"Our task must be to free ourselves... by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty"

-- Albert Einstein, letter dated 1950, Mathematical circles adieu: A fourth collection of mathematical stories and anecdotes [compiled by]

European Journal of Ecopsychology
ISSN 2040-4204

EDITOR
Paul Stevens, Bournemouth University, UK

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Martin Jordan, University of Brighton, UK
Martin Milton, University of Surrey, UK

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE
Matthew Adams, University of Brighton, UK
Jamie Heckert, Anarchist Studies Network
John Hegarty, Keele University, UK
Alex Hopkinson, Climate East Midlands, UK
David Key, Footprint Consulting, UK
Alex Lockwood, University of Sunderland, UK
David Luke, University of Greenwich, UK
Jeff Shantz, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Canada

FOCUS & SCOPE
The EJE aims to promote discussion about the synthesis of psychological and ecological ideas. We will consider theoretical papers, empirical reports, accounts of therapeutic practice, and more personal reflections which offer the reader insight into new and original aspects of the interrelationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world. Topics of interest include:

- Effects of the natural environment on our emotions and wellbeing
- How psychological disconnection relates to the current ecological crisis
- Furthering our understanding of psychological, emotional and spiritual relationships with nature

For more information, please see our website at http://ecopsychology-journal.eu/ or contact us via email: info@ecopsychology-journal.eu

Reproduction of EJE material for nonprofit educational use is permitted.
Heart opening – Viola Sampson, taken on summer solstice 2001
http://mjr.members.gn.apc.org/DoubleVision/
One of the central tenets of ecopsychology is the articulation and examination of our psychological, including the emotional, relationships with the natural world. The fundamental challenge is to locate the human mind back within the natural world and to understand that this relationship is a reciprocal one (e.g., Boston, 1996; Schroll, 2007; Scull, 2009; Greenway, 2010). However, finding a 'core' language to represent ecopsychology as a unified discipline is problematic, and it might best be seen as a space for thought, language and practical actions that attempt to articulate the human-nature relationship which, thus far, other branches of the social and natural sciences have failed to do.

As an emerging discipline, ecopsychology finds itself at an interesting time and place within the history of ideas that underpin its position both in academic circles and in relation to those wider issues faced by those of us living within unsustainable societies. Existing at the interface between the disciplines of psychology and ecology, and influenced by environmental philosophy, has led to the field having a confused identity (unsurprising given that those fields have radically different epistemological and ontological foundation) with ecopsychologists often finding the ivory tower of academia too confining. Even sitting at the table of academic psychology (itself conflicted with competing ideas and paradigms) can be an uncomfortable placement at times, with ecopsychology squeezed between a humanistic/transpersonal paradigm (Schroll, 2007; Greenway, 2010; Metzner, 1999; Reser, 1995) and the more experimental approach advocated by branches of conservation and environmental psychology (Reser, 1995; Clayton & Myers, 2009). Many ecopsychologists see a large part of what they do as existing outside the confines of academic discipline; an attempt to co-create a common ground where people and movements with seemingly different agendas can articulate their ideas and find shared meaning. This is increasingly seen in the UK ecopsychology movement, which draws inspiration from diverse areas such as
permaculture, environmental politics, shamanism and dance-movement therapy, to name just a few.

Yet it is still important to locate ecopsychology within the pre-modern, modern and post-modern systems of thought which have forged its birth. Over the last twenty years, the advent of postmodernism and an anti-foundationalist stance (seen in the deconstructive philosophical positions and ideas of Jaques Derrida and Michel Foucault) have seen traditional certainties dissolved in certain areas of academia, the social sciences in particular (see the writings of Kenneth Gergen, Ian Parker and Nicholas Rose for an account of this movement within psychology). Ecopsychology developed in tandem with some of these ideas but has yet to find a place to sit in relation to them. Being named after two seemingly disparate strands of thought – ecology and psychology – ecopsychology can often find itself embodying the split in thinking that has plagued Western thought since the enlightenment: perceived dichotomies of subject and object, person and place, mind and nature.

Some ecopsychologists, many whom emerged post-Roszak's initial articulation of the term, now position themselves as a group who argue that 'ecopsychology' may in some ways be a misnomer; that trying to make a direct link between psychology and ecology can at times be problematic. The *European Journal of Ecopsychology* (*EJE*) emerged from such a group, and aims to be a forum for a variety of critical perspectives on how humanity might better relate to the rest of the natural world. That the EJE is the second peer-reviewed journal to emerge in only two years is a sign that there is lively debate and discussion amongst ecopsychologists (by whatever name) and a good indicator that the future of the field will be both exciting and sustainable.

In this, our first issue, we focus on the field as it is now, asking where it came from and where it might go. In trying to understand the origins of the field, **Jonathan Coope** sets the scene by putting Roszak's concept of ecopsychology back within a sociohistorical context, giving us a glimpse of a more inclusive area of study that could help us to reframe our understanding of human existence beyond the environmental aspects. **Jamie Heckert** then highlights the often-overlooked contributions of anarchist thought to ecopsychology, offering shared perspectives to inspire the future development of the field.

A current common criticism of the field is the lack of empirical work, citing the
success of the positivistic stance which dominates the natural sciences, guiding them with a clear epistemological foundation and allowing these disciplines to articulate cause and effect and uncover and predict patterns of relationship. While many ecopsychologists tend to be wary of a system of thought which has played no small role in producing the current environmental crises, there is much to be said for being a part of its evolution (e.g., Norton, 2008). In support of this approach, Jorge Conesa-Sevilla proposes a more interdisciplinary focus on humanity's evolutionary adaptation to the world as a more useful way of conceptualising the human-nature relationship, while Mark Hoelterhoff argues for an increased emphasis on naturalism that still recognises the importance of spiritual experiences.

Yet, for all the debate, it is important to remember that ecopsychology in the present form still has inspired and helped many people. John Hegarty reminds us of this by looking at a core concept of ecopsychology – connection to nature – and showing how people find it both relevant and helpful in their everyday lives. Finally, a short Insights piece from the people at a leading and successful UK horticulturally-based mental health charity – Cherry Tree Nursery – questions the often too-simplistic notion of 'horticultural therapy', instead painting a wider picture of the natural world as part of a therapeutic community.

