

About AWE

The Alliance for Wild Ethics works for a rejuvenation of oral culture — not to the exclusion of literate culture, nor to the exclusion of digital culture, but rather underneath these more abstract layers of society, providing their necessary soil and sustenance. For when left to itself, the literate intellect, adrift in the play of signs, easily forgets its dependence upon the body and the breathing earth – as the digital mind, dazzled by its own creations, often becomes oblivious to the sensuous, animate surroundings. Ungrounded, these abstract and self-reflexive layers of human consciousness come to believe in their own autonomy – and as they do so, they begin to wreak havoc upon the more-than-human earth.

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DEMONSTRATION ONLY



Alliance of Wild Ethics (AWE)

Description:

The Alliance for Wild Ethics (AWE) is a consortium of individuals and organizations working to ease the spreading devastation of the animate earth through a rapid transformation of culture.

Stakeholder(s):

Wild Ethics Alliance Members

David Abram :

Director for the Alliance of Wild Ethics

Stephan Harding

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Dark Mountain Project

Acoustic Ecology Institute

Animas Valley Institute

Ashes and Snow

Building Living Neighborhoods

Center for Biological Diversity

Circle of Stories

Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund

Cultural Conservancy

Ecotrust

Nature Institute

Orion

RAFT :

(Renewing America's Food Traditions)

Resurgence

Salmon Nation

Schumacher College

Slow Food International

Sonar

Tamalpa Institute

Terralingua

Walking Stick Foundation

White Earth Land Recovery Project

Wilderness Awareness School

The Wildlands Network

John Luther Adams :

composer

Marc Beckoff :

animal ethologist

Cornelius Boots :

breath wizard

Robert Bringhurst :

poet and essayist

Becky Burrill :

dancer

Matthew Chase-Daniel :

artist

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philosopher of science

Patrick Curry :

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artist

David Gallahan :

dancer

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— continued next page

Stakeholders (continued)

Anna Halprin :
dancer and performance artist

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Doak Heyser :
rock art photographer

James Hillman :
psychologist and author

Freeman House :
author and activist

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Paula Josa-Jones :
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Sean Kane :
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Bill McKibben :
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Margot McLean :
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Gary Nabhan :
author and activist

Arne Naess :
philosopher

Richard Nelson :
cultural ecologist, author, sound recordist

Richard Powers :
novelist

Taira Restar :
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Pattiann Rogers :
poet

Deborah Bird Rose :
cultural ecologist

David Rothenberg :
musician and author

Gary Snyder :
poet

Brian Swimme :
cosmologist

Maya Ward :
writer

Mobi Warren :
poet and teacher

Rex Weyler :
author

Grace Wells :
poet

Terry Tempest Williams :
author and activist

Vision

Thriving oral cultures

Mission

To ease the spreading devastation of the animate earth through a rapid transformation of culture.

Values

Love: Motivated by a love for the more-than-human collective of life, and for human life as an integral part of that wider collective, we work to revitalize local, face-to-face community – and to integrate our communities perceptually, practically, and imaginatively into the earthly bioregions that surround and support them.

Reality: Our work is aligned with a new respect for the mysterious eloquence of earthly reality – a deeply immanent sense of the sacred quietly dawning across the planet.

Wonder: While Alliance members bring different skills and strategies to bear in our various projects, an underlying method in all our efforts is the awakening of wonder.

Wildness: Why Wild? Wildness is the earthy, untamed, undomesticated state of things — open-ended, improvisational, moving according to its own boisterous logic. That which is wild is not really out of control; it is simply out of our control. Wildness is not a state of disorder, but a condition whose order is not imposed from outside. Wild land follows its own order, its own Tao, its own inherent way in the world. (The word “wild” may derive from the Old German “wald,” meaning a forest or wooded upland, or it may derive from “willed,” the past participle of the English word “will.” For wild terrain follows its own will: self-willed > self-wild > wild.) Wilderness, a related term, has in the modern era come to be equated with land that is pristine, uninhabited by humans, and unaffected by human artifice. Such a narrow definition assumes, however, that humans are not a part of nature, and that our species has no wildness of its own. A broader definition might equate wilderness with land that is untouched by modern humankind, unaffected by technological civilization. But is such an ideal landscape to be found anywhere today? Has not technological civilization spread its influence unto every corner of the planet? Rapid climate change, itself a result of the profligate burning of fossil fuel for human convenience, is by now altering organic life in every region of the biosphere. Hence unadulterated wilderness, free of all taint from civilization, can no longer be said to exist. Yet at the very same historical moment when wilderness, in that pristine sense, is vanishing from the world, a new and unexpected recognition is slowly arising that there is no place that is not wild!

