Disabled activism, the environmental movement and deep adaptation

This article will look at the UK Environmental movement, and its sister network of 'Deep Adaptation' from a disabled perspective. It will examine how disabled voices, needs and perspectives are marginalised or invisibilised within those movements, with implications not only for disabled people, but with potential ramifications for society at large if disabled voices are not an equal part of the narrative about environmental protection and the transformation of society.

The key concepts for this article, which will intersect with one another during the piece, are:

- **The Social Model of Disability**, which proposes that what makes someone disabled is not their particular medical condition or impairment, but the structures and attitudes of society which lead to exclusion and restriction, and thereby prevent full participation in society. This model was developed by disabled people in the 1970s [1].

- **Disablism**, which can be described as the manifestation of discrimination or oppression against disabled people [2]. This can be experienced by disabled people as external physical and social barriers to living fully, or internalised as negative feelings as a result of experiencing those barriers, affecting psycho-emotional wellbeing [3].

- **Ableism**, which can be described as discrimination in favour of non-disabled people. It is the valuing of being non-disabled over being disabled [4]. This creates norms where being non-disabled is somehow more desirable, and being disabled is seen as negative, 'other', or less desirable. Ableism makes assumptions about what bodies should be able to do - there are 'able bodied' people and those who are not able bodied, rather than bodies with varied abilities [5].

- **Environmentalism/the Environmental movement**, which in many different ways seeks to protect and improve the health of the environment [6].

- **Deep Adaptation**, which has a core premise that it is no longer possible to avoid climate/environmental catastrophe, leading in all likelihood to near-term societal collapse. This gives rise to a need for individual and social transformation to plan for navigating an increasingly chaotic and unpredictable world. Though a terrifying prospect, Deep Adaptation is premised on creating cultures of care, rather than attempting individualist survival strategies such as buying land and stockpiling supplies [7].

Backdrop

The case of outlawing plastic straws acts as a gateway to understanding the lay of the land in the way that environmentalism and disabled activism intersect with one another, and highlights where some of the tensions lie. In 2018, Teresa May announced that plastic straws were to be banned on environmental grounds, for causing problems for marine life. This led to protest from

disabled activists, who highlighted that plastic straws are in fact an essential for meeting basic needs for many disabled people, and that there had been no consultation of disabled people in creating this new law. Following their protest, the law has since been adapted to give exemptions for people who need access to plastic straws on medical grounds or due to being disabled [8].

This single illustration highlights many different issues. Firstly, that in spite of around 20% of the UK population being disabled (amounting to more than 13million people) [9], disability is routinely treated as an add-on, rather than being integral to the way things are planned and organised. In the case of plastic straws, it was left to disabled people to protest, before a paternalistic and benevolent state would concede that in 'special cases,' there should be 'allowances' made.

Secondly, that Disabled people are frequently put in the difficult position of being dependent on resources for their daily survival that are produced by complex industrial processes that create environmentally degrading products. Thirdly, banning plastic straws was made to look like an important act of care for the environment, but it allowed for sidetracking from thinking about the huge problem of plastics across the board. This also invisibilises how non-disabled people are also extremely dependent on environmentally degrading products to meet basic needs. Fourthly, the case of plastic straws blurs the boundaries between consumption of luxury items and the materials needed for meeting the basic needs of disabled people, demonising disabled people as not being environmentally friendly enough.

Lastly, there are disabled activists who reeled from the story of the plastic straw and how it played out, but the case was soon largely forgotten about by the environmental movement, who quickly moved on - 'of course some concessions will have to be made,' as one environmental activist put it, not recognising how this still undermines disabled people in being central to the conversation. As disabled rights activist, s.e. smith writes,

> Let me be blunt: Screeching at us about straws is not going to fix the problem of plastic. For that, we need to go higher up the supply chain, rethinking when and how we produce plastics across the board instead of shaming disabled people who are piping up about our needs. And disabled people need to be included in the conversation about reducing plastic waste — our needs matter just as much as trees and sea turtles [10].

