

Fritjof Capra is the long time mainstay and high visibility representative of an ecologically-hued new age science. From *The Tao of Physics* to the recent *Web of Life*, his popularising books have found a loyal audience beyond the subject-specific enclaves of many of his peers.

Here **Sarah Boas** revisits various issues raised by his books, and looks to where Capra's thinking is going in the future.

## Beyond Ecotopia

*A conversation with Fritjof Capra*

Every two years or so Fritjof Capra makes the journey to Schumacher College to teach a course on 'Ecology, Gaia, and the Systems View of Life'. Schumacher College is nested within Dartington Trust's grounds, in the beautiful, rolling Dart valley countryside of South Devon, a few miles from Totnes. Capra's course can be viewed as part of the College's developing work of establishing a centre for the contemporary study of Holistic science.

In a way this West country stop-off is only part of the latest chapter of the path which has led from worldwide success of *The Tao of Physics* to international emissary advocating an ecological paradigm shift across science and society. *The Tao of Physics* sold over a million copies and has been translated into most of the major spoken languages on the planet. It became a book of its time, a hippie-cum-proto New Age text, appearing in 1973 after the first flush of psychedelia, where a language of alternatives was finding voice, but before the successor zeitgeist of the late seventies and eighties reinterpreted the myth and meaning of its immediate cultural forerunner.

With his follow up work, *The Turning Point*, he focused in on changing paradigms, and his conviction that very significant cultural change was underway in the West and indeed across the planet. Together these two books made Capra a household name across a wide community of people looking for explanatory stories which included their experiences of the last twenty years in its picture. They also sat on pre-New Age bookstore shelves alongside other currently popular titles, *The Dancing of the Wu Li Masters* or *The Aquarian Conspiracy*. What is interesting is how, comparatively, these books have been forgotten, whilst the Capra books, particularly *The Tao of Physics* and the

ideas within them continue to exert a fascination for new readers long after their initial publication. That said, there are those who would ask where exactly did this transformation get to. Physics generally, has not exactly welcomed the Tao to its bosom, and its Big Science story is the one which gets all the features these days. And as to Paradigm Shift, is it genuinely credible to view the kind of changes as so deeply taken into the body of contemporary society as to warrant the use of the phrase? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe only once time is out, fifty or so years hence, and we look at our behaviours and values, will a sense of whether we live in and behave, both individually and in terms of our organisational processes – in more holistic, ecological or maybe just caring ways, will be clear.

And this point – ecological – is key to Capra. He is happier with it as a descriptive term than he is with 'holistic'. This makes biographical sense. His story seems in its beginnings very much the sixties' story. In a way it's the viewpoint of the radicalised science student, who was into Marx, revolution, and also the psychedelic doors of perception which brought him to the great river of the spiritual traditions. And perhaps, who happened to get lucky. In the eighties when he co-wrote *Green Politics* the fusion of this history with the early days of the ecological parties, Capra had seamlessly updated the sixties' spirit within *The Tao of Physics* to fit the political coming of age a significant portion of his generation had found itself at. The next years, spent establishing the ecological educational charity, The Elmwood Trust, deepened this. And his most recent work *The Web of Life* fuses ecological systems' thinking with various other elements of new paradigm thinking in the life and computer sciences. That book has been welcomed by the green, as well as