Chaos: It is now becoming apparent that there exists no place on earth where an exclusively human logic holds complete sway over things – there is no realm (not even the mental space of our thoughts) that falls completely under conscious human control. Indeed, the new sciences of “chaos” and “complexity” demonstrate that even the simplest and most ubiquitous phenomena — the air currents, for instance, in the room where you sit reading this, including the small vortices made by your breath as it slips in and out of your nostrils – enact dynamic patterns that we can never precisely predict, even if we were to know all of the knowable parameters. The slow metamorphosis of a storm-cloud, the halting trajectory of a raindrop down a windowpane, the precise micro-moment of your next heartbeat — all of these happenings exceed the determinative or predictive power of even the most sophisticated science. They are, in other words, wild. Again, they are not entirely out of control; they are simply out of our control, beyond our ability to fully map with our theories or fully fathom with our thoughts.

Complexity

Culture: And then there’s Wild Culture: Recent ethnobotanical and archaeological research in the Americas has shown that many landscapes deemed “wild” by the earliest European explorers had already been modified and subtly managed by the indigenous peoples of those regions, often for many centuries. We now know that the rich diversity of the Amazonian rainforest, for example, is at least partly the result of small-scale horticultural practices enacted by the native Indians of that region for many thousands of years before contact!

Creativity: Such evidence should not lead us to conclude that the assumption of wildness is always mistaken, but rather that human creativity and craft, when practiced in attentive, participatory attunement with the local earth, can also be deeply wild. Human creativity can be beneficial, that is, not only to ourselves, but to the wild, more-than-human reality that enfolds and sustains us. Such are the forms of creativity and culture that the Alliance for Wild Ethics seeds and encourages — practices that bring human groups into ever deeper accord with the exuberant nature that surrounds them, enabling community to thrive in reciprocity with a flourishing terrain. Wild culture accords well with a wild-flourishing Earth!

Craft

Ethics: Why Ethics? All of man’s mistakes arise because he imagines that he walks upon a lifeless thing, whereas his footsteps imprint themselves in a flesh full of vital power. ~ Jean Giono

Humility: Although “ethics” is commonly equated with a set of rules or principles for right conduct, for us ethics has more to do with a simple humility toward others – an attentive openness not just toward other persons but toward the inexhaustible otherness of the manifold beings that compose this earthly world.

Responsibility: When we consider the palpable earth around us as though it were an object – when we conceive of nature merely as an objective set of mechanical processes – we tacitly remove ourselves from the world we inhabit. We pretend that we are not palpable creatures co-evolved with the rest of earthly life, but are rather disembodied minds pondering reality from a godlike position outside that reality. In this manner, we free ourselves from any responsibility to the rest of nature; we give ourselves license to engage other animals, plants, and natural elements as a

set of resources waiting to be used by us, as a clutch of fixed and finished entities waiting to be manipulated and engineered to suit our purposes. To look upon any entity only as an object is to sever the possibility of real relationship with that being, and so to forestall any need for ethical reflection.

Dynamics: If, however, we acknowledge the myriad presences around us not as objects but as subjects in their own right — as open-ended beings with their own inherent spontaneity and active agency — then we swiftly become aware of the relationships that we sustain with those beings. For only then, when we recognize the things we experience as sensitive beings like ourselves, do we notice that we inhabit a common world. And in truth, it is not only the other animals and the plants with whom we actively share this world; it is also mountains and rivers and stormclouds, the asphalt street underfoot and the wind surging through the skyscrapers... Every aspect of the sensuous surroundings can be experienced as an active, animate power, able to sense the beings around it and to influence them in turn.

Community: When we speak of earthly nature in this manner, not as a collection of passive and determinate objects but as a community of living subjects, then we straightaway begin to feel ourselves as members of this community, and to wonder about the quality of our relations with the other beings in our neighborhood.