Disabled activists and the environmental movement

It seems useful to turn next to an examination of how disabled activists and the subject of disability are located within the environmental movement, drawing on examples from the UK and the USA. There are some key barriers for disabled activists to participate in the environmental movement. These barriers can only really be understood when grounded in the Social Model of Disability, and notions of Ableism and Disablism. Without a grasp of these concepts, non-disabled activists may assume that disabled people are unlikely to participate in the environmental movement because their impairments inhibit them from doing so.

However, from the perspective of the Social Model, it can be seen that disabled people frequently find it very difficult to participate because accessibility is not found at the core of organisational structures. In addition, disabled activists find themselves feeling the need to live up to mainstream environmentalist norms and values, leading to feelings of failure where doing

so is impossible, such as where a disabled person has reliance on a vehicle for mobility reasons.

Accessibility often remains an add-on in environmental activism spaces. Whether or not disabled people will be able to access a meeting space or participate in an environmental action is generally an afterthought, where at times there is a desperate scramble at the last minute to try and work out how to make an inaccessible venue accessible to the disabled people who've signed up, or it's seen as a shame that the disabled person who wants to come won't be able to make it because the venue isn't accessible. These norms are shifting, but the idea of creating a norm that puts access needs at the heart of the movement still has a long way to go.

In addition, norms and values within the environmentalist movement often have an ethic of individual responsibility, which translates into codes of ways of living that are right or wrong, and valorises the non-disabled, independent, self-sufficient individual, who is perpetually committed to a cause, makes ethical choices about their practices of consumption, and takes heroic action in the name of the environment. The judgement involved in deeming mainstream society to be wasteful and environmentally destructive is continuous with judgemental attitudes regarding what are seen as the unsustainable aspects of disabled access, such as the need for fossil fuel based resources. Both the lack of accessibility to activist spaces and the prevalent norms of environmentalist thinking have the effect of being discriminatory for disabled people, as,

> Activists are meant to be committed to a cause, but the material conditions, environments, and situations that activists must submit themselves to are sometimes inaccessible to people with disabilities. This can lead to feelings of guilt and shame that distance people with disabilities from being involved [Fenney, page27].

In addition, the emphasis so often placed on individual lifestyle choices as the mechanism for bringing about change in the world invisibilises the limits to choice that disabled people have with regards to ethical consumption, and is suggestive of disabled people not caring about the environment or being a burden on it, and detracts from the need to work on systemic change. As s.e. smith writes,

> ...in the daily nuts and bolts of environmentalism, which often seem to hyperfocus on the individual to the exclusion of the institutional, [it] mak[es] it impossible for disabled advocates to engage with the institutional structures that perpetuate environmental harm without being criticised for not doing enough as individuals [magazine.catapult.co/column/stories/when-disability-is-a-toxic-legacy].

It's therefore vitally important to consider what an inclusive Environmental movement would look like. A crucial premise of an inclusive movement would be that inclusion is not only to benefit disabled people in creating greater access to participation in what they believe to be valuable, but to benefit the environmental movement itself. This premise is important in numerous ways. Firstly, the key to the strength of any movement is its diversity. A movement must build broad-based alliances and coalitions of varied groups and individuals, in the recognition that struggles are not separate but overlap with one another.

Given that disabled people represent around one fifth of the UK's population, this proportion should be reflected in participation in the Environmental movement, and disabled people should have democratic participation in the direction of the campaigns and organisations that they are

involved with. In a world where poor democratic structures can be found as one of the root causes of environmental destruction, it follows that having access to participation in the direction of environmental groups and campaigns should be a starting point for the improvement of democracy, because ‘the basic ingredient of democracy [is] doing things together.’ An inclusive Environmental movement would also fully acknowledge the value of disabled voices and disabled participation. As it’s put by Al Etmanski in ‘The Power of Disability,’ disabled people are,

> ...authoritative sources of creativity, resilience, love, resistance, dealing with adversity and living a good life. People with disabilities have been instrumental in the growth of freedom and the birth of democracy...They have been on the frontlines fighting for justice [Etmanski, chapter 15].

The disabled people’s movement has transformed the basis on which disabled people can participate in society. In 1995, the hard-won Disability Discrimination Act was enshrined in UK law, as the culmination of a public campaign involving demonstrations of 100,000, and direct action where disabled people handcuffed to buses, hanging their bodies, ‘proudly, visibly affected by various disabilities,’ in the road. The government was thereby forced to end state and business discrimination against disabled people. Before that, there were no minimum guaranteed standards for equality for disabled people; only charity handouts and portrayals of disabled people as tragic or pitiable. This is just one example of the ongoing work disabled people do in the name of political and personal empowerment.

