

# In Memoriam: Ulrich Loening

by Dieter Steiner

This special issue of *Human Ecology Review* is dedicated to Ulrich Loening, who passed away on July 10, 2025, at the age of 94, after a brief illness.

In May he still participated in the conference of the European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER) in Athens, where he gave a presentation on the topic “Why ‘science’ as currently conceived is often part of the problem, and how it could become part of the solution.” It was his intention to also attend the International Conference of the Society for Human Ecology (SHE) in Mons, Belgium, in June, but he was no longer able to do so. He wrote: “With luck, I can record, from bed, an off-the-cuff talk on my Darwin ideas.” He succeeded in doing so, and sent the recording to the conference. With Ulrich’s passing, we have lost a distinctive, accomplished, and wise representative of human ecology. He described it as “thinking that is at the same time a science, as the word ecology suggests, and carries with it what some have called the baggage of emotional reaction to the state we are in.” Accordingly, absolute honesty in scientific work and respect toward the natural world, which is ultimately superior to us and envelops us, were his hallmarks.

Ulrich studied biochemistry at the University of Oxford and then worked for more than 20 years at the Institutes of Botany and Zoology at the University of Edinburgh, where he conducted research on RNA and protein synthesis and was involved in teaching biology. He became increasingly concerned about the degrading effects of human activity on the environment: “That which makes us human also bestows on us the potential to develop an ultimately suicidal power over Nature,” was his conclusion. The opportunity to devote himself fully to this topic arose in 1975 when the geneticist Conrad Waddington died. Waddington, driven by similar concerns, had three years earlier founded the “School of the Man-Made Future.” Now the University wanted to close it down, but Ulrich and others managed to keep it alive under the new title of “Centre for Human Ecology” (CHE). Later Ulrich also became its director. The Centre established a Masters study program in human ecology, conducted research concerning energy problems, food issues and organic farming, and organized exhibitions and international conferences. The latter were often made possible thanks to the participation of other institutions, such as the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council (CHEC). The university had mixed feelings about this operation and, accordingly, gave it only moderate support. On the one hand it recognized that it should become involved in the key issue of the time called ‘sustainability,’ on the other it occasionally regarded the persons working in the Centre as weirdos. When Ulrich reached retirement age in 1995, the

university announced that the CHE would be closed down. However, it ventured to continue operating outside the University of Edinburgh. This was successful, initially with support from other universities, and later on a purely private basis.

Ulrich also had a strong streak in practical human ecology. When he discovered two old stone buildings in the village of Ormiston outside Edinburgh he converted them to homes partly equipped with solar heating. He then lived there himself with Francesca, his wife, and their children and often also welcomed guests. And, as a critic of today's agriculture and genetic engineering, he also maintained an organic vegetable garden.

In his message to the SHE conference, his "last talk," as he himself called it, Ulrich suggested looking at Darwin's tree of evolution not from the top down to the roots, as is usually the case, but the other way around. We should start with the original microorganisms and then examine how the evolving life repeatedly created new environments such as an oxygen-rich atmosphere and soils that enabled the existence of new life forms. In this way we could much better understand the significance of the increasingly complex symbiotic network that developed as a result, not least with regard to our own survival. The conclusion must be that humanity's creative contribution to the overwhelming legacy of evolution can only be sustained in harmony with nature. In the two articles that emerged from our Potsdam conference, Ulrich attempts to show that this requires a "convivial science" and a corresponding educational program.

From this perspective, it is entirely appropriate that this issue of *Human Ecology Review* is framed by these two contributions from Ulrich.