References

Ecopsychology and the historian: Some notes on the work of Theodore Roszak

Jonathan Coope
University of Chichester, UK

Abstract

Ecopsychology has many sources. Theodore Roszak is often regarded as one of its co-founders – not least, because it was he who coined the term ‘ecopsychology’ in *The voice of the Earth* (1992). There, he hoped the field might ultimately: a) ‘ecologize’ psychology, and b) ‘psychologize’ ecology. Yet intriguingly, Roszak was neither an environmentalist nor a psychiatrist but, rather, a *historian* by profession. Roszak had long been exploring ecopsychological themes in his works prior to 1992; however, thus far, little scholarly attention has been paid to the development of Roszak’s ecopsychology within the overall context of his work as a historian. Consequently, this paper explores the relationship between ecopsychology and earlier concepts in Roszak’s work – most notably, his sociological and historical category of “counter culture”, first outlined in a series of articles for *The nation* in 1968. A second concept explored is “the spectrum of consciousness”, an idea usually assumed to have originated from within the field of transpersonal psychology; however, as this paper shows, Roszak’s development of the notion predates its appearance in transpersonal theory. This essay contributes to crossdisciplinary studies in ecopsychology, first, by supplementing our understanding of the field’s past developments and, second, by indicating ways in which ecopsychological principles may be applied to a range of cultural and historical issues in the future. It is hoped that the latter task is not merely of academic interest but of therapeutic concern as well i.e., as part of an ongoing project of what might be termed “ecological outreach work”.

**Keywords:** ecopsychology, Roszak, historical

Introduction

Mark Schroll reminds us that the development of ecopsychology has been woven of many threads (Schroll, 2007). For those who seek origins to the field, Theodore
Roszak proposes Paul Shepard as “the first ecopsychologist, the first thinker in the environmental movement to apply psychological categories to our treatment of the planet” (Roszak, 2002). Meanwhile, Robert Greenway indicates that ecopsychology first began to take shape as a ‘field’ or ‘discipline’ with the publication of Roszak’s *The voice of the Earth* in 1992 (Greenway, 1999); Whit Hibbard likewise observes that it was not until Roszak’s text “that ecopsychology was named formally and outlined seriously” (Hibbard, 2003).

Theodore Roszak, the subject of this essay, is thus widely acknowledged as one of the co-founders of ecopsychology. In *The voice of the Earth*, Roszak expressed his hope that the field might help a) to ‘ecologize’ psychology; in other words, to re-envision psychology within its ecological contexts, and b) to ‘psychologize’ ecology; that is, to bring psychological sensitivity and sophistication to the environmental movements. Yet intriguingly, Roszak was neither an environmentalist nor a psychiatrist but, rather, a *historian* by profession. And, while Greenway notes how Roszak had long been exploring themes of ‘ecopsychology’ in his work prior to coining the term in 1992 (Greenway, 1999), little scholarly attention has hitherto been paid to considering the development of Roszak’s approach to ecopsychology within the overall context of his work as a historian. This paper thus considers the relationship between ecopsychology and earlier concepts in Roszak’s work – most notably, his sociological and historical category of “counter culture”, first outlined in a series of articles for *The nation* in 1968.

I begin by exploring Roszak’s first explicitly psychological essay, ‘The Historian as Psychiatrist’ (1962). In that essay, Roszak first suggests – following Freud – that Western modernity may be, collectively, pathological. Now, if we were to take that assessment seriously, we might be tempted to ask ‘what then are the roots of such pathology?’ And to show how Roszak came to his own conclusions on the matter, I then take a brief biographical detour to recount a key personal encounter between Roszak and technocratic authority during the Cold War in the US. Third, I outline Roszak’s concern to place the visionary dimensions of the personality, and the feel of the world around us, at the heart of his critique of technocracy. Fourth, I outline Roszak’s innovative conception of the “spectrum of consciousness” – an idea often assumed, mistakenly, to have first originated among transpersonal psychologists such as Ken Wilber. Finally, I explore the relationship between Roszak’s influential notion of ‘counter culture’ – developed in his bestselling text *The
Roszak is only one contributor among many to the field of ecopsychology. But it is hoped that this paper will a) supplement our understandings of earlier developments in the field and, b) demonstrate how one of the few professional historians working from an ecopsychological perspective has attempted, since the 1960s, to bring such perspectives to bear upon a range of historical and cultural issues.

Psyche and history

Despite a growing recognition that some of the most fruitful scholarship occurs between disciplinary boundaries, respecting those boundaries remains one of the most common ways in which academic training continues to discipline – or, some might say, constrain – the purview of the scholarly mind (Reisz, 2008). From that perspective, the notion of a “psychiatrist as historian”, or a “historian as psychiatrist”, all-too-easily smacks of dilettantism and inadequate rigour. However, there is another way we might view the matter as Christine Daigler recently indicated, with respect to Jean-Paul Sartre:

The picture that emerges[…] is that of an intellectual who grasped everything within his reach. Talented and with a voracious mind, he devoted himself to his writing. He was a total intellectual, in that his activity was not confined to one realm or style. He was fully committed and believed that, as a writer, he had an important social role to play. (Daigle, 2010)

Roszak may lack the notoriety of Sartre; nevertheless, his book *The making of a counter culture* did coin a term in common parlance, selling over half a million copies in the process – quite a feat for a scholarly text. Moreover, it becomes clear in Roszak’s 1962 essay “The historian as psychiatrist” why he decided to step beyond the normal disciplinary boundaries of history. For Roszak became convinced that post-war modernity – its politics and culture *as a whole* – was becoming increasingly psycho-pathological. Drawing that conclusion, he saw that an important task for the historian might be to explore the roots of that crisis.

It’s worth briefly noting that in recent decades, many historians have tended to be suspicious of “big picture” histories that attempt to summarise broad swathes of the past. And clearly such suspicions are not wholly without foundation since ‘big picture’ histories in their search for broader themes, continuities and “grand narratives” can be liable – as postmodernists have noted – to ride roughshod over
particularities and differences. Other historians, however, increasingly recognise the need for broader understandings in order to make sense of, for example, anthropogenic climate change and other environmental challenges (Corfield, 2009).

