid the negative consequences of Global Climate Change and to ensure the survival of the civilized state and all it entails.

My research on the vast differences in philosophical ideologies, cultural views, religious views, etc. that are exhibited in the world help to demonstrate the incapability of humans to proactively and effectively mitigate Global Climate Change. Terror Management Theory can only succeed on a global scale if all its members share a similar worldview. Because this fact is unavoidable, the only commonality that all humans share is the fear of death and the survival instinct. Global Climate Change will eventually reach a point where all humans will become intimately aware of their own mortality, and in that moment, they will all realize the value of the Earth.

I advocate for Deep Ecology: that all of the Earth’s living organisms share an equal intrinsic value. I propose that those who are serious about the preservation of the Earth and its inhabitants work to make that a reality by conducting themselves through the principles of Deep Ecology. This does not mean I support all forms of climate change mitigation! In fact, any form of mitigation that supports capitalism and industrial civilization does not actually help the environment, it promotes the behavior and the cultural practices that caused this environmental catastrophe. No, I don’t think that this is globally attainable ideal, but that does not mean I should compromise these fundamentals. The fight against civilization is one that cannot be won through human deliberation and mobilization. Instead, Nature will silence the rise of civilization in a way that I could or any idealist never could. When this age comes, it will hopefully hit the reset button on the human existence.Not only will Global Climate Change[[41]](#footnote-41) provide significant reduction in human population that we desperately need, it will also provide a chance for humans to learn from our mistakes. The question is, will we revert back to our former lifestyle of exploitation and mass consumption of the Earth’s resources, or will we use history and rethink our roles on Earth for the better?

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1. Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (Salt Lake City: Simon and Schuster, 1968).,xiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is a broad generalization. Many retired elderly people have enjoyable and fulfilling retirements. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hiking to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and staying in a cabin with all the trappings of a hotel, or spending two weeks in Alaska traveling from town to town is not really experiencing wilderness, especially since the only notable wildlife we witnessed were mules passing us on the canyon trail or a wildlife and game reserve in Alaska. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the next section for evidence on Terror Management Theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Early humans, particularly hunter gatherers were able to live in a sustainable way in the purest definition of the word. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (Simon and Schuster, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski, “Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews: Empirical Assessments and Conceptual Refinements,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 29 (1997): 61–139. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kenneth E. Vail et al., “When Death Is Good for Life Considering the Positive Trajectories of Terror Management,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16, no. 4 (November 1, 2012): 303–29, doi:10.1177/1088868312440046., 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Janis L. Dickinson, “The People Paradox: Self-Esteem Striving, Immortality Ideologies, and Human Response to Climate Change,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 1 (2009): 34., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Orit Taubman Ben-Ari, Victor Florian, and Mario Mikulincer, “The Impact of Mortality Salience on Reckless Driving: A Test of Terror Management Mechanisms,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76, no. 1 (1999): 35–45, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.76.1.35. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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16. Matthew Vess and Jamie Arndt, “The Nature of Death and the Death of Nature: The Impact of Mortality Salience on Environmental Concern,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 42, no. 5 (October 2008): 1376–80, doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2008.04.007. 1376. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. By making these claims, I am not saying I am above any of them. I use roughly as much electricity as the next college student. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Dickinson and others, “The People Paradox.”, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Arne Naess, Satish Kumar, and Shepherd Production, *Deep Ecology* (Phil Shepherd Production, 1992), http://environment-ecology.com/biographies/194-arne-naess.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Dave Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (New York: Crown Pub., 1991)., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Jamie L. Goldenberg et al., “Fleeing the Body: A Terror Management Perspective on the Problem of Human Corporeality,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 4, no. 3 (August 1, 2000): 200–218, doi:10.1207/S15327957PSPR0403\_1., 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*., 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. , 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Edward Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951-1989*, 1st ed (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994)., 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ron Arnold, *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature: The World of the Unabomber*, 1st ed (Bellevue, Wash: Free Enterprise Press : Distributed by Merril Press, 1997)., 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Marshall Sahlins, “The Original Affluent Society,” in *Stone Age Economics* (Walter de Gruyter, 1972), 1–41., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid.,23. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Sander L. Koole and Agnes E. Van den Berg, “Lost in the Wilderness: Terror Management, Action Orientation, and Nature Evaluation,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 88, no. 6 (2005): 1014–28, doi:10.1037/0022-3514.88.6.1014., 1014. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Arnold, *Ecoterror*., 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1927)., in Arnold, *Ecoterror,* 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Arnold, *Ecoterror*., 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Koole and Van den Berg, “Lost in the Wilderness.”, 1015. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 1026. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. In this sense, I am making an assumption about Global Climate Change. I am assuming that the damage associated with Global Climate Change will wreak havoc on the human race due to a multitude of environmental disasters as well as a climate that is much more harsh for us to handle. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)