



## Viewpoint

# Neglected Interiors: A Critique of Political Ecology, with Reference to the Work of Ken Wilber

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### *Abstract*

*Both Political Ecology and Environmental Education correctly assert the importance of ideology critique and the reappropriation of knowledge/knowledge production in working for socio-ecological change (see Hattingh, et al., 2002:3–4; Lotz-Sisitka, 2002:117). Similarly, both disciplines confront the need to rethink our understanding of how social change comes about, and the limitations of current reflexive practises in enabling such change (Lotz-Sisitka, 2002:117). This viewpoint paper flags the importance – and partiality – of the post-structural sciences of complexity, political activism and discourse analysis in Political Ecology, and demonstrates both an irreducible interiority to our ecological problems, as well as how this interior domain may be approached and argued for. In this sense, Wilber’s critique of Political Ecology may be instructive to Environmental Education practitioners who wish to foster and embody greater awareness of these concerns in their own field. Wilber’s Integral Theory has been applied in the education field, in which Integral Pedagogy has been explored by Esbjörn-Hagens (2006) and Murray (2009), among others.*

### *Introduction*

In the whole interactive and indivisible web – ecological, social and personal – there is need and suffering which must claim our attention. (Ken Jones, 1993:3)

In the history of the collective as in the history of the individual, everything depends on the development of consciousness. (Carl Jung in Walsh & Vaughan, 1993:13)

Gaia’s main problems are not industrialisation, ozone depletion, over-population, or resource depletion. Gaia’s main problem is the lack of mutual understanding and mutual agreement ... about how to proceed with those problems. We cannot reign in industry if we cannot reach mutual understanding and mutual agreement based on a worldcentric moral perspective concerning the global commons. And we reach that worldcentric moral perspective through a difficult and laborious process of interior growth and transcendence. (Wilber, 2000b:285)

Political Ecology<sup>1</sup> is a discipline exploring the relation between political, economic and social dynamics, and the environment. Political Ecology correctly discerns that such dynamics are not neutral, but, rather, are shaped by state and corporate interests. Thus, Political Ecology has emerged out of a growing realisation that consensus views underlying environmental policies, narratives and scientific practices often serve these interests at the expense of both people and the environment i.e. these discourses are primarily discourses about political power (Berglund & Anderson, 2003:4).

As awareness grows that social justice and the protection of nature are closely related (see Brechin, *et al.*, 2003), and as access to natural resources becomes ever more contested, environmentalism has become increasingly politically vocal, and the field of Political Ecology more strongly defined. Mainstream Political Ecology emphasises progressive social and economic reform, noting that global conservation programmes increasingly reflect neoliberal political and economic agendas. As the norms of this globalising conservation become currency in international relations (Stott & Sullivan, 2000), Political Ecology has challenged its ideology, and sought a 'political framing of environmental issues' (*ibid.*). Following from this, Political Ecology has come to view the protection of nature as more a process of ideology critique, politics and human organisation, than of formal, empirical ecological science; and the sociopolitical realm is seen as foremost in enhancing or diminishing conservation efforts.

In recent texts, Political Ecology has highlighted the manner in which powerful interests and formal ecological science construct narratives that 'unevenly distribute privilege' and 'support the strong against the weak' (Stott & Sullivan, 2000). According to Stott (1998), our slowness to unravel the power relations of many formal ecological narratives may be attributed to their 'semiotics and language', and the kind of science supporting them. For these reasons some political ecologists stress not only a 'post-structuralist sensibility to discourse' (Berglund & Anderson, 2003:15), but also question the scientific methods and practices that generate ecological knowledge (Stott & Sullivan, 2000:5–6; Sullivan, 2000:15–17). Increasingly, orthodox views of ecosystem behaviour have been countered by Systems, Chaos and Complexity theories, which emphasise the ecological dynamics of openness, non-equilibrium and non-linear interactions. These new paradigms have yielded novel insights into social and ecological dynamics, and have profound implications in political and policy arenas (see Sullivan, 1996; Sullivan & Rohde, 2002; Behnke, *et al.*, 1993).