However, it should not be the responsibility of people who are disabled to prove themselves as such to be able to participate in the environmental movement. It is the responsibility of non-disabled people, whose actions have been enabled by the social structures around them, to educate themselves. And by this point in the article, it should be clear that disabled people have the kind of skills and attributes that the environmental movement should naturally want to have on-side.

It should also be made clear that the separation of the struggles of the environmental movement and the disabled rights movement is an artificial one. There are numerous examples of how environmental pollution and degradation lead to impairments. Industrial activity has led to environmental pollution which creates exposure to toxins such as pesticides, nitrates, lead, petrochemicals, or, as in the case of fracking industry in the USA in the last 10 years, a brew of numerous toxic chemicals. This has created significant health risks in communities living within the vicinity of industrial production, which has often led to people developing environmental illnesses and disabilities, or having children with disabilities. Developmental and intellectual disabilities, as well as physical impairments, plus higher incidences of cancer, damage to the central nervous system, asthma, liver damage, and reproductive or endocrine damage are all associated with living in areas of high environmental pollution.

This demonstrates that, “environmental health is just one example of where environmentalists and disability rights activists can find commonalities and work together to help create policies that have stronger consequences for reckless pollution.” [Cabat, Interrogating The "And": A Study of Environmentalism and Disability]. To separate out the struggle of disability activism from the struggle of environmental activism, means to see these impairments only in terms of the disability itself, rather than being situated in an environmental context, in which poor communities (very often of colour) experience the powerlessness to stop polluters in their

vicinity. When divorced from context, disability can be looked at as being wrong, tragic or bad, as society maintains, ‘ “We should prevent these disabilities,” not understanding that the disability is the consequence of the wrong, not the wrong itself.’ Disability in these contexts can be understood as a symptom of environmental injustice [se smith, ‘When disability is a toxic legacy].

Conversely, in recent years the toll that environmental activism can have on activists who have previously considered themselves to be non-disabled has come to light. The physical and emotional strain on environmental activists can precipitate chronic illnesses such as chronic fatigue syndrome, burn-out, and mental health problems, as well as disability due to physical injury, leading activists to leave the environmental movement. These activists can come to experience the same lack of accessibility that disabled people encounter in the form of an ableist and disablist environmental movement. It is another way in which the narrative of the able-bodied environmentalist hero, operating on high adrenaline and an ethic of self-sacrifice, should become obsolete in favour of a sense of togetherness, building a community of connection and empathy, and creating contexts which care for people and facilitate them to use and develop their creativity and skills.

In addition, an environmentalist movement that puts accessibility and inclusion at its heart does more than benefitting disabled people…

> when spaces are made more accessible to people with disabilities, they also become increasingly accessible to people from other marginalized backgrounds by encouraging designs that promote tolerance and understand cultural differences. [Interrogating The "And": A Study of Environmentalism and Disability, page 9-10].

People find it difficult to participate in the environmental movement for numerous reasons; lack of childcare, lack of time, differentials in class, race and gender privilege, the domination of cliques or certain types of personality, and the lack of attention paid to process and power dynamics can all make environmental groups inaccessible or unappealing places to be.

Acknowledging the intersections between the disabled rights movement and the environmental movement creates fertile ground for growth of the wider social justice movement. As disabled activist Eli Clare writes, “I want non-disabled progressive activists to add disability to their political agenda. And at the same time I want disability activists to abandon their single-issue politics and strategies” [ibid]. Remaining separate may mean to continue to be ignored by the mainstream. If there is coalition building across movements, this can benefit all parties involved. An important historical example of this was learning from the success of the Civil Rights movement after the arrest of Rosa Parks when she started the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956. Only a decade later, disabled activists adapted the techniques of the Civil Rights movement in their campaign for accessible transport, and in advancing the agenda of the disability rights movement [ibid, page 21]. Space needs to be made for the environmental movement and the disabled rights movement to learn from and strengthen one another. After all, both movements have the commonality of, “striv[ing] for healthy, safe, and equitable communities” [ibid, page 26].