Intuition: The intuition that we inhabit a breathing cosmos — the awareness that the sensible things around us are, like our own creaturely bodies, sensitive and perhaps even sentient powers — is common to the discourse of virtually every indigenous, traditionally oral culture. For in the absence of intervening technologies, the unaided human senses cannot help but encounter the world as a tangle of animate, expressive beings. Since we are corporeal creatures thoroughly embedded in the sensuous cosmos, we can encounter things only from our limited angle or perspective. We never experience another entity in its totality — we can never completely penetrate or plumb the secrets of another being.

Perception: Each thing that we perceive has its accessible aspects and its hidden aspects, its bright facets that capture our attention and its unseen dimensions that lure us deeper into participation. Hence our perception of any presence is not an instantaneous event but rather an unfolding dynamic — a living interchange wherein a thing first “catches” our eye, or subtly beckons to our body, to which we reply by focusing our gaze upon it, or reaching out to touch it, whereupon the other replies by revealing some further facet of itself, and so we are drawn ever deeper into dialog with the unique allurements of this boulder or that fungus-ridden tree stump. Direct sensory perception reveals the things around us not as inert or inanimate chunks of matter but as enigmatic, elemental presences with whom we find ourselves in relation.

Experience: To speak of the world as a clutch of inanimate and mechanical objects is therefore to deny our real experience; it is to avoid, and to stifle, our spontaneous, sensory encounter with the world in favor of a set of mental abstractions. It is a way of speaking, and thinking, that closes our animal senses.

Relationships: To speak of the earth, on the other hand, as a living field of relationships between beings — each being with its own openness or creativity — is to speak in accordance with our senses, and with our spontaneous bodily experience of the world around us. It is a way of speaking, and of thinking, that enhances our sensory rapport with the sensuous terrain; a way that holds us in conscious relation to the elemental realities that enfold us.

Ambiguity: By acknowledging the inherent ambiguity and mystery of the myriad beings that surround us (by acknowledging that we can never fathom all the secrets of even a single blade of grass) such a way of thinking engenders humility, and a steady wonder — the exuberant heart of a wild ethics.

Mystery

Reciprocity: At this curious moment in the world’s unfolding, when human violence toward other humans is matched only by our violence toward the living earth — with terrestrial and oceanic ecosystems rapidly collapsing under the weight of our steady assaults, and with countless species tumbling into oblivion as a result of our arrogant disregard — it is now evident that our own species must undergo a sea change if anything of beauty is to survive. If we wish to bring humankind into a new reciprocity with the rest of the biosphere, then we will need to release ourselves from the tyranny of outmoded concepts, and remember ourselves as a part of this breathing planet. We’ll need to renew our felt experience of the land as a complex of sensitive and sentient powers, as a boisterous community of beings in which our own lives are participant, and to which we are beholden. This primordial form of experience, which returns us from the pretense of disembodied detachment to our corporeal situation in the midst of the here and now, engenders a new respect and restraint in all our actions.

Empathic Attunement: Divesting ourselves of our abstractions, acknowledging the enigmatic otherness that things display when we meet them in the depth of the present moment, enables an attentive and ethical comportment in all our endeavors, an empathic attunement to our surroundings and a compassionate intention to do least harm. For too long we humans have withheld our allegiance from the sustaining earth, reserving our faith only for a mystery assumed to reside entirely beyond the sensuous. To return to our senses is to remember an older, indigenous faith that we have never completely lost – our breathing body’s implicit faith in the solid ground underfoot and the renewal of light every dawn, its faith in mountains and rivers and the cyclical return of the salmon, in the silent germination of seeds and the unseen, imperturbable wind. It is this animal fidelity to the breathing earth, so easily overlooked or forgotten, that unites us with countless other species – and it remains the ground of every lasting ethic between persons, and between peoples. A faith in the wild and shadowed goodness of the Earth.

Oral Communication: Why Oral Culture? While the Alliance for Wild Ethics works fluidly with the printed word and with digital media, we nonetheless give priority to oral culture – the culture of face-to-face (and face-to-place) storytelling. Indeed, we hold that the revitalization of oral culture is an ecological imperative! Why? Well, let’s consider: Literate culture (the layer of society implicitly informed by books, newspapers, and magazines) enables an exchange of tales and insights from diverse times and places. Reading is a most wonderful form of experience, yet it is necessarily abstract relative to our direct, sensory encounters in the immediacy of our locale. Indeed, by mingling notions drawn from divergent eras and cultures, literate discourse often instills a useful distance, and detachment, from our immediate surroundings (a great blessing when the situation in which we find ourselves is especially oppressive and painful). Literate culture, in this sense, is inherently cosmopolitan.