In his own approach to the past, Roszak eschewed any claims on behalf of dispassionate objectivity – claims still made by many historians today, including environmental historians (Hughes, 2005). Instead, he suggested a different conception of objectivity:

A grasp of how deeply diseased man’s historical development has been would withdraw from his political behaviour the respectability he requires to take himself seriously. It would give rise to a new objectivity. Not the objectivity of one who hides his sanity and ethical concern in order to “understand” wretched and wrong-headed men of power, but rather the objectivity of the psychiatrist investigating the history of a sick soul, breaking down its defenses, gauging its behaviour at every step by the standards of good health and happiness. (Roszak, 1962)

So why had Roszak become convinced humanity’s development was “diseased”? Upon what evidence had he based that conclusion? After all, the essay was written prior to the modern Green movement, and Rachel Carson’s Silent spring had only been published two months earlier. However, among the influences on Roszak at the time were post-Freudians such as Paul Goodman in Gestalt therapy (1951), Herbert Marcuse in Eros and civilisation (1956) and Norman O. Brown in Life against death (1959). And one thing that was obvious to these commentators was a tendency in modern adulthood for people to be alienated from their own organism. Roszak concurred and, following Freud and Norman O. Brown, viewed this organic estrangement as an aspect of Freud’s death instinct, for “man is the animal who cannot assimilate death” (Roszak, 1962). Furthermore, he saw this estrangement between psyche and organism pushed to ever greater extremes within technologically developed societies.

Now, if there is such a malaise in the present then that malaise must also have a past. And for that reason, Brown had suggested that history possessed a “psychoanalytical meaning”. Roszak argues the case in the following terms:

Dissociation [between psyche and organism], or repression, is our way of asserting our independence of the body. And history is the course of repression. It is man’s attempt to flee his mortality by investing his sensuous vitality in an enduring personal project that outlives him[…] the psychic foundations of civilisation, and of the historical process as a whole[…] this is exactly the historical problem that most fascinated Freud (and Jung and Ferenczi and
Far from believing that psychoanalysis was relevant only to mankind’s outbursts of obvious individual and collective madness, Freud was convinced that the new science of psychoanalysis also had much to say about our conditions of normalcy. Or to put it another way, he became progressively more aware that “normalcy” may actually be the socially acceptable form of psychic sickness.

And if history is the course of repression, then some of humankind’s most enduring ‘achievements’ will be amenable to being read as pathological symptoms:

the building of cities, the raising of pyramids, the conquest of empires [...] At one and the same time, the strenuous and ascetic task of making history is a means of punishing the body (thus “mastering” it) and of organizing an enduring substitute for it. (Roszak, 1962)

Now, some might counter that this is surely speculative big picture history at its most abstract, most generalised, and hence most irrelevant. However, Roszak’s essay is dated 24 November. Exactly four weeks previously the Cuban Missile Crisis had been at its peak – the day the Cold War nearly turned hot. That prospect of annihilation lent Roszak’s diagnosis of collective craziness both plausibility and ethical urgency.

**Science, technocracy and moral nausea**

If society was as pathological as Roszak believed, then we might ask why so many people collude in that pathology. As Roszak would later put it, “The fundamental question of radical politics has always been, why do the people obey unjust authority?” Where, psychologically-speaking, are people “hooked”? (Roszak, 1972).

Roszak recalls that during his own student days in the 1950s he happily imbibed the prevailing assumption of post-war American intelligentsia that science was the only right and proper basis for a modern culture and that society was, fortunately, liberating itself from the shackles of religious superstition. Having been raised a Roman Catholic, Roszak was soon won over to the logical positivism of his first philosophy lecturer at UCLA, who had used Bertrand Russell’s 1902 essay “A Free Man’s Worship” as the class text. “A Free Man’s Worship” espoused a bleak scientific worldview that stoically rejected the possibility that warm sentiment or religiosity had any place left in our understanding of the universe. According to Russell:
man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving[...] his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms[...] no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave[...] all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and[...] the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of the universe in ruins[...] Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built. (Russell, 1961)

And with the zeal of the convert, Roszak found himself “proudly and pugnaciously” espousing Russell’s words as a sort of secularist manifesto (Roszak, 1992). However, Roszak’s faith in science as a “firm foundation” of reason was soon to be shaken.

With the development of the hydrogen bomb in the 1950s, civil defence rapidly became a national priority. President Truman’s Federal Civil Defense Association suggested that the evacuation of cities in the event of a thermonuclear attack would be impractical, and proposed instead a massive bomb shelter programme to protect the entire US population. In January 1962 President Kennedy announced a $3.5 billion shelter programme (Winkler, 1984).

Roszak, who was by then teaching history at Stanford University, found himself invited to speak at local meetings to protest at the shelter proposals. He was horrified by what was being countenanced by the military and civil planners but soon discovered that expressions of moral horror, or emotions of any kind, were simply dismissed as “irrational”:

> The only legal tender for these debates were – the facts. If you introduced anything emotional or evaluative, you were immediately cautioned for trying to arouse feelings[...] someone would say ‘Let’s not get emotional, let’s be as scientific as possible.’ That taught me what society’s going standards of rationality were[...] My response was that feelings were part of the discussion: human beings are whole things, and the feelings of dread and horror and disgust were part of the issue – in fact, the heart of the issue.

Indeed, the exclusion of such “irrelevances” from the discussions, in favour of niceties such as the thickness of concrete needed to withstand a firestorm – “took a heavy toll of my appreciation for reason and rationality in American society” (Chedd, 1971).

