

ECO-FEMINISM AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *FLIGHT BEHAVIOR*

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Abstract

This article applies an Ecofeminist lens to Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*. The women in these works recognize that human and nonhuman lives, including plants and animals, are inextricably linked. This awareness enables the female protagonists to transcend the dualistic or dominant culture in which they live. Born out of a rising concern that the earth cannot support modern (particularly Western) consumerist and environmental exploitative behaviors, the ecocritical movement in the humanities has gained traction in academia over the last three decades.

Keywords Eco-feminism, Climate Change and Ecology.

Ecofeminism and Social Perspectives

Ecofeminism and the Future of Climate Change Many of the women's stories in Shannon Bell's *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed* discuss reluctant activism. They had an appreciation for nature before their experiences with the results of exploitive land practices that caused environmental problems such as coal ash, flooding, landslides, and erosion. After their experience with those problems and the activism they began to save their families. The women in *Our Roots Run Deep as Ironweed* share a renewed wonder and appreciation for the nature around them as well as a new identity as activists. The numbers did not trouble them until they were personally affected by the results of environmental exploitation now they have narratives to add to the numbers. The main character in *Flight Behavior* falls into a similar camp as she learns about the realities of climate change that are manifesting in her backyard. In this chapter, I will continue my examination of gendered responses to nonhumans. With the notable exception of the scientist Byron, the men in *Flight Behavior* perpetuate exploitive land use practices while the main character, Dellarobia, learns of the realities of climate change that are now evident in her backyard and her town.

Flight Behavior departs thematically from *Prodigal Summer* in its discussion of the realities and consequences of climate change. This novel is characterized by those who deny or resist the fact that climate change is real and that it affects their lives. Gradually, Dellarobia comes to the realization that she cannot deny climate change. *Flight Behavior* is more than just a service announcement about climate change, though. In the novel, the future generations are on the danger zone. The monarchs have had to shift their home place and nesting grounds because of climate change and the ambiguous yet foreboding future of the monarchs is mirrored by other difficult births in the novel: Dellarobia has a traumatic experience with Hester's birthing lambs as she comes to accept the death of her and Cub's own child. The emphasis on animals and their reproductive successes in this novel creates a significant eco feminist avenue to pursue. The animals' reproductive successes and sometimes even their present location mirror the levels of denial or acceptance of climate change, especially in the main character Dellarobia. The parallels between humans and nonhumans are important to notice because they critique the future of our common reproductive success in the face of climate change. Critiquing anthropocentrism, this novel

shows that if humans continue denying their exploitive environmental practices, they will compromise their own potential for successful future generations.

In *Flight Behavior*, Dellarobia has to come to terms with herself as well as come to terms with the environmental devastations that have happened both near (Tennessee) and afar (Mexico). She loves her children, but her husband and his family are exasperating; therefore, she feels repressed in her current family situation. She and the junior Turnbow man, Cub, had a shotgun marriage because of their baby who later died. Dellarobia and Cub now live on a part of the family land that Hester and Bear (Cub's parents) lord over them, keeping them out of key financial decisions that can affect the part of the farm where Dellarobia and Cub live. Furthermore, everything Dellarobia says seems to be the wrong thing in the eyes of the disapproving Hester. However, things change after Dellarobia sees the butterflies. She initially thinks that the mountainside is on fire and the sign is religious before realizing that they are monarch butterflies, not fire. She meets the press and eventually meets a man named Dr. Byron who has come in to study the monarchs and why they are no longer migrating to their native home in Mexico. Through her interactions with him and his assistants, she gains a scientific view of the phenomenon: the world is out of sync because humans perpetuate exploitive land use practices. She fights the patriarchal family she married into and ends up leaving, knowing that she has to make do for herself. Importantly, for this project, her coming of age (of sorts) is mirrored by animals and environmental markers throughout the novel. In Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, the characters in *Flight Behavior* have gendered responses to nonhuman life. Males generally, especially Bear Turnbow, treat the land as if they are entitled to its resources, acting with an anthropocentric mindset, by making decisions without regard to the ecosystem and long-term consequences. Dellarobia, the main character, comes to recognize how interrelated animals, nature, and humans are; how, typically, males perpetuate patriarchal, exploitive land practices that devalue women, animals, and nature; and how nonhumans are affected by human exceptionalism that results in those exploitive practices.