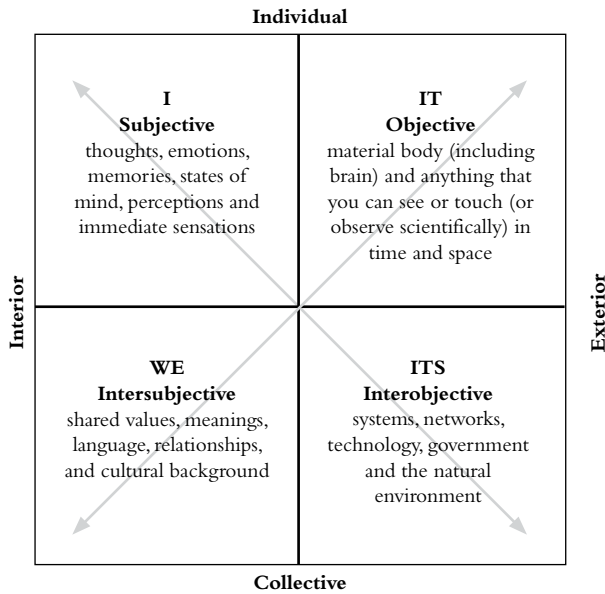
In summary, Political Ecology asserts the primacy of the sociopolitical/economic realm, and ideological/discourse analysis in addressing environmental problems, while promoting the sciences of complexity. Collectively, these approaches now represent a leading edge of environmental theory and analysis in a rapidly growing field.

Although such analysis is indispensable (Wilber, 1998b:23), it is also 'the disease for which it claims to be the cure' (Wilber, 2000a:71, 138, 147). From the perspective of Integral Theory, Political Ecology's focus on the above concerns is problematic (Wilber, 1998b:22; 2000a:72).

While it is beyond the scope of this review to discuss Integral Theory, or Integral Ecology in detail<sup>1</sup> a central idea is the identification of four irreducible, mutually determining domains or perspectives that must be consulted in order to understand a given phenomenon. These

perspectives are represented as four quadrants denoting the interiors and exteriors of both individual and collective realities (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** The four quadrants of Integral Theory



(Source: <http://www.kenwilber.com/blog/show/505>, accessed 8 September 2009)

Political Ecology's bias toward the exterior domains neglects interior dimensions (introspection, contemplative awareness, meaning, value, purpose, intentionality, self-awareness), reducing them to objective, exterior, empirical processes (Wilber, 2000a:71–72, 1998:56), and obscuring a foundational ontological dimension of environmental problems.

Historically, this interior dimension has been most clearly addressed by spiritual/contemplative traditions, which explain suffering in both epistemological and ontological terms. Epistemologically, suffering is generated through ignorance and misperception, while ontologically it is seen to reflect a 'disconnection from our essential being' (Wellwood, 2002:221). Eastern philosophies equate suffering with ignorance of higher modes of awareness (i.e. other ontological levels) that increasingly reveal consciousness as the 'primary constituent of reality' (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). Both Transpersonal Psychology, and Buddhist and Vedantic traditions (among many others), emphasise the plasticity of consciousness, the broad range of its potential states, and the sub-optimal nature of our usual state. Growing evidence suggests that this ignorance underlies much of the individual, social, global and environmental pathology that surrounds and threatens us (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993:8).

Furthermore, neglect of the subjective domain supports only empirical and rational categories of knowing (Wilber, 1998:38) and leaves Political Ecology open to category errors – a mistake described by Jürgen Habermas as the ‘colonialisation of the value spheres by science’ (Wilber, 1998:76, 1998b:27). Wilber’s four-quadrant map describes a methodological pluralism allowing empirical knowledge (science), rational knowledge (logic, philosophy) and spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*) to each disclose irreducible realities with their own ontological validity. Category errors occur through a confusion of these epistemologies, especially when monological science attempts to understand domains disclosed by dialogical philosophy or translogical spirituality (see Wilber, 1998:18, 141–142). Ironically, while ecological science is one of modernity’s triumphs, it entrenches this methodological narrowness – and in Political Ecology, too, is to be found ‘the disqualified universe’ (Mumford); ‘the dawn of the wasteland’ (Eliot in Wilber, 1998:76). In contrast, Integral Theory applied to ecology offers four domains of inquiry, each with its own techniques, injunctions, and methods to acquire knowledge claims about its respective dimension of concern (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Integral Ecology’s four terrains