Disabled activism and Deep Adaptation

In 2018, Professor Jem Bendell of the University of Cumbria, released a paper entitled, 'Deep Adaptation: a Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy'. The Deep Adaptation paper expressed a marginal and overlooked point of view within academia and sustainability management, which is usually focussed on the way in which emissions may be reduced. The paper extensively reviewed the most recent climate science, and came to the conclusion that it is now too late to sufficiently slow down or respond to climate change in a way that will avert climate catastrophe. Bendell concluded that this will lead to social collapse, which looks to be inevitable and even near-term. In stark terms, he says, "the evidence before us suggests that we are set for disruptive and uncontrollable levels of climate change, bringing starvation, destruction, migration, disease and war" [Bendell, page 12].

Encountering this kind of thinking can lead on the one hand to denial, and on the other to grief, fear, distress and despair. However, Bendell posits that facing up to the likelihood that it is now too late to avoid catastrophe gives us the possibility of coming together to explore the implications and support each other. Important to the Deep Adaptation Agenda is the need to build not just organisational resilience to adversity, but the psychological resilience to cope with trauma, tragedy, threats or significant causes of stress [Bendell, page 12].

From a disabled viewpoint, the prospect of living in a Deep Adaptation scenario is initially particularly terrifying. Depending on complex industrial products and medications for daily survival, it is very difficult to look into a future where the production of such things may be impossible. At the same time, however, it can be argued that disabled people are much more connected with the reality of the materials needed for life to be survivable and tolerable. A simple example for non-disabled people to relate to is the wearing of glasses. Glasses wearers are not considered disabled, but in a context where the industrial production of glasses was no longer possible, glasses wearers would find themselves disabled by poor vision. Following on from this, non-disabled people may not need medication for daily survival, but are heavily dependent on medications such as antibiotics and vaccines, and on emergency medical care, surgery and more to lead otherwise healthy and non-disabled lives.

A review of the current literature on Deep Adaptation does not address this near universal dependence. In developing ways to adapt to an increasingly chaotic and unpredictable world, it looks to building closer knit communities, localised production, exchange and currencies, and increased self-sufficiency, such as the production of herbal medicines, and small-scale production of aspirin. In this way, disabled people are effectively written out of future existence. An ableist image of the future presides, in which those who survive are young, fit, able-bodied and need only herbal tea for medicine.

It should also be raised that if this logic is followed, the unimagining of disabled people from a Deep Adaptation future knocks up against eco-fascist ideology. Novara Media journalist Ash Sarkar draws attention to the thinking of Kaarlo Pentti Linkola, deep ecologist and eco-fascist, who said, "when the lifeboat is full, those who hate life will try and load it with more people and sink the lot. Those who love and respect life will take the ship's axe and sever the extra hands that cling to the sides". Says Sarkar in response,

> Rather than mutual aid being a defining characteristic of what it means to be human, it's seen as encouraging forms of social parasitism. If you're marginalised for any reason – perhaps you're a refugee or you're disabled, or you're merely poor, that's a reason to be excluded from the body

> politic, rather than being helped by it ['Nature is Returning…Was Humanity the Real Virus? - Youtube video by Ash Sarkar].

To avoid the logic of ecofascism, it's imperative that disabled people, amongst other marginalised people, are included in the development of Deep Adaptation thinking. If this is not done, a perspective that is both ableist and disablist can be left in place. It becomes fatalistic that disabled people will automatically be left out of the future, as there's nothing more that can be done. As Bendell says,

> It is not my intention in this paper to map out more specific implications of a deep adaptation agenda. Indeed, it is impossible to do so, and to attempt it would assume we are in a situation for calculated attempts at management, when what we face is a complex predicament beyond our control [Bendell, page23].

A disabled perspective would counter that although a Deep Adaptation scenario is important to contemplate, living with impairments means that it is not possible to have the luxury of refusing to engage with the complexity of how the health systems that we all rely on can continue to exist in some form. Disabled people have always fought for their rights and survival, and fatalism is not remotely helpful. Much more helpful are the three key ideas that Bendell employs in the development of a Deep Adaptation Agenda. These are Resilience, Relinquishment and Restoration.