Thus far in my description of *Flight Behavior* it would seem that Kingsolver is revisiting the same themes that she did in *Prodigal Summer*. Kingsolver is exploring themes, I argue, that are similar in both novels; however, to say that she is replicating the themes would be inaccurate. In *Prodigal Summer* the themes were narrative and natural ecologies and gendered responses to traditional agricultural practices. While there are still gendered responses to nature, Kingsolver goes in a different direction with *Flight Behavior*. The main themes in the novel are failed progeny and failed futures depicted in terms of the climate crisis in the novel. I want to demonstrate that this theme plays out in the novel metaphorically in the diverted monarchs, the weak newborn lamb, and the miscarriages in the novel. If we actively include distorted relations with nature in critique of Western culture, in hopes of fixing the dualistic culture that devalues women and nature both, Val Plumwood cautions in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* that we should not affix nature with the same dominating discourse that dominated previous discourse that negated women and nature: "We do not have to assume that nature is a sphere of harmony and peace, with which we as humans will never be in conflict. A rejection of the western treatment of nature implies a careful, critical and political look at the category of nature" (37). The call to arms is twofold for Plumwood. First, nature should not be treated either as a helpless victim or as a receptacle for any evils, material or cultural, we wish to throw away.

Nature is not helpless. In fact, nature is capable of healing itself of many ills, yet its ability to do so is not inexhaustible. Humans continue to push nature's self-healing abilities by producing and consuming evermore products. Second, fixing the problematic Western treatment of nature, as Plumwood's statement suggests, will require a multifaceted approach including, likely, continued efforts in politics, science, and public information campaigns. Plumwood's comment grants nature its agency to

behave and act as it will in spite of humans' apparent will to dominate and control it (37). *Flight Behavior* demonstrates this idea through examining climate change and the effects climate change can have on people. If humans are so self-involved that they will ignore the plight of animals and nature, then hopefully humans will work to preserve their own existence. This last chapter of my thesis progresses to look not at the status quo as *Prodigal Summer* did but at the future as *Flight Behavior* does. Chapter three discussed ways that a masculinist perspective perpetuated traditional land practices that replicated the patriarchal, exploitive environmental usage and also discussed ecological solutions that only the women in the novel noticed. This chapter examines the consequences of denying climate change brought on by exploitive environmental practices. To continue my discussion of realities and consequences, I will work through this chapter through the topics of denial, realities, and remediation of climate change. In denial, I will analyze the ways humans and nonhumans alike deny the realities around them. Kingsolver herself notes in an interview that others' denial was part of the impetus for this novel. In realities, I will categorize ways the middle class needs an environmentalism that works for them. Dellarobia's status as housewife is reconstructed as a pseudo-scientist. The affective power of the environmental movement is caricatured through those who descend upon the Appalachian region to save the butterflies. Additionally, Dellarobia's work in environmentalism mimics many of the women who became reluctant environmental advocates referenced in chapter two.

There is a hope for remediation. Dellarobia takes Kingsolver's readership through the process to arrive at what might be hopeful winds of change. The ending of the novel is notably open-ended; however, I will argue that it is hopeful because it is charged with resistance. Denial and Climate Crisis Patrick Murphy's article on *Flight Behavior*, specifically, titled "Pessimism, Optimism, Human Inertia, and Anthropogenic Climate Change," corroborates my assessment of the major themes at play in *Flight Behavior*. He emphasizes (as does Linda WagnerMartin, discussed later) Dellarobia's growth and subsequent disunion from the Turnbow family. I will discuss that throughout this chapter in my own way. Additionally, Murphy discusses what I call the realities and consequences of climate change. The scientific specifics of climate change are not themes I cannot hope to fully analyze in this thesis, but I can examine the culture that rejects climate change, the same one in which Dellarobia and her family are embroiled. The first development is Dellarobia's growing self-awareness, whereas the second "focuses on the scientific investigation of the monarchs' alteration of their historic multigenerational migration patterns and the lead scientist's correlations between it and climate change" ("Pessimism, Optimism" 158). The monarch's *Flight Behavior* can be contrasted with the multigenerational non-migration patterns of the Turnbow family and many of their entrenched neighbors. Additionally, Murphy says, "The second plotline provides significant opportunity for Kingsolver to educate readers about the impacts of climate change on flora and fauna in terms of the disruption of seasonal cycles and the temperature gradients that induce relocation and possibly extinction" ("Pessimism, Optimism" 158).