Sense of Place: Digital culture (the computerized culture of email and social media and web-pages like this one), brings us almost instantaneous information from around the world, empowering virtual interactions with people in vastly different locations. The internet is an astonishing achievement, rich with potential. Yet for all its apparent immediacy, digital communication is often more disembodied and placeless than our involvement with printed books and handwritten letters. Indeed cyberspace seems to have no location at all, unless the “place” that we encounter through the internet is the planet itself, transmuted into a weightless field of information. If literate culture is inherently cosmopolitan, our increasing participation with social networking, e-commerce, and digital posts of all kinds involves us in a still more abstract layer of culture that is inherently global and globalizing. Oral culture, however, is inherently local and place-based. It involves the face-to-face exchange of stories that are not written down – tales that often carry, in their telling, precise information regarding the subtleties of the local terrain.

Story Telling: For tens of thousands of years before the recent advent of formal writing systems, we humans were utterly dependent upon the oral transmission of such stories, in which were embedded instructions regarding such matters as which local plants were good to eat, and which ones were poisonous, and how to prepare certain plants as medicines for particular ailments. The stories preserved crucial information regarding where to find water in the event of a prolonged drought, and how best to hunt specific animals, and how to prepare their skins for shelter or clothing...

Knowledge: Traditional oral stories, in other words, carried within their adventures all of the ancestrally accumulated knowledge regarding how to survive and to flourish in a particular region.

Landscape: Moreover, in the absence of the written word, the sensuous landscape itself was the necessary mnemonic (or memory-trigger) for remembering the oral tales. For example, local animals often figured as protagonists within the stories; hence an unexpected encounter with a coyote or a hummingbird, as one went about one’s daily business, would promptly trigger the memory of some tale wherein that animal played a prominent role. Similarly, the encounter with a particular cliff, or creek bed, or cluster of boulders would release the memory of the storied events believed to have happened in that place. To the members of an indigenous, oral culture, every part of the regional landscape has its storied associations – tales that steadily seem to tell themselves as one wanders the local earth. For the land, itself, speaks.

Language: Language, to a deeply oral sensibility, is not an exclusively human possession, but a property of the animate earth — a power in which we (along with the bears, the aspen trees, and the huddled mountains) all participate.

Sensorial Intimacy: Such sensorial intimacy with the living land — such unsentimental, respectful reciprocity with the more-than-human terrain — is the hallmark of every deeply oral culture.

Natural Intelligence: It is an embodied, earthly form of intelligence that is sorely lacking today.

Sustainability: The Alliance for Wild Ethics holds that neither the cosmopolitan culture of literacy nor the globalizing culture of the internet can ever be truly sustainable (truly nourishing to the animate earth) until these are both rooted, once again, within a thriving oral culture.

Diversity: Or rather, within a thriving diversity of oral cultures, each such culture tuned to the particular pulse of its place, each a dynamic expression of the local ecosystem, or bioregion, that it inhabits.

DEMONSTRATION ONLY

Human Experience

Provoke deeply felt shifts in the human experience of nature.

Stakeholder(s)

Artists

Scientists

We employ the arts, often in tandem with the natural sciences, to provoke deeply felt shifts in the human experience of nature.

Integration

Integrate communities into the bioregions that surround and support them.

Stakeholder(s):

Eco-Cultural Initiatives :

The Alliance draws clues for such integration from a range of innovative, eco-cultural initiatives currently underway around the world.

Indigenous Peoples :

We also draw guidance from the place-based traditions of diverse indigenous, oral peoples – mindful that the largest part of our human inheritance derives from our indigenous ancestry.

Bioregions

Consultation & Training

Provide consultation and training for communities, organizations, and businesses committed to a sustainable and sustaining world.

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Stakeholder(s):

Communities

Businesses

Organizations

Administrative Information

Start Date:

End Date:

Publication Date: 2020-04-13

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