By placing personal ethical sensibilities at heart of the issue, the supposedly
rational and scientific mindset of the experts appeared merely “pathetically small and vicious”. However, Roszak noticed that even among opponents of the shelter programmes those who were most likely to collude in the pretence “that certain aspects of human nature either don’t exist or have no value whatsoever” were those who clung fast to a scientific picture of reality. And another contemporary critic noticed how the persuasiveness of the shelter campaign rested upon the authority accorded to supposedly scientific styles of knowledge:

> the intellectual reputability of the idea[…] is very largely a reflection of the reputability of the social science literature in which it has been put forth[…] this condition has come about because of our society’s great respect for the claims of science and expertise. (Green, 1966)

The distinctive scientific/technocratic mindset of US authorities in the Cold War era is exemplified by Herman Kahn, an employee of the RAND Corporation and adviser to the US government. Kahn was proud to contemplate “the unthinkable” and in one text on nuclear strategy from the time he proudly states that the distinguishing value of his approach is its techno-scientific style of reasoning:

> The major quality that distinguishes this book[…] is the adoption of the Systems Analysis point of view – the use of quantitative analysis where possible[…] It is necessary to be quantitative. For example, in describing the aftermath of a war it is not particularly illuminating to use words such as “intolerable”, “catastrophic”. (Kahn, 1961)

It was in order to articulate his claim for those aspects of the personality dismissed in the shelter debates, and which those who cleaved to scientific assumptions about reality appeared most likely to overlook, that Roszak conceived his notion of the spectrum of consciousness and of knowledge – in which scientific understandings have their right and proper place, but should not monopolise in a wholesomely ordered mind.

‘The feel of the world around us’

Roszak’s argument was that personal ethical sensibilities were at the heart of the matter in his debates with the technocrats who had been proposing the fallout shelter programme. Roszak extended this critique to examine the ways in which technocratic styles of manipulation were being applied in more and more aspects of Western modernity – from economics to sociology and education. It appeared that a prevailing “myth” in modernity – within scholarship and elsewhere – was that
truly reliable knowledge of nature, politics or any other matter was only obtainable by cultivating an objective or de-personalising style of consciousness. Part of the function of many of the methodologies in various academic disciplines seemed to be the cultivation of a depersonalised response to the subject matter. And the source of this prevailing “myth of objective consciousness” was the cultural authority accorded to science.

With regard to nature, Roszak noted that the increasing authority of science – a scientific worldview and its often objective style of knowledge – tended to foist a boundary condition, or an emotional coldness and distancing, upon our affective responses to the natural world. Drawing upon Freud’s idea of the reality principle, Roszak suggested that industrial society, just like any other society, tends to normalise its citizenry psychologically – and that it often does so in subtle ways. For one way Roszak perceived that we can become adjusted to societal norms was by absorbing a non-intellective feeling tone for the world around us. Of course, it may be that few of us attend to this non-intellective aspect of experience. Nevertheless, as the poet Kathleen Raine observed in *Defending ancient springs* (1967), the underlying tone of experiencing the world can differ from person to person:

> we continue to imagine that we all live in the same apparent world through sheer inability to imagine otherwise. From time to time we receive a shock, when we are compelled to realize the immense divergence not of deductions and conclusions, but of the premises, the basic assumptions upon which these rest; and thus even of the primary experience itself… (Raine, 1967)

Roszak, who would draw upon Raine’s work for his later discussion of “transcendent symbols”, concluded that any searching ethical discussion, or critique of society, must ultimately explore this visionary dimension of the personality:

> Our action gives voice to our total vision of life – of the self and its proper place in the nature of things – as we experience it most movingly[…] We have no serviceable language in our culture to talk about the level of the personality at which this underlying vision of reality resides. But it seems indisputable that it exerts its influence at a point that lies deeper than our intellective consciousness[…] (Roszak, 1969)

Roszak concluded that the collective vision of modernity was increasingly circumscribed by the widespread assumption that science offers a wholly adequate
picture of reality and knowledge:

What is important in the examination of a people’s [collective vision] is not what they articulately know or say they believe[…]. What matters is something deeper: the feel of the world around us, the sense of reality, the taste that spontaneously discriminates between knowledge and fantasy. It is in all these respects that science has been the dominant force… (Roszak, 1972)

So how does Roszak characterise those visionary aspects of the personality that an objective or scientific standpoint often tended to overlook, or repress?

The spectrum of consciousness

In a lecture at the Royal College of Art in 1971 Roszak noted that primitive or premodern cultures, and tribespeople such as Black Elk or Smohalla, often expressed a personal, experiential relationship between humans and nature:

Smohala and Black Elk[…] represent a magical vision of nature, in the truest sense of the word magical[…] the conviction that the world is there to be communicated with, that it can be prayed to, that there can be a transactory relationship between people and their environment.

However, when such affective, magical, or rhapsodic sensibilities towards nature appear in the midst of our modern culture, as they frequently do in art and poetry, for example, they present problems:

What do we make of someone like the poet Shelley, who was no savage but who writes a poem that begins, ‘Oh wild west wind, though breath of Autumn’s being’? What do we make of Wordsworth when he says ‘the earth and common face of nature spake to me remarkable things’? What do we make of Dylan Thomas when he says ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives my red blood’? Or what do we make of St Francis and the canticle of the sun, when he addresses himself to brother fire and brother sun and sister wind, and so on? What does one make of Vincent van Gogh’s Starry Night in which the very heavens seem shot through with a living presence, with a vitality that makes them seem to swirl and move with a life of their own? (Roszak, 1971)

The usual attitude has often been to accord such art its place in civilised modernity. But since such expressions tend to be at odds with the scientific picture of reality, their affective claims tend to be regarded as “poetic licence”, or “mere metaphors”. Yet human consciousness is a spectrum of possibilities, Roszak insists. And scientific objectivity should take its rightful place within that spectrum in a wholesomely ordered mind. The problem of scientism arises when part of the
spectrum comes to monopolise the whole of the mind or of our conception of knowledge, so that other hues of the spectrum become repressed. Roszak’s approach here is neither anti-intellectual nor anti-science – though it has sometimes been misread as such (Marx, 1978); it is simply the recognition that there are other, affective styles of mind and knowledge. Roszak introduces the idea of consciousness as a “spectrum” in his text Where the wasteland ends (1972) and later outlined the idea in the following terms:

Perhaps the best way to summarize[…] is to conceive of the mind as a spectrum of possibilities, all of which properly blend into one another – unless we insist on erecting barriers across the natural flow of our experience. At one end, we have the hard, bright lights of science… In the center we have the sensuous hues of art; here we find the aesthetic shape of the world. At the far end, we have the dark, shadowy tones of religious experience, shading off into wavelengths beyond all perception; here we find meaning. Science is properly part of the spectrum. But gnosis is the whole spectrum. (Roszak, 1974)

This idea of consciousness as a spectrum is widely credited to the transpersonal psychologist Ken Wilber (Wilber, 1975; Miller, 1998; Visser, 2003), but Roszak’s use clearly predates Wilber’s.