Furthermore, Murphy's article discusses Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* and other recent, related climate change fiction. In his comparison, he discusses whether *Flight Behavior* is ultimately pessimistic or optimistic and discusses what implications the novel might have about human inertia in the face of climate change, saying there is an "increasingly inescapable conclusion: the problem is not one of means but one of recognition, acceptance, and will to act" (Murphy 149, emphasis added). His article discusses the affect science has on those who choose to or not to listen to the facts presented to them. *Flight Behavior*, along with several other climate change novels he references, deals with the trouble that some have with accepting what most scientists and global community members accept as fact and our reality. What Murphy says of skeptics is similar to my numbers and narratives strategy. We need both to work cooperatively to achieve the best reasoning, and the greatest argument possible: Especially when confronting skeptics or people who just don't want to think about the issue of climate change and deflect

considerations with remarks about the climate and earth always changing, etc....it is always handy to begin with the finding of military leaders, oil companies, and insurance organizations. ("Pessimism, Optimism" 150) In Kingsolver's novel, Dellarobia's life pinching pennies and shopping at thrift stores contrasts with the national, generic forms of environmental affect that ask people to drive or fly less. To convert those who ignore or do not believe climate change, Murphy suggests, the environmental movement should start with entities that are already familiar or trustworthy sources of information. Dellarobia never travels more than a few blocks via car and never flies.

Therefore, the rhetoric needs to change to cause an effect in Dellarobia and her family's lives. For the characters, they can see the effects of climate change (the butterflies), whether they attribute the monarchs' new flight path to a miracle, choice, or climate change. From her perspective as a farmer and author who lives in southern Appalachia, Kingsolver feels particularly equipped to discuss (and fictionalizes the discussion in a novel) the environmental problems of the region. She says in an interview with *Time*: Our agriculture here has gone through one disaster year after another, so climate change is not some kind of abstract future threat here. It is literally killing our farm economy. We've had record heat years. We've had record drought years. So the people most affected by climate change already are people among whom I live: rural conservative farmers. And it strikes me that these are the same people who are least prepared to understand and believe in climate change and its causes. Our local politicians are quite deliberately misinforming us and fighting every kind of environmental regulation that could possibly slow down the release of carbon for the very obvious reason that they're beholden to the big player in this region, which are the coal companies. Here we are, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. What can I do but write a novel? (Walsh) The quote is not for naught, though. In discussing part of the impetus for *Flight Behavior*, Kingsolver lights upon one of the themes I discussed in the previous chapter and one that I will continue in this one: traditional environmental practices are bad choices for us all because they might provide a short-term fix but they will have long-term and larger consequences. In addition to hurting the farm economy by making the weather more volatile, the climate changes happening as a result of poor environmental management have cultural stigma attached to them as well. That is where eco feminism comes in.

The Realities of Climate Change Dellarobia has to fight for her own voice in a family that wishes to log the mountainside and a culture in general that wishes to keep itself alienated from nature. Dellarobia gains a perspective on nature that allows her to see the connection between human and nonhuman, which, of course, was the truth waiting in the background all along. In this case Appalachian people are being encouraged by the narrative to adopt an ecofeminist perspective their well-being as ethnic others is bound up with the fate of nonhuman nature. Both disempowered humans like Dellarobia and nonhumans are especially subject to a ravaging capitalist system. Part of Dellarobia's disempowerment in the family and community culture is her home status. She and Cub are still on the family land with Hester and Bear occupying the other end of the family farm. Dellarobia's family is beholden to Hester and Bear, who entitle themselves to every facet of Dellarobia's life without reciprocating. For instance, Hester and Bear put up Dellarobia's part of the farm as collateral for a loan without consulting her. As the outsider to the family politics, Dellarobia is without a voice in their decision-making processes. She must communicate through her husband who, she often feels, is ineffective against the stalwart wishes of Hester. The main issue for the family throughout the novel is the lien that Bear took out against the farm. Logging the mountaintop will get enough money to keep from losing part of the farm to the collection agency, Bear claims. Despite seeing the butterflies and hearing some townsfolk call the butterflies signs from God, Bear does not back down. Hester tells Dellarobia: Bear's signed the contract. He says he's going ahead with it, rain or shine. King Billies butterflies or no King Billies. Now see, I don't know why they couldn't wait a month or two and see

