

Homo Gaia: Rejoining Earth's Community Where We Belong by Oy Kanjanavanit. River Books Press Ltd., Bangkok, Thailand. 2025. 155 pp. ISBN 978-616-451-093-7 (softcover).



As explained at the beginning of this book, “Gaia” is the name of the Greek Goddess of Mother Earth. The “Gaia Hypothesis”, advanced by English chemist and Earth system scientist James Lovelock (1919–2022), holds that the Earth is “an animated entity, where life forms interact with each other and with inorganic components to create a complex self-regulating system that helps to maintain the conditions conducive for life on earth” (p. 13). The Gaia idea has become somewhat of a cult among environmentalists. There are many negative feedback mechanisms that tend to stabilize conditions on Earth, and animate the idea of Gaia. The idea of the Earth as an “animated entity,” however, has drawn some criticism from other scientists. The author then defines “*Homo gaia*” as “A species of human that renews its membership with the Earth community, living along side other beings. It is a human that has evolved beyond the crisis of nature destruction caused by *Homo sapiens*.” Humans will somehow evolve into a form that has come to realize its survival depends on reintegration with Nature. What are the characteristics of such a new enlightened form of human? This a serious problem, and this book attempts to enlighten us with how we can better become responsible members of the Earth community.

The author, Saranarat Oy Kanjanavanit (she goes by “Dr. Oy”; we will refer to her as just “Oy”), is well known among the Thai environmental community for her educational activities and promotion of environmental awareness. She received her Ph.D. for research on the ecology of forest fire from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She and I have not crossed paths very much but I knew her mother, Khun Nuni, who was an outspoken environmental activist who lived in a house on Doi Suthep,

Chiang Mai. Oy credits her mother with inspiring her to understand and appreciate the beauty and importance of nature while she was growing up. Like most professional biologists (including myself), she spent her early years collecting insects and other things, observing birds and plants, and hanging out with the world of nature.

In the Prologue, Oy relates how, in 2007, she had an experience which changed her life. She went on an educational conservation trip to Washington State, to study the native North American Lummi people, to study how to use economic tools in nature conservation. One day the participants went on a kayak side-trip to the Salish Sea to observe nature along the shoreline, and had a “magical experience,” in which she felt blessed by Mother Gaia. Suddenly, she encountered a spotted harbor seal which swam up to her kayak and fixed her gaze with beady liquid eyes, and their hearts touched. Soon she saw an orca mother with a baby nearby, and then a sea otter. A new world of interconnectedness, both physical and spiritual, opened to her. During the Covid pandemic, after much reflection, she decided to write a book about this.

While the book has a clear organization, the writing is somewhat rambling and informal, and highly personal. It tells us as much about Oy as about Gaia. The book is illustrated by numerous, delightful line drawings that appear to be taken from her notebooks. They alone illustrate her profound devotion to nature.

The first three chapters of the book lay the core groundwork of her teaching: Feel, to be aware; Connect to be whole; and Expand our basic senses. “To be aware” means first we must not only know the facts about our environment—she uses the effects of altering the Mekong River as an example—but develop a feeling of what is right, and a heart-felt commitment. To connect to be whole, we must be aware that “we are part of the most incredible, most wonderful, most magical network there ever was. Its interconnectedness is more complex and profound than any ecological textbook could attempt to explain.” Textbook knowledge is essential, but it is true that a person’s ability to sense and understand nature is not conferred by reading a textbook. It is usually present before a student ever takes a college course. And, of course, there is still a lot more to learn beyond what is reported in textbooks, which is only well-established and verified knowledge. Such knowledge is becoming out of date as soon as it is published.

The third chapter is lengthier, and explains how to develop and use our senses to experience the natural world. I can relate to this endeavor much more closely, as a young teenager, I would spend long periods of time just sitting and listening and watching to what is around me, and developing the ability to perceive and identify birds and other animals more rapidly. This is just part of being a better field biologist. More than that, however, it involves being spiritually connected to the natural world, and understanding it better. This is what people who grow up in cities lack, and why they don’t understand much about the natural ecosystem and why it is important.

I grew up on a small farm surrounded by fields and forests, in western Pennsylvania, and the ability to perceive and enjoy nature developed as a teenager has lasted throughout my life. My grandchildren, like most children today, are growing up in suburbia and are missing the experiences I had with nature. Hence, I can relate very well to what Oy has to teach about sensing the real world. Some people may argue that today it is more important to sense the sounds and sights of the city than of the forest. This may be true, but we are not developing ourselves to our genetic potential, and some day we will regret that the nature in which we evolved no longer exists. Oy teaches us to not only sense the natural world,

but to develop our empathy and feelings for what we see, hear, feel, smell and taste. She also has advice about how to move and walk in the natural world, which I also have had to develop in the forest where I do research.