In Roszak’s hands, this idea leads to two important insights. First, understandings of nature that overlook the affective or ecopsychological dimensions are recognised as psychologically under-dimensioned, or neurotic. Indeed, he describes his critique as a therapeutic endeavour to address “a neurotic complex that profoundly flaws the epic grandeur of science” (Roszak, 1975). Second, so long as science continues to assume that it is our only source of reliable knowledge of nature, and then to claim that the natural world is merely an alien, meaningless collection of unfeeling objects with which we can have no conceivable ethical relationship then that is apt to lead, in an era of environmental crisis, to an irresponsibility we can ill afford:

By reducing the world to nothing more than bits of matter in random motion, atomism helped teach us how to talk about nature mathematically. That is a formidable achievement and a lasting contribution. But[…] the exclusivity of that approach has cost us dear. (Roszak, 1999)

Roszak’s argument is that we can only be truly responsible, in any psychologically sustainable way, for what we love. And an under-dimensioned, neurotic relationship with nature diminishes our ethical capacity to respond with compassionate motivation to the needs of the earth. Moreover, even if Newtonian
materialism is well behind us, the “new physics” can still deprive nature of what Kate Rigby describes as “moral considerability” (Rigby, 2004); for, as Roszak puts it: “The cold void” of Newtonian physics has merely been exchanged for “the queasy absurdity of Einstein’s” (Roszak, 1992).

It is interesting to note that in the aforementioned lecture from 1971, Roszak predicted a coming split within the environmental movements: between those, on the one hand, who grant affective, relational responses their epistemological legitimacy as part of a more encompassing and wholesome conception of rationality and, on the other hand, those who continued to sternly dismiss the claims of animist or magical responses to nature as merely weak-minded or irrational. And that split does indeed divide environmentalists today. For, while ecopsychologists, ecofeminists and others have been keen to explore affective responses to the natural world, many other articulate environmental commentators still assume science should monopolise our conception of reliable knowledge, and of nature, and dismiss magical or affective responses to the more-than-human world around us (e.g., Phillips, 2003; Garrard, 2004).

**Counter culture**

Roszak coined the term “counter culture” in a series of articles for *The nation* in March 1968. And while popular understandings of the term have since tended to refer to assortments of hippies, drugs, rock music and Woodstock, Roszak’s intended meaning for the term was something rather more precise. Roszak defines his counter culture in terms of what it confronted: the pathological aspects of modernity.

> The only reason all this ever had to be a *counter* culture was because the culture it opposed – that of reductionist science, ecocidal industrialism, and corporate regimentation – was too small a vision of life to lift the spirit (Roszak, 1995).

And the most potent aspects of the counter culture, according to Roszak, were those that challenged the psychological foundations of modernity’s problems: its peculiarly alienated sensibility, “it is with respect to its interest at this level – at the level of vision – that I believe its project is significant” (Roszak, 1969). Roszak thus sought the seeds of a new humane social order based upon an alternative vision to the dominant imperatives of urban-industrialism, the conquest of nature, material progress and scientific “rationality”. The idea that life itself and the
opportunities it might afford –

for growth, for intellectual adventure, for the simple joys of love and companionship, for
working out our salvation[...] this is what I have always assumed it meant to be
countercultural. (Roszak, 2009)

One suspects that many of the half million or so who purchased his *The making of a counter culture* found it a rather more scholarly text than expected. In his quest for intellectual currents that explored other aspects of the spectrum of consciousness, Roszak included a remarkably eclectic range of thinkers and styles – from Alan Watts’s Zen Buddhism, to William Blake and the Romantics, to Martin Buber’s Hassidic mysticism and Thomas Merton’s accounts of Taoism, to the visionary anarchist sociology of Paul Goodman and the personalist history and philosophy of Lewis Mumford and Emmanuel Mounier. But his engagement with these authors was learned and rigorous. And while Roszak viewed the counter culture’s moral task in ambitious terms – nothing less than “to proclaim a new heaven and a new Earth” – his assessment of its imminent prospects for effecting widespread societal change was rather more muted. He viewed the task of creatively transforming society into a humanely ordered world taking at least four generations, while the counter culture itself – as a sociological and historical entity – still consisted of only “a strict minority of the young and a handful of their adult mentors.”

To us now, Roszak’s texts from the late 1960s and early 1970s seem dated. Nevertheless, some of the themes they explored still have resonance today. For example, Patrick Curry notes in his *Ecological ethics* (2006) that –

Belief in technological fixes is symptomatic of a wider faith in modern techno-science[...] the idea that science offers unique access to ‘the truth’ has widespread rhetorical plausibility, even among those whose interests are damaged by its exercise[...] paradoxically, the value that proponents of science place on ‘objectivity’ can contribute to the ecocrisis as much as, in another way, it can help by gathering, analysing and presenting evidence. Why? One reason is the extent to which an overemphasis in this respect, and a corresponding devaluation of the Earth in its sensuous particulars and emotional meanings[...] is itself implicated in that crisis. (Curry, 2006)

Roszak’s suggestion that urban-industrialism is near its limit and that, for the good of both the Earth and its human residents, industrial society requires a therapeutic and creative disintegration – found in his work on counter culture (Roszak, 1979) –
remains as part of his eco-psychological project in *The voice of the Earth*. Another aspect of his counter cultural critique that may have lasting relevance is Roszak’s conception of transcendent symbols. In *The voice of the Earth*, Roszak characterises the mature ego in terms of its vivid experience of relationship with nature. And, as already indicated, from vivid relationship, may come a vividly experienced sense of *responsibility*. The aim of ecopsychology, Roszak suggests, is maturation “towards a sense of ethical responsibility with the planet that is as vividly experienced as our ethical responsibility to other people” (Roszak, 1992). And among the repertory of resources to which he suggests ecopsychology might turn in order to recuperate the child’s innately animistic quality of experience in later adulthood are the cultural expressions of heightened visionary response to nature we find expressed in religion and art (Roszak, 1992). Roszak described such cultural exemplars as transcendent symbols – by which he means, examples of art that have the potential to communicate a unique rhapsodic or visionary response (Roszak, 1972). With respect to nature, such symbols might thus have a role to play in awakening our slumbering capacities for affective delight:

> Jung would have called such images “archetypes,” a fruitful idea, though one which becomes less interesting the more we psychologize its status – as many Jungians are inclined to do. I have[… ] called them “transcendent symbols,” images whose extraordinary power derives from their unique proximity to some original *visionary experience*. (Roszak, 1988)

Such symbols may represent, Roszak suggests, human culture’s most valuable resource: indeed, in an era of increasing environmental challenges, we may need all the resources we can muster.