what happens. I pray about it every day...but you were the first to pay attention. He and Peanut Norwood won't give an inch....I don't think it's just the money. I mean, it is the money. But to be in such a rush over it, not listening to anybody. I think they've put each other up to that. A man-to-man kind of thing. (133) the logging seems to have come down to a matter of male posturing. Dellarobia, exasperated at the prospect of a deforested hillside, thinks of "the great themes: man against man, man against himself" and wonders if man could "ever be for anything" (133). This sentiment relates well with the ideas of intersectionality by communicating the futility of man's constant struggle against things. Humans are related to the ecosystem and declaring war on a certain element of the system will inevitably lead to consequences from the other parts of the system sooner or later. Going through with the logging will result in the same devastation that caused the monarchs to shift their migration paths in the first place. The butterflies have no home to go to anymore because of logging. Preston makes a friend in school, Josefina, whose family had to move from the monarchs' old home. Dellarobia had done "some looking on the Internet about the town in Mexico where Preston's little friend Josephina and her family lost their home, and logging was a part of it. They had clear-cut the mountainside above the town, and that was said to have caused the mudslide and floods when a hard rain came" (137-138). Josephina's family's displacement, considered different because they are a minority in the Tennessee town, mimics the displaced butterflies. The mudslide, in fact, took out houses as well. Humans, trees, and butterflies were all affected by the human decision to deforest the mountain. Now Josefina's family and the butterflies have to relocate. The gruesome reality of what mudslides can do and what they did do to Josefina's hometown is captured on the internet in that search. Dellarobia "had to shut off the computer before Preston completely figured out what they were seeing. She told him not to worry that was a long way from here" (137-138).

Unfortunately, Dellarobia realizes the problem with deforestation, yet as she tries to protect her son from tragedy, she perpetuates the same rhetoric that keeps the problem distanced and elsewhere. Murphy also picks up on the rhetoric she uses to calm Preston because Dellarobia defends herself when Cub uses this rhetoric. Murphy writes in "Pessimism, Optimism": When Dellarobia expresses concern about the plight of the monarchs and their loss of viable habitat, Cub replies, "There's always some place else to go" (172). Exasperated, Dellarobia thinks, "And what if there was no other place?" (175). That question refers both to her desire to escape her marriage and the recognition that climate change leaves no other place to go untouched by anthropogenic impacts. Escape fantasies function to delay decisive action because they promise to enable business-as-usual to continue, whether psychological, economic, or ecological, just in a different location. (159) she sets up a double standard wherein she tries to reassure Preston that all will be okay while understanding through time that, in fact, everything will not be fine. I understand that comparing Dellarobia's response to bear and to Preston might seem unfair considering Preston is a child; however, I do think that she should consider introducing to Preston the idea that the world is not healthy. Murphy also speaks to Bear's decisionmaking habits. Murphy writes, "This clearcutting is just one example of short-term and short-sighted solutions to systemic economic problems. It also becomes an example of how people can be persuaded by the consumerist culture in which they live to make decisions that run counter to their own personal long-term interests, as well as the long-term health of their human communities, their ecoregional communities, and the biosphere" (159).

Murphy's statement is similar to Kingsolver's comments about politicians who are engaged in keeping the traditional, exploitive rhetoric resounding in Appalachian farmers' ears. The clear-cutting might save the farm from this one loan collection, but the farming troubles will persist if the weather remains unpredictable and violent. Dellarobia's Ecofeminist Remediation So, far I have discussed the extra and intra-textual examples of climate change problems and their relationship to human and

