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It's time we learned to live in peace with our planet
Stephan Harding
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I believe it is now blindingly obvious that our lust for endless economic growth is seriously destabilising the climate of the Earth and wiping out the astounding biodiversity that enfolds us. As the ice caps collapse and the great forests burn, we are at last waking up to the fact that we are at war with nature - a war that only she can win.

So why is our civilisation so destructive of the natural world on which we utterly depend? Some say that it's merely a matter of technology, that any culture with access to chainsaws and bulldozers would have done the same. But I disagree. I am convinced that we see the world in an utterly mistaken way, that something malicious is eating away at the core of our view of the world. For us, the Earth is nothing more than a vast, dead machine to be exploited without hindrance by focusing only on what can be measured and quantified.

All of us go about with this idea deliberately planted in our heads by our educators, by the media, by politicians and by scientists. It was Descartes, Bacon and the other pioneering scientific geniuses of the 16th and 17th centuries who sold us this line, and for the past 400 years this understanding has contaminated every aspect of our lives.

Our efforts to solve the massive ecological and social crises we now face will come to naught unless we remedy this unbalanced perspective. So if "world as machine" only alienates, disconnects and makes us destructive, then what is the alternative? Here it is: that our Earth is palpably and deliciously alive; that our turning world is a vast living creature of planetary proportions within which we are immersed and which supports and nourishes our psyches every bit as much as our physical bodies.

This is an ancient understanding with a profound pedigree. Plato called it the "anima mundi" - the soul of the world. For the ancient Greeks, and indeed for most indigenous people to this day, mountains, forests, the great oceans and the wide-open sky are full of an ineffable communicative power that we are capable of perceiving spontaneously with our intuition and our senses and to which we respond with a profound sense of awe and innate respect.

These are the qualities so cruelly banished by science for so many centuries. They teach us that the whole of nature has value because it exists, irrespective of its usefulness to us.

The good news is that this alternative, more holistic perspective is at last moistening and

dissolving the desiccated scientific heart of our culture, at first through the astonishing discoveries of quantum physics, and more recently through James Lovelock's Gaia theory. Both imply that nature is far more creative, far more animate than we ever dared suppose.

How would things be if we achieved this? Limits to material growth would be rationally determined through our best science and then accepted as we took up our rightful space within the community of life. Only things of real value would grow - love of place, simplicity, self-sufficient local communities and economies, ecological restoration, renewable technologies, sustainable artifacts - and time for contemplating and celebrating the qualities of this astonishing Earth.

⋮ Stephan Harding is coordinator of the MSc course in holistic science at Schumacher College, Devon. His book, *Animate Earth: Science, Intuition and Gaia*, is published by Green Books (£10.95). To order a copy for £9.95 with free UK p&p call 0870 836 0875 or go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop

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