**Conclusions**

Ecopsychologists know only too well the therapeutic merits of acknowledging the environmental dimensions of the psyche for our personal well-being. At the same time, environmental campaigners are increasingly recognising the psychological dimensions of their project (Retallack, Lawrence & Lockwood, 2007; Crompton, 2008). But Roszak’s early work reminds us also that adopting an ecopsychological perspective reframes our understandings of both culture and history. And *inevitably* so.

Roszak’s term ‘counter-culture’ caught something important about the spirit of the times in the 1960s, and it remains with us today as an important organising and
historical concept for a range of dissenting cultural projects, activities and protesters. But Roszak bequeathes to us at least two other ideas of merit – the spectrum of consciousness and ecopsychology. In this essay I’ve outlined how these three ideas – ‘counter culture’, the ‘spectrum of consciousness’ and ecopsychology – reflect different facets of the same dissenting thesis.

Roszak’s detailed examination of the contours, or boundary conditions, of collective vision appeared to offer a coherent strategy for cross-disciplinary work in reflecting upon and understanding the broader historical roots of environmental problems that still trouble us today. And that perhaps raises a question: with what, in the twenty-first century, will academic ecopsychology concern itself with primarily? Will it be the well-being of the individual psyche? – a worthwhile project in itself. Or, in its inevitable examination of the boundary conditions of collective experience, to what extent will ecopsychology also address itself to the broader culture – to the future well-being, and to the current pathologies, of our society as a whole?

References


**Correspondence**

Dr Jonathan Coope  
26 Thoresby Court  
Llucknow Drive  
Mapperley Park  
Nottingham NG3 5EH
Anarchist roots & routes

Jamie Heckert

Anarchist Studies Network

Abstract

Following Andy Fisher's call for a radical ecopsychology – one which heals individuals and transforms social, philosophical and psychological systems of organisation and knowledge – this paper explores the anarchist pasts and possible futures of the field. While anarchists such as Kropotkin, Goodman, and Snyder are mentioned in Roszak's history of ecopsychology, these roots of the field have been little explored. There are clear affinities and overlaps between the two: ecopsychology's critique of disconnection is the flipside of anarchism's critique of hierarchy. In practising connection as interdependent equals, ecopsychology practitioners might look to anarchist traditions of direct relationship, direct action and direct democracy. These elements might weave themselves together into a radical, fractal network of networks replacing dominant and dominating systems of state and capital. This of course requires practice. The concluding section of the paper turns to the work of the anti-state feminists Wendy Brown and the subRosa Collective to hold on to both personal healing and political transformation in this challenging process of nurturing autonomy.

Keywords: anarchism, autonomy, radical, democracy

Introduction

[Humans suffer] a nostalgia for which there is no remedy upon Earth except as is to be found in the enlightenment of the spirit – some ability to have a perceptive rather than an exploitative relationship with his [sic] fellow creatures (Bakunin, cited in Tift & Sullivan, 1980: 2)

Anarchists have often compared this open cooperative social structure to a biological organism. Organisms are living beings which evolve of their own free will through a process of perpetual becoming that is unbounded and non-deterministic. Similarly, an anarchist society emulates this openness through a harmonious social structure that is free, dynamic, and ever-evolving (Antliff, 2008: 6).

Andy Fisher has called for a recognition of ecopsychology as radical praxis – a
theoretically engaged and profoundly practical process of “increasing critical consciousness and reconstructing society” in order to address the deep sources of problems which are simultaneously psychosocial and ecological (2009: 61). In other words, individual ecotherapy can only ever be part of the process of undermining the dominant and institutionalised narrative of human beings as separate from, and superior to, the rest of life. Fisher looks to ecosocialism and Buddhism as resources for radicalising ecopsychology. Here, I suggest a third complementary body of resources: anarchism.

Anarchism as a tradition is both controversial and diverse. Whereas the mainstream represents anarchists as “violent” or “mindless thugs” (Donson, Chesters, Welsh & Tickle, 2004), my own experience has been very different. While anarchism does attract people whose idea of freedom is individualistic (arguably a notion more consistent with capitalism) and anarchist subcultures and movements frequently suffer from patterns of machismo and racism, these patterns of hierarchy are themselves challenged and transformed as an integral part of a movement which is a living tradition (Ackelsberg, 2005; Dark Star Collective, 2002; starr, 2007). Many groups and individuals are involved in numerous grass-roots projects working to nurture autonomy – our capacity to recognise our fundamental equality, interdependence and ability to live without domination (Clark, 2007; Notes from Nowhere, 2003; Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006). Others work to challenge and/or subvert the official political economy (state and capitalism) and other hierarchies in “domination societies” (Rosenberg, 2003: 23) which are deeply intertwined with the presumption of a separate/superior humanity.

Whether or not a perfect anarchist society is achieved, or achievable, what arguably matters most is the practice: the process of understanding ourselves, our connections with each other and with the land. In this way, anarchism, like ecopsychology, is deeply concerned with the interdependence of human well-being with the well-being of the rest of the natural world. For human beings, more egalitarian societies are healthier (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010), and anarchism promotes the most equal societies of all: classless, stateless and without hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality or ability. For the rest of the natural world, the anarchist ethic of mutuality and recognition of interdependence promotes an awareness of “the complex interrelationship between global ecological and individual psychological problems” (Fox, 1985), leading one researcher to note that environmental issues are “so close to the central problem of anarchism that it is
perhaps the most directly relevant body of theory for many of the critical issues” (Ophuls, 1977: 235).