nonhuman ecologies or cultures. The decisions to log the land are handed down by the patriarch of the family. Dellarobia must live with the decision or else find somewhere to move. Of course, moving would only separate Dellarobia from the truth that Bear will do what he wants. This section analyzes how Dellarobia fights the traditional, patriarchal power structures of her culture. The chapter is grounded in an ecofeminist analysis of Dellarobia's interactions with nature and her newfound identity which is at least partially informed by a new, symbiotic view of nature. In her monograph *Barbara Kingsolver's World: Nature, Art, and the Twenty-First Century*, Wagner-Martin notes the shift in Dellarobia that accompanies her renewed sense of self (7). Her newfound confidence and self-sufficiency comes in part from her interaction with the scientists studying the monarchs and also from a new way of seeing the world. Wagner-Martin says, "And for Dellarobia's part, accepting the inevitable began to have some allure; her temperament starts to change from romantic to more nearly objective" (7). Nature is not some illusory god-like being that acts upon and reacts to humans. Instead, nonhuman entities are actually in a symbiotic relationship with humans and are reacting to anthropocentric actions. The scientists that traveled to Tennessee as Byron's researchers regard the butterflies without the emotional or religious attitudes that first gripped the locals: Lone individuals dropped from the trees steadily like insect rain, trembling where they landed and taking their time to die. She Dellarobia wondered if this was a butterfly funeral, but you'd not know it from this science crew. They seemed in a fine mood, just getting down to business with their tape measures, plastic sheeting, boxes of waxed-paper envelopes, and smaller instruments she couldn't name. (Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*, 139) The scientists see the destruction of the butterflies' homeland and resulting new migratory paths as regular work even though they do understand the potential consequences the butterfly migration might have on butterfly and human life. Dellarobia is only starting to shift to a more scientific mode of thinking.

Consequently, the change from romantic to objective coincides with redefining the occurrence, the monarch's new home in Tennessee, as a tragedy. At the outset, Dellarobia thinks the orange of the monarchs was a sign from God, a burning bush for her lost soul. However, she comes to view the altered migration routes as a chaotic, desperate fight for life and a new home place. And in viewing the tragedy from the butterflies' perspective, she is trying to move past human exceptionalism. Increasingly, Dellarobia starts to grasp the ecological thinking of the scientists, particularly Byron. Byron's 'complicated system' began to take hold in her mind, a thing she could faintly picture. Not just an orange passage across a continent as she'd imagined it before, not like marbles rolling from one end of a box to the other and back. This was a living flow, like a pulse through veins, with the cells bursting and renewing themselves as they went. The sudden vision filled her with strong emotions that embarrassed her. (146) Dellarobia's perspective, like Wagner-Martin notes, is shifting here. The monarchs are first objectified and yet still abstract in Dellarobia's mind the butterflies' migration is likened to marbles shifting around in a box. However, she sees the butterflies now as both individuals (cells) and a collective (living flow), having both individual and collective agency within the metaphor of life-giving veins. In response to the change the butterflies were having in her mind as well as the outrage she was garnering towards Bear, she resolves to go against him. She says, "These butterflies had been hers. She found them, she'd showed them to her son, in her name they were becoming beloved and important. They seemed to matter, like nothing she'd ever possessed. Already she had made up her mind to throw her one hundred dinky pounds against the heft of her family's men, if it came to that" (149). Her resolve grows throughout the novel, and she resents the shortsightedness of those around her who are not learning about consequences as she is. Dovey does not fully understand the implications of Dellarobia's flight path, though she supports almost all of Dellarobia's decisions. Dovey explains, "Now see...that's a woman thing. Men and kids get to just light out and fly, without ever worrying about what comes next." But Dellarobia replies, "No, Dovey, it's an everybody thing. It's just a question of how well you can picture the crash landing" (190). They have a misunderstanding about the consequences all of the

actions resisting the Turn bow family, maybe leaving Cub, altering the butterflies' tragedy might have. Dovey is not specifically speaking about the monarchs because she is more interested in Dellarobia's wellbeing. Dellarobia's meaning is clear: she is speaking in grand terms, uniting everything in a cosmic cause-and-effect pattern because if everything is interlaminated, then everything exists in a cosmic cause-and-effect pattern. The new attention to cause and effect as well as to consequences is part of Dellarobia's new ecological mindset, wherein she sees human and nonhuman intersecting. With Dellarobia's growing anti-patriarchal mindset and actions, she would seem to be mirrored in some of the actions and symbolism in *Flight Behavior*. I will draw some further similarities between Dellarobia and the nonhumans in the novel to show how she is thinking more in an anti-anthropocentric mode.