		INTERIOR	EXTERIOR
INDIVIDUAL	<p><b>Terrain of Experiences</b> The subjective realities of any organism at all levels of its perception.</p> <p><i>Known by felt experience</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>I</b></p>	<p><b>Terrain of Behaviours</b> The objective realities of any organism at all levels of its organisation.</p> <p><i>Known by observation</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>IT</b></p>	
	COLLECTIVE	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>WE</b></p> <p><b>Terrain of Cultures</b> The intersubjective realities of any organism at all levels of its communion.</p> <p><i>Known by mutual resonance</i></p>	<p><b>ITS</b></p> <p><b>Terrain of Systems</b> The interobjective realities of any organism at all levels of its intersection.</p> <p><i>Known by systemic analysis</i></p>

Note: this simple depiction is given its fullest treatment from an ecological perspective in Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmerman (2009).

(Source: <http://www.integralecolology.org/source>, accessed 8 September 2009)<sup>2</sup>

While the ‘post-structural sciences of complexity’ (Stott & Sullivan, 2000:6) represent a suite of genuinely new and needed paradigms (Wilber, 1998:38–39, 1998b:27) they do not address the problems described above. None of them go beyond their monological/empirical grounding (Wilber, 1998:39), and thus, these approaches deliver not a genuine, but merely an exterior/objectivistic holism (Wilber, 2000a:72, 1998b:22). As a result, they have little effect

on psychological maturity because they introduce no new ontological depth i.e. they do not adequately address interior stages of consciousness development (Wilber, 2000a:137–8).<sup>3</sup>

While Political Ecology has witnessed a ‘growth in interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity’ (Stott & Sullivan, 2000:5), it has demonstrated little authentic epistemological pluralism (but see Jones, 1993; Mattingly, 1997; & Allendorf, 1997). This is evidenced by its neglect of Wilber’s Subjective quadrant (Figures 1 and 3), and accounts for the widespread inability of political ecologists to adopt approaches that ‘go to the heart of the human condition’ (Jones, 1993:167).

Finally, ecological wisdom is not needed to protect the biosphere – it is needed to bring humans into agreement on how this can be done (Wilber, 2000b:292, 2000:148), a project in which the human condition itself is an impediment to progress (Jones, 1993:40–44; Wilber, 2000a:137–138, 2000b:285). Increasingly, transnational crises reveal the inadequacy of national responses, and place a premium on our ability to cooperatively transcend self-interest. These crises relate primarily to the following:

- (1) The necessity to protect the global commons, the common biosphere/climate which belongs to all.
- (2) The necessity to regulate the world financial system, which no longer responds to national borders.
- (3) The necessity to maintain a modicum of international peace and security (Wilber, 2000:204–205).

Wilber (2000:205) notes that while solutions to these crises demand efforts on ecological-economic-financial fronts, that they also require a corresponding shift in world-views that will allow citizens and their governments to ‘perceive the greater advantage in the lesser death’ (the surrendering of some sovereignty for the greater good) (Wilber, 2000:205).

Wilber’s contention above (Wilber, 2000:205, 148, 2000b:292) explains Hattingh’s (2002:5) observation that while ‘sustainable development’ is almost universally supported as a moral imperative, that there is little consensus about its content, interpretation and implementation. This state of affairs suggests that ‘Ontology precedes ethics’ (Zimmerman in Fox, 1990: 227; Evernden, 1993:69; Jones, 1993:172; Macy, 1991:215–217; Wilber, 2000b:285) because the lack of ‘consensus’ noted by Hattingh cannot be addressed without recourse to ‘the interior dimensions where mutual accord and intersubjective wisdom can actually be found’ (Wilber, 2000:148, 2000b:253).

Similarly, no reworking of ‘semiotics and language’ (Stott, 1998), or application of the ‘sciences of complexity’ (Stott & Sullivan, 2000:6) will alone suffice – again, because the worldcentric moral perspectives required are achieved not through intellectual or ideological assent, but through interior growth and transformation (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993:223; Wilber, 2000:148). As an example of this emerging awareness, consultants to UNICEF recently attributed this organisation’s failures to a lack of understanding of ‘the need for interior/subjective development in individuals and societies in order to make the process of change and especially transformation sustainable’ (Wilber, 2001:102).