'Resilience' asks us "how do we keep what we really want to keep?" and, "What are the valued norms and behaviours that human societies will wish to maintain as they seek to survive?" Maintaining these valued norms and behaviours will allow us to adapt to changing circumstances.

'Relinquishment' asks us, "what do we need to let go of in order to not make matters worse?" The concept involves people and communities letting go of certain assets, behaviours, and beliefs, where retaining them could make matters worse.

Restoration asks us "what do we bring back to help us with the coming difficulties and tragedies?"

It would be highly valuable to develop conversations within the disabled activist community around these tenets of Deep Adaptation. This would contribute to the Deep Adaptation Agenda in thinking about how communities which have the capacity for caring for marginalised people are core to weathering the difficulties to come, and could look at the more practical aspects of how to fight for and maintain the health systems on which we all depend.

It's also important to highlight that disabled people have already had to incrementally adapt to the removal of the safety net of the welfare state, which in its own way can be considered a form of Deep Adaptation. As disabled activist Clare Bonetree writes,

> ...This process of adaptation has included (but is in no way limited to) developing and sharing practical skills in self care and mutual aid (we help each other with Personal Independence Payment and Employment Support Allowance bureaucracy - and with the mental health fallout of dealing with those bureaucracies); political education across the community and across differences of class, ability and privilege (disabled people developed the social model of disability in the 1970s, and radical political empowerment structures over the last 30 years, now being

called on again in the struggle against austerity); alliance building (eg. Disabled People Against Cuts, and taking direct action). At an individual level, disabled people have supreme skills in resilience and adaptation, and our lives embody and exemplify the permaculture principle 'Living with Limits'. We have much to teach those who have only recently begun to face the reality of living with (environmental) limits that cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

The Deep Adaptation Agenda looks at how to navigate a world with radically diminished access to resources. At the same time, we need to remember that there remains a concentration of resources in the hands of elites, who continue to develop for their own ends high technology such as artificial intelligence, the potential for mining in space, nanotechnology, genetic engineering and more. In spite of ensuing climate chaos, the planet still has resources and we need to tackle how those resources are used, by whom and for whom, especially as environmental decline will make it increasingly difficult to access and manufacture the resources we need.

We need only look to the current Coronavirus context in the UK to understand how a combination of a dysfunctional democracy, a state of power skewed towards elites, and systematically failing to maintain health systems over time creates its own form of Deep Adaptation, leading to one of the worst death tolls in the world. Now that the virus is endemic in the population, there is no going back; only adapting. Through writing this article, it has become increasingly striking how one of the disabling structural factors that disabled people encounter is that disabled voices are most frequently not even on the radar of the non-disabled. In an ableist and disablist world, being disabled is an issue which is all too often not seen as relevant; it is about the ‘other;’ it has nothing to do with non-disabled concerns, and this frequently includes the concerns of the environmental movement and Deep Adaptation network. Understanding how this came to be the case, and how disabled histories of activism are so ignored by the non-disabled, is an area for more research. Understanding that this cannot continue to be the case is fundamental to building the future. Some questions for next steps may be, How would our health systems look if disabled voices and needs were situated at the core? How would the environmental movement look? How would navigating a Deep Adaptation future look? How have societies that have already experienced collapse-like circumstances navigated the impacts on health systems?

Endnotes

[1] For more on the Social Model of Disability, see:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24KE__OCKMw
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_model_of_disability

[2] Disablism definition https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/disablism/

[3] See paper, ‘Ableism and Disablism in the UK Environmental Movement’ by Deborah Fenney, p4.

[4] Ableism definition https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/disablism/

[5] Again, see paper, ‘Ableism and Disablism in the UK Environmental Movement’ by Deborah Fenney, p4.

[6] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_movement

[7] See full paper on Deep Adaptation: https://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf

[8]For more on plastic straw ban: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/25/plastic-straw-ban-california-people-with-disabilities

[9] Disability facts and figures: https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures/#:~:text=Number%20of%20disabled%20people,disabled%20people%20in%20the%20UK.

[10] See end of article for quote: https://www.vox.com/first-person/2018/7/19/17587676/straws-plastic-ban-disability