What Dellarobia gives us is not a spokesperson for nonhuman entities; rather, she becomes a symbol for alternative responses to the land. She resists the patriarchal, myopic actions of Bear Turnbow and the limiting marriage to Cub, and she transforms her vision of the land from Turnbow property to true ecology with interconnections affecting both human and nonhuman entities. In addition to her rebellion against limiting personal relationships with the Turnbow men, she gains a greater understanding of animal lives, particularly the butterflies and the sheep that live on the Turnbow farm. She studies up on caring for the sheep and prepares for difficult births. One gives her a shock because, perhaps, she equates its struggle for life with her own firstborn who died: "Black, strangely flat against the snow, unmoving inside its translucent sac: a tiny sheep child. The ewe walked away from it and nosed into the snow, looking for graze" (Kingsolver, *Flight Behavior*, 415). The ewe rejects the kid in a similar way that Hester and Dellarobia had difficult first pregnancies: Hester gave up her baby and Dellarobia's died. "Without ever fully gaining her feet [Dellarobia] made it back to the puddle of lamb, swearing at the mother that stood blandly chewing now. Some distance away from this thing that had definitely not happened to her" (415). This botched birthing can have several interpretations relating to the humans in *Flight Behavior*. The lamb's struggle to live may very well be symbolic of Dellarobia's first baby; she is able to save this lamb, whereas she could not save her child. Additionally, the lamb who struggles to breathe is symbolic of the out of balance world that the unbelieving humans put at her doorstep. The lamb is symbolic of the altered flight paths of the monarchs as well as other possible global environmental crises and the sheep who "stood blandly chewing...away from this thing that had definitely not happened to her" are those humans who refuse to acknowledge that they are creating such devastation to their planet (415).

However, there is an actual lamb in the novel, not just a representation. Remembering the actual lamb is important because it shows Dellarobia's newfound connection with nature. The lamb actually reaches her on an emotional level that even Cub, who must also miss the miscarried child, could not touch in Dellarobia. I chose to end this thesis with Dellarobia and with *Flight Behavior* because she represents the hope that eco feminism holds as a subtext within its analysis. Dellarobia embodies the hope for a better world and better planet (as synonymous with both human and nonhumans collectively) that we treat fairly and injure as little and infrequently as possible; hopefully, we treat the planet with more respect than anything else. Furthermore, the ending to *Flight Behavior* is ambiguous yet hopeful enough to engender the impression that there is still a chance that we can change things for the better. Wagner-Martin remarks: Thinking that the novel has been a traditional account of a woman character's growth through education as well as life experiences, the reader may be momentarily confused: *Flight Behavior* in Kingsolver's deft hands, however, does not give the reader Dellarobia's outcome. It does not explain how she likes her college courses, or how much influence she will be able to maintain over her smart young son Preston. (Barbara Kingsolver's World 3) In short, the novel does not give the readers the result of the hope that Dellarobia's decisions create. Instead, the open-ended novel offers more questions than it answers. The novel concludes: "The sky was too bright and the ground so

unreliable, she couldn't look up for very long. Instead her eyes held steady on the fire bursts of wings reflected across water, a merging of flame and flood. Above the lake of the world, flanked by White Mountains, they flew out to a new earth" (433). "Merging" is, arguably, the pivotal word. Merging represents the too bright sky and the unreliable ground that seem to want to sandwich Dellarobia between them. Wagner-Martin adds that the merging represents a renewed combination of human and nature. In Barbara Kingsolver's *World* Wagner-Martin says, "The books' two final paragraphs are Kingsolver's choice to force the natural world to become integral to the human one, a feat that is accomplished without Dellarobia's name ever being mentioned" (3). Wagner-Martin picks up on the themes of ambiguity and hope that end the novel, and I want to emphasize what she says about the integration of the natural and human worlds. If the reader realizes that one fact, then the book seems both successful, hopeful, and eco feminist in the resulting unification of human and nonhuman identities. What readers should take away from both novels examined in this thesis is optimism. Through a better understanding of how we humans are related to every other thing on the planet we can start to enact processes and mindsets that will rejuvenate the earth and, hopefully, stop treating one another, animals, and nature with single-minded pursuit of profit and leisure.

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