The fourth chapter, "Go beyond the realm of the senses," is a rather impassioned defense of the spiritual forces that enlighten us, that are beyond our ordinary senses. As a scientist, Oy assumes that extrasensory communication or legitimate paranormal phenomena have a physical basis, albeit poorly understood. She does not believe in ghosts. She explains that such phenomena likely depend on the electromagnetic energy field that surrounds us. An example she gives is the ability she has developed to detect which way to turn at a trail junction from a tingling sensation on the side of her neck, but she doesn't explain how this stimulus "decides" which the correct side is. She laments that we live in a rational or scientific culture that tends to deny the invisible things around us, or our supernatural powers. Different religions and cultures have different words to describe the supernatural world, such as Grace, shi-va, and chi.

Chapter 5, "Access the wild wisdom," is a discussion of the amazing abilities of animals to cooperate with and help one another. The author describes studies of animals such as wolves, dogs and whales. We can learn from other animals; humans are not the only beings that can show altruism. The next chapter discusses the abilities that animals and plants have in communicating with one another. The author describes the ability of Anna Breytenbach (in the documentary *The Animal Communicator*) to understand and talk with animals. Some of the most interesting and well documented findings concern communication between trees and fungi, specially the mycorrhizae, the root fungi which form a vast network of hyphae (tiny branches) that extends throughout the soil. Mycorrhizae have well-studied symbiotic relations with plants. Then the author discusses evidence for telepathic communication between plants, and plants and human, which must depend on sound waves or other unknown phenomena. She discusses evidence developed by experiments conducted by Australian botanist Monica Gagliano that plants can detect sound waves or vibrations. A lot of interesting research is being conducted in the new field of "plant bioacoustics." But it gets a little spooky when people maintain that plants can "talk" with one another and with humans, and have "consciousness." Probably, we will have to redefine these terms if we wish to apply them to plants. Nevertheless, the proper scientific attitude is not to denounce such claims, but to demand more scientific evidence and plausible mechanisms.

Chapter 7, "Co-create together," describes the importance of interactions among species, and the importance of preserving the balance of nature. She describes how she decided to write this book. Chapter 8, "Blending the outer and the inner worlds," describes many of the experiences she had in becoming a scientist and a teacher. Although she is a scientist, she argues that "scientific knowledge is not sufficient to lend us wings to get past the crisis of nature destruction. Science alone cannot enable us to co-exist with other beings who share the planet with us."

In the final "Epilogue", Oy stresses the importance of conserving the biodiversity on Earth. We are in the midst of the Sixth Extinction. "The Theory of Gaia sees the Earth as a super-organism, operated by the diversity of life . . ." It is related to the efficiency of working of the ecosystem. Oy laments that "There is a small group of people with all the power who hoard the majority of the resources," who prevent Thailand from moving forward. She details many of the local environmental problems facing Thailand. Finally,

she describes her house in the rice growing area of Chiang Rai, where she and her husband have put their conservation ideals into practice.

In closing, I would like to add, as a biologist, some comments about Gaia in support of this book, which is thought-provoking and great fun to read. Oy has admirably explained the mindset that *Homo gaia* must attain, and cultivated it in her own life and the lives of others around her. The question remains, however, of whether we will ever become *Homo gaia*? Is it even possible?

The concept of the Earth as a “super-organism” should be taken in a metaphorical sense. But can *Homo gaia* actually evolve out of us, and become realized? Paleontologists tell us that the average species on Earth lasts about one million years before becoming extinct, and the species alive today are but a tiny fraction of the ones that ever existed. Even our hominid ancestors evolved into forms that are known only from fossils, i.e., are extinct. Some lucky species, however, give rise to new forms which are able to survive the Earth’s climate changes, catastrophes, diseases, predators and competitors, and become better adapted, new species. One example is *Homo sapiens*. As Oy pointed out, modern humans have thrived on Earth for about 200,000 years. Within the last 10,000 years, however, we have exploded in numbers and influence, from a geological perspective. Will we survive to a million years as *Homo sapiens*? The jury is out, but the way things are going, it does not seem too likely. In order to survive the next 1,000 years, we will have to solve the problems of population growth, pollution, sustainable energy production and consumption, and destruction of biodiversity. Many of these problems will demand solutions much sooner than 1,000 years. Energy production must not produce carbon dioxide, and in fact we must *reduce* the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere. We will need to accomplish this within this century to prevent the polar icecaps from melting and raising the sea level. Eventually, the rate of input of CO₂ into the atmosphere must just balance the rate of absorption by the oceans. Gaia has accomplished this throughout Earth’s history, but at present, this process is being overwhelmed by the still-increasing level of CO₂ from the burning of fossil fuels. This has huge consequences for the Earth system and for us (one of them being the loss of Bangkok and all other cities near sea level).

All these things must be accomplished in an instant of geological time. We must also develop sustainable governance, which seems to be our species’ limiting problem at present. Lovelock expressed doubt that humans are capable of implementing all of these corrections to the Earth system, but at some point if we do succeed in doing so, we will have become a self-sustaining species worthy of the name—*Homo gaia*.

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