**Anarchist roots**

While anarchism is occasionally acknowledged in the history of ecopsychology, my invitation in this paper is to take a deeper look at anarchist traditions which might provide fruitful sources of inspiration for facing the challenges of nurturing into existence a profoundly emotionally and ecologically sustainably society. As a brief introduction to an enormous field of possibilities, I begin here by outlining the work of recognising anarchist roots of ecopsychology already undertaken.

Contemporary ecopsychology has roots not only in healing practices such as wilderness therapy but also in radical social movements, counter-cultures (Rhodes, 2008; Roszak, 1992/2001) and critical theory (Fisher, 2002). Anarchism, a diverse set of political traditions advocating and practising decentralised, interdependent, egalitarian and libertarian modes of living and relating, has been a part of all these.

**Pyotr Kropotkin**

In his influential ecopsychology text, *The voice of the Earth*, Theodore Roszak (1992/2001) counts the anarchist geographer and political theorist Pyotr Kropotkin (1842 – 1921) as both “one of the founders of modern ecology” and “among the first ecopsychologists” (p. 228). While Darwin's theory of evolution was being interpreted to justify the white-supremacist global empires of European states (i.e., survival of those most capable of dominating), Kropotkin's painstaking fieldwork led him to a very different understanding. Rather than contributing to the naturalisation of hierarchy and competition, Kropotkin's observations led him to note that:

> when animals have to struggle against scarcity of food [...] the whole of that portion of the species which is affected by the calamity comes out of the ordeal so much impoverished in vigour and health that no progressive evolution of the species can be based upon such periods of keen competition (1902/2010, emphasis original).

He also noted the great extent to which mutual aid – that is, care and support among members of a species – contributes directly to their individual and collective well-being and thus their evolution. Rather than reinforcing the
dominant political stories that human societies require coercive institutions such as states or corporations to maintain themselves, Kropotkin pointed to the ways in which life is self-organising. As Roszak also notes, if an instinct for mutual aid or “an ethical unconscious did not exist, no amount of police force or bureaucracy could hold any society together. We form ourselves spontaneously into family, clan, band, tribe, guild, village, town” (2001: 229).

**Paul Goodman**

Roszak also acknowledged the role of Paul Goodman's ecological gestalt psychology in the development of ecopsychology. Taking inspiration from Kropotkin and Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (for anarchist readings of the *Tao Te Ching*, see Le Guin, 1997; Morris, 1996; Rapp, 2009; Watts, 1975) among others, Goodman saw self-organisation, autonomy and interdependence as fundamental characteristics of humanity and of the ecosystems of which we are a part. Rather than seeing human beings as inherently violent, dangerous or otherwise pathological, Goodman viewed the individual as “innately healthy and capable, with pathology as a secondary disruption of an otherwise natural homeostatic equilibrium” (Aylward, 1999: 112). His anarchist-inspired gestalt therapy offers an alternative to those therapeutic approaches which emphasised adaptation to a society dependent on domination and ecological devastation. Instead, it nurtures autonomy through “trusting the body, the senses, and the natural environment to solve their problems in their own spontaneous way” (Roszak, 2001: 229). And like much recent anarchism, Goodman's politics and psychology (for they were one and the same) were prefigurative. That is, instead of waiting for 'the revolution', anarchist-inspired actors practice in the present the forms of social organisation they would love to see more fully developed in the future. The challenge, in Goodman's ecopsychological terms, is “to live in present society as if it were a natural society” (cited in Fisher, 2002: 182).

**Gary Snyder**

A third anarchist figure recognised by Roszak, among others, at the roots of ecopsychology is the Beat poet and bioregionalist, Gary Snyder. While Roszak refers to him only briefly, Rhodes (2008) devotes significant attention to Snyder in his own effort to synthesize an anarchist critique of hierarchy with ecopsychological efforts to recognise our connection with the rest of the natural
world. For Rhodes, the roots of ecopsychology lie less in ecology or psychotherapy and more in the Beatnik counter-culture with its blending of anarchist politics with Buddhist, Taoist and shamanic spiritual awareness. Fisher, too, quotes Snyder favourably (2002), though without any reference to his “Buddhist anarchism” (Snyder, 1961/2010) or his involvement in the non-hierarchical, grassroots union: the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.).

**Anarcha-feminism**

While ecofeminism is generally accepted as one of the roots of ecopsychology (Fisher, 2002; Roszak, 2001), the *anarcha-feminist* influences are rarely mentioned, though there are plenty which are due acknowledgement. The intersections of anarchism, pacifism and feminism were, for example, key influences in the evolution of Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (Roseneil, 2000) which drew connections between the personal, political and ecological aspects of a patriarchal culture which aims to create 'security' through control rather than through connection. Similarly, environmentalist and anarcha-feminist Judi Bari worked hard to nurture connections between radical ecological activists and loggers, bridging what was an apparent conflict of interests to promote sustainable harvest of trees for generations to come. For her efforts, she was a targeted by the FBI and was the subject of attempted murder by car bombing (Shantz, 2005). In both these cases autonomy is nurtured through diverse practices including direct action, consensus decision-making and crafting cultures of resistance.

The ecofeminist and anarchist philosopher Chaia Heller is someone I look to for ecopsychological inspiration. In *Ecology of everyday life: Rethinking the desire for nature*, she wrote that “the antidote to capitalist rationalization is a new relationality, an empathetic, sensual, and rational way of relating that is deeply cooperative, pleasurable, and meaningful” (1999: 93). This new relationality includes both humans and the “more than human world” (Abram, 1997). Likewise, Ursula Le Guin might also be considered an ecopsychologist. Inspired by the anarchism of Kropotkin and Goodman, and the insights of Taoism, as well as being a colleague of Snyder, Le Guin links a deep respect for indigenous cultures with a passion for social justice and ecological sustainability throughout her works. One of her most famous novels, *The dispossessed* (1974), explicitly links the connection of self to nature with the practices of freedom advocated by
the anarchists who inspired her to write it (Stillman & Davis, 2006); these anarchist links are still very present, though implicit, in her later eco-utopia, *Always coming home* (1985). In addition, the sensual anarcha-indigenism of Jay Griffiths' travel log, *Wild: An elemental journey* (2008), is currently influencing ecopsychologists, as might the similarly shamanic and 'post-anarchist' ecofeminist writings of Sian Sullivan (see 2008a; 2008b).