Once a global, consensual perception of the nature and degree of environmental problems emerges, many approaches will be needed. Wilber’s formulation demands the integration of its

four domains, and champions activism across them. But it also reveals an irreducible interiority to our environmental problems (Figure 3), casting them as a ‘race between consciousness and catastrophe’ (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993: 231) in which a primary, underlying task is to encourage sufficient human maturity to embrace a solution.

**Figure 3.** The four terrains of an eco-crisis according to Integral Theory

	INTERIOR	EXTERIOR
INDIVIDUAL	<p><b>Crisis of Consciousness</b>            Reactive emotions            Lack of perspective-taking            Self-identity issues            Psychological dynamics</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>I</b></p>	<p><b>Crisis of Behaviours</b>            Apathy            Resource use            Consumerism            Under adherence to science</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>IT</b></p>
COLLECTIVE	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>WE</b></p> <p><b>Crisis of Cultures</b>            Worldview clashes            Religious fundamentalism            Philosophical unclarity            Tribalism</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ITS</b></p> <p><b>Crisis of Systems</b>            Globalisation            Political dynamics            Ineffective education            Poor regulation enforcement</p>

(Source: <http://www.integralecolology.org/source>, accessed 8 September 2009)<sup>4</sup>

Techniques for catalysing the required interior development have been refined over thousands of years in hundreds of cultures, and constitute the core of the world’s contemplative traditions (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993:47). These traditions, most notably those of the East, emphasise that ordinary consciousness is a narrow, restricted version of higher modes of awareness, and that specific injunctions are necessary to cultivate these higher potentials (Wilber, 1998b:272; Wilber, 2000:283–284). Similarly, Western developmental/transpersonal psychology asserts that consciousness is not a single entity, but a developmentally unfolding process with significantly different architecture at each of its stages of growth. That consciousness contains the potential for higher stages of development and wellbeing, including refinements in cognitive, affective, moral and spiritual development is widely acknowledged (see Wilber, 2000a:197–217).

These claims are not based on mere narratives or theories, but, primarily, a set of experiments, exemplars or injunctions in the strictly scientific sense of that term (Wilber, 1993: 11; 2000:281–284), and in the context of the three essential aspects of scientific inquiry:

- injunction – i.e. actual practices, exemplars, paradigms, experiments;
- direct apprehension – immediate experience of the domain brought forth by the injunction, i.e. data; and

- communal confirmation (or rejection), i.e. falsifiability. Validation of evidence with those who have adequately completed injunctive and apprehensive stages (adapted from Wilber, 1998:155–6; Harman & Clark, 1994:380).

Such claims thus withstand the most rigorous of scientific scrutiny, and are corroborated by an enduring accumulation of ‘empirical, phenomenological, interpretive, contemplative and cross-cultural evidence’ (Wilber, 2000b: 138; Huxley, 1946). Contemporary developmental psychology confirms a ‘remarkably consistent story of the evolution of consciousness’ (Wilber, 2001:5). Humankind’s perennial search for meaning and self-knowledge reveals a human interior capable of significant refinements in compassion, ecological sensitivity and adaptive intelligence. However, the referents of such interior growth are ‘not simply given empirically’, but are disclosed by cognitive transformations in the context of injunctions (Wilber, 2000:282). Not even the most avant-garde of the post-structural sciences of complexity can offer this (Wilber, 1998:38–39, 2000a:136–138), and nor can it be found in a ‘post-structuralist sensibility to discourse’ (Berglund & Anderson, 2003:15) or a progressive/green politics.

For environmentalists to dismiss approaches that are injunctive, evidential, and falsifiable is to weaken environmentalism – indeed, it is profoundly unscientific to ignore fallibilist claims (Wilber, 1998b:18; 2000:284) for which an experimental proof is possible (Wilber, 1993:11; Fox, 1990:251–252). Political Ecology’s task is to acknowledge its partial approach, for while the advocacy of the discipline retains its current narrowness, problems facing the environment seldom come clearly into focus.

