

Who Owns the Earth? Earth Ecology versus Global Economy

Part I

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[Brian May's Save Me](#)

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"Vimes knew how you could own a pub, but he wondered how you could own a trout stream because, if that was your bit, it had already gurgled off downstream while you were watching it, yes? That meant that somebody else was now fishing in your water, the bastard! And the bit in front of you now had recently belonged to the bloke upstream; that bloated plutocrat of a fat neighbour now probably considered you some kind of poacher, that other bastard! And the fish swam everywhere, didn't they? How did you know which ones were yours? Perhaps they were branded - that sounded very countryside to Vimes."
Terry Pratchett - *Snuff*

Years ago I travelled in a friend's car down to Devon to stay on an Exmoor farm. I was dropped off at the end of the lane to the valley where the farm lay. After so long cooped up in a small car full of people I walked slowly down the hill, filling my lungs with clean, fresh air. My senses were being cleansed. I saw more clearly and sniffed more keenly the scents blowing from the moor. And I listened.

I stopped and listened again, trying to trace what it was I could hear. It was all around me, a background whispering, soft creaks and cracks; not quite a conversation but something more. To my amazement I realised that what I was hearing was the sound of life. The banks and hedges were full of it; every tiny herb, each blade of grass, every hazel and hawthorn leaf in the hedges reaching towards the afternoon sun, were giving off this faint, busy, joyful sound of life growing.

It was a seminal moment in my life. I was no longer a human living on but apart from the Earth. I was, with every other form of life, a part of the Earth and essentially, with no more right to the resources of the Earth than any other being, whatever its form.

So I find it hard to think of rats or aphids, or anything you care to name, as 'pests' or vermin. We talk of 'plagues' of locusts simply doing what locusts do, but we never look at the world-wide plague that the human race has become. And in many ways that plague has been propagated by humanity's ideas of and desire for 'ownership'.

So - who owns the Earth, or rather, who owns the soil under our feet? Silly question. Of course it is all those rich and powerful men, isn't it? Most governments are made up of people who have far too much money. We are told we live in a democracy, but while the majority of us struggle and worry about the dire state of our finances, I do wonder why so many unthinkingly vote into power mega-millionaires. Have our wits gone begging that we should believe they can truly represent us, we with our little houses and they with their

large estates? People like Tory MP [Richard Benyon](#), who recently had to [withdraw](#) from an appalling property management scheme, and who owns land devoted to shooting for sport, rich men's sport, that is.

A few days after Nicola Sturgeon became Scotland's First Minister, the Scottish Government made moves to reactivate the [land reform](#) process which had been stalled for some years. Land reform in Scotland, a whole nation under the sway of privately owned 'sporting estates' would be, as [one commentator put it](#), "bad news for 432 people but good news for 5,254,800 of us."

That gives some idea of just how unbalanced money's impact on the Earth and its inhabitants is. For the rich not only own land – soil, rock, water and minerals – they believe they 'own' all the life upon it, on the land, in the air or in the water. They 'own' the trout and the salmon, and ban anyone from taking a little canoe or rowing boat up 'their' stretch of the river in case it disturbs 'their' fish. They 'own' the grouse and the deer, and feel free to kill any life that gets in the way of their profits or their pleasure.

They think money buys them the right. Well, it doesn't. They have simply assumed that right over centuries of abrogating to themselves too much power and self-importance, to the point where, as George Gunn [wrote](#), "Now those who hoard wealth assume that democracy is their property." And they place their cronies (usually with connections to big corporate business) in positions where they have no right to be. Look at the people who were given important posts in Defra by big-business friend Prime Minister David Cameron, he who promised to lead the greenest government ever:

- Caroline Spelman, Environment Secretary – tried to [sell off](#) the nations' forests to private buyers. She was also a co- owner of a lobbying firm for the food and biotechnology industry.
- Richard Benyon, Wildlife Minister – tried to implement a [policy](#) of "controlling" buzzards to protect game birds – game birds being the targets for rich shotguns. Cameron's parents-in-law own a big sporting estate in Scotland. Well, there's a surprise!
- Owen Paterson, Spelman's successor – his brother-in-law is a major climate-change denier. Paterson promotes GM crops, fracking and of course, the infamous badger culls.
- Liz Truss, Paterson's successor – after three disasters a nice safe bet, inexperienced and pretty well invisible where the badger cull is concerned. On the other hand, she wants to [repeal](#) the Hunting Act, as does her boss Cameron, who has ridden with the [Heythrop Hunt](#).
- Sir Philip Dilley, appointed to be chairman of the Environment Agency, is [connected](#) to the fracking industry. Cameron is on record as saying "we are going all out for shale gas". How will this impact on the forthcoming climate change talks in Lima, shale gas being a fossil fuel that feeds climate change?
- Andrew Sells (an appropriate surname), the [recently appointed head](#) of Natural England, has a background in investment banking and house building – one of those guys who'd like to build on ancient woodlands and SSSIs (Sites of Special Scientific Interest), and who probably thinks you can "offset" ancient woodland by planting new trees elsewhere.

And, if you think this is just about the United Kingdom, think again. Wherever you look, rich

and corporate interests are trashing the Earth in pursuit of profit. The environment is only there to serve 'the economy', whatever that is. The President of the EU Commission Jean-Claude Juncker recently [gave](#) the post of Environment Commissioner to a Maltese politician – Karmenu Vella, who supports the shooting of thousands of migrating birds, something that [Chris Packham](#) has vigorously campaigned against. Vella's brief is to make the environment, naturally bursting with business opportunities, economy-friendly.

Across the Atlantic, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has had a [succession](#) of high-ranking officers connected to Monsanto and Waste Management Inc., two companies the EPA is supposed to regulate. Its climate change expert [defrauded](#) the government by pretending to be a CIA agent. The current head Gina McCarthy comes via the White House rather than industry, but has a record of lying to, sorry, [misleading](#) Congress.

Wherever you go in the world, you'll find this is how it is run; big business profits while the environment, with all that includes, suffers and dies. Speaking at an anti-badger cull demonstration in Winchester Chris Packham made the point that he doesn't care for badgers above other animals. All wildlife is important. The totality, the ecology, is important. "But," he added, "caring is not enough."

How right he is. And one of the things the English badger culls have done is to connect many more people to the wildlife that is not just a part of the Earth, but to that particular bit of Earth where they too belong and have their home. People have become more active. The [Hunt Saboteurs Association](#) has seen a real surge in membership since the culls began. People are joining the dots between fighting for one species and fighting to protect all; going up against those humans for whom all aspects of our ecology are there to be obliterated for fun or profit.

Why did I start by telling you about that magic moment in Devon? Because it was a Mystery. Life, every single tiny bit of it, is a mystery. Mystery can provoke awe and sometimes terrify us. It can inspire us, change our lives and engender the kind of overwhelming love I have for this patch of Earth called Britain. The kind of love that demands I, and you, stand up and get in the way of those who think they 'own' what we know is precious and essential to our well-being; well-being that comes from the wholeness of life; life which for us is the Earth, which can only be owned by itself.

For there is one thing that humanity, with all its religions, its power, inventiveness, arrogance and greed, cannot do – it cannot ever own Mystery. It will always slip through our hands. All we can do is follow where it leads.

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