Practised well, ecology (both formal and political) reveals its truths – but this does not guarantee that we will use these truths wisely (Shrader-Frechette & McCoy, 1993:197, 278; Wilber, 1998:x). For environmentalists, the pressing concern is not what our subject ought to become – but, rather, what we must become in order to practice it. It is thus that we can engage the dilemmas ‘of finite beings in finite circumstances attempting to honour an infinite Care’ (Wilber, 2000:765).

### *Educational Implications of this Discussion*

Environmental Education invites the maturation of both our environmental sensibilities, and our capacity to meet environmental challenges. In striving to accomplish this, Environmental Education grapples critically with multiple perspectives on the environment (see for example Hattingh, *et al.*, 2002); and ascribed to Environmental Education processes are questions concerning the ‘epistemological and political reflexivity’ (Lotz-Sisitka, 2002:119) required to engage the complexity of environmental risk, and the challenge to ‘think and act transformationally with regard to the self and self-realisation’ (Hattingh, 2002:12). Integral Theory, with its honouring of both interior development and epistemological pluralism, and its sophisticated inhabiting of multiple perspectives within an inclusive framework, is well suited to the pursuit of these aspirations, both theoretically, practically (see Wilber, 2001, 2007) and at the level of the personal (Wilber, *et al.*, 2008). Integral Theory points not so much to a new set of methods, but to ways of coordinating, integrating, practicing and embodying already

existing approaches within progressive pedagogies. The integral approach can inform both the organisational structure of teaching facilities and curricula in an all quadrant (see Figure 1) manner (Wilber, 2001:96<sup>5</sup>), and indicates new ways of being in the classroom and making meaning of the educational process (Murray, 2009:127). At the same time, Integral Theory remains provisional and open-ended, lending itself to genuine inquiry and ongoing refinement – ‘It is not a fixed or final theory, simply one that has served its purpose if it helps you get to a better one ...’ (Wilber, 2001:xiii).

### *Conclusion*

If Political Ecology is to enhance conservation efforts then it requires greater self-scrutiny. Political Ecology avoids discussion of the internal human condition, which remains unacknowledged as a driver of exclusion, injustice and environmental degradation (Jones, 1993:167, 40–44). Failure to correct this oversight leaves unattended a foundational ontological dimension to the ecological problems we face. The Integral Theory of American philosopher Ken Wilber acknowledges neglected interior dimensions and offers a framework for ordering and honouring the many perspectives with which ecology must engage.

### *Notes on the Contributor*

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### *Notes*

The following websites provide downloadable materials on Ken Wilber’s work, Integral Theory and Integral Ecology: <http://www.integralecology.org/source>, <http://integralinstitute.org>, <http://multiplex.integralinstitute.org/Public/cs/files/default.aspx>.

### *Endnotes*

- 1 While Political Ecology is flagged in this paper, it should be noted that Wilber’s critique applies equally to the many social science disciplines which have fruitfully studied the interface between socio-political/economic arenas and the environment, and linked environmental justice with the social and political.
- 2 This website contains excellent free downloads of overviews of both Integral Theory and Integral Ecology, bibliographies, audio and video material and case studies, amongst other resources.
- 3 For comparison/presentation of the many stage-based models of human development and their associated authors see Wilber (2000a:197–217).
- 4 This depiction is given its fullest treatment in Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmerman (2009).
- 5 For EE practitioners, the following resources provide an introduction to Integral Theory’s application



to education: (1) Ken Wilber and the Education Literature – Abridged Annotated Bibliography by R. Michael Fisher. [http://www.pathsoflearning.org/resources\\_writings\\_Ken\\_Wilber.pdf](http://www.pathsoflearning.org/resources_writings_Ken_Wilber.pdf) – accessed 8 September 2009; (2) Esbjörn-Hargens, S. (2006). How integral theory informs teaching, learning, and curriculum in a graduate program. *ReVision: A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation*, 28(3), 21–29.; (3) Murray, T. 2009. What is the Integral in Integral Education? From Progressive to Integral Pedagogy. *Integral Review* 5(1): 96–134.

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