Finally, the most famous anarcha-feminist Emma Goldman was both a student of Kropotkin and a profound anarchist theorist in her own right (Jose, 2005). Editor of the anarchist monthly *Mother Earth*, she acknowledged that we, too, are nature:

A natural law is that factor in man [sic] which asserts itself spontaneously without any external force, in harmony with the requirements of nature. For instance, the demand for nutrition, for sex gratification, for light, air and exercise, is natural. But its expression needs not the machinery of government, needs not the club, the gun, the handcuff, or the prison. To obey such laws, if we may call it obedience, requires only spontaneity and free opportunity. That governments do not maintain themselves through such harmonious factors is proven by the terrible array of violence, force, and coercion all governments use in order to live (Goldman, 1969: 58).

This may be read as a naive optimism toward human nature: a frequent critique of anarchism. In the same essay, Goldman countered this by noting the radical changes in behaviour among animals in captivity. Are we not also animals in captivity, she asks? What can we say about human nature, about human potential, based on our experiences in a culture of control? Goldman, in other words, challenges the human exceptionalism paradigm (Catton & Dunlap, 1978). Unless you believe in an interventionist God, and Goldman vociferously did not, nature has no ruler, no state. Humans only need the state if we really are exceptional in nature, a view challenged by anarcha-feminists and ecopsychologists alike.

**Social ecology**

This is also a view challenged by social ecologists, one of the major eco-anarchist traditions. Founded by Murray Bookchin, social ecology, like the work of Pyotr

---

1 Post-anarchism is the linking of poststructuralist political theories (including Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and Butler) with anarchism. Gregory Bateson, a key figure in ecopsychology, was also a major influence on Deleuze and Guattari, indicating another rich vein of connections between anarchist and ecopsychological traditions. For more details, see Rousselle & Evren (in-press).
Kropotkin, is something of a permaculture version of anarchism. In other words, anarchist principals of organisation are developed from observations of nature. And for Bookchin:

What renders social ecology so important is that it offers no case whatsoever for hierarchy in nature and society; it decisively challenges the very function of hierarchy as a stabilising or ordering principle in both realms. The association of order as such with hierarchy is ruptured. [...] Our continuity with non-hierarchical nature suggests that a non-hierarchical society is no less random than an ecosystem (Bookchin, 1991/2003: 37).

As John Clark comments, this approach “demands that a new ecological sensibility pervade all aspects of social existence”, transforming society, individual consciousness and humanity's relationship with the rest of the natural world (1990: 8). And, like many other anarchists, Bookchin declared it “axiomatic that there can be no separation of the revolutionary process from the revolutionary goal” (1971/1974: 45, original emphasis). In other words, if the ideal is an organic, self-organising society which nurtures the autonomy and diversity of individuality (human and otherwise), then the methods of working toward that ideal must be as consistent as possible. Freedom, equality and ecological sensibility cannot be legislated; they can only be practised, nurtured.

It is perhaps unsurprising that ecopsychology and anarchism might overlap in so many ways. Anarchism, after all, has made major contributions to modern environmental movements (Bookchin, 1974; McKay, 1998; Best & Nocella, 2006) and green political thought (Carter, 1999; Davidson, 2009). Their objects of critique, too, are intertwined. For many in ecopsychology, disconnection is the source of ecological and emotional unsustainability. For anarchists, hierarchy is at the root of social and ecological problems (Bookchin, 2003). Are these not too different ways of saying much the same thing? To imagine oneself hierarchically superior or inferior to another requires a denial of human embodied interdependence (Beasley & Bacchi, 2007), of our dynamic embedment in nature (Stevens, in-press) or, in other words, our kinship with other living and nonliving beings (Bookchin, 2003; LaDuke, 1999). The state, with its hierarchies, borders and policing, its arms and armies, its judges and judgements, is always a state of separation, of disconnection.

There is, of course, debate here. Is the hierarchy of class primary? Are all hierarchies equally problematic and deeply intertwined? While anarchists share a critique of hierarchy and domination, the nature of the critique varies widely.
Anarchist routes

Both anarchists and ecopsychologists realise the emotional and social benefits of relating directly with each other, minimising the mediations of technology, bureaucracy and money (Bey, 1994; Gordon; 2008; Glendinning, 1994). Whereas state politics are characterised by representation – what Delueze (1977) called “the indignity of speaking for others” – anarchism, which is simultaneously personal and political, replaces this with the dignity of speaking for oneself, of being listened to and of listening to others (human and otherwise) in direct relationship (Heckert, 2010). While shallow environmentalism is characterised by abstract problem-solving, deep ecology-inspired ecopsychology highlights the importance of a directly experienced relationship with the natural world for both promoting pro-environmental behaviour and emotional well-being (Kals, Schumacher & Montada, 1999). In this way, we can recognise that we are co-creators of the ecosystems of which we are an integral part (Macy & Brown, 1998). The same applies to social systems: while we are led to believe that only some people are in power, we are all already co-creators of our social worlds.

It seems clear to me that the questions facing ecopsychologists and anarchists are intertwined. What knowledge, practices or experiences help people recognise the ways in which we are all capable of creating change? How do we learn to let go of strategies of domination in our relations with ourselves, other beings and the land? How might we work together to further the ongoing process of co-creating the psychic, organisational and cultural infrastructure for sustainable societies? I’m in agreement with Fisher that these questions cannot be answered by individual therapy alone and suggest that anarchist ethics and practices can offer support for the practical, psychological, critical and philosophical tasks of renewing the radicalism at the roots of ecopsychology (Fisher, 2002).

Direct action

Ecopsychology faces a dilemma: if the best way for people to recognise that they, too, are nature is to spend time in wild spaces, and if this recognition is key to addressing our current ecological crisis, how might those who fear the wild be encouraged to (re)connect with it?

We, too, are wild, and nurturing relationships between people is another way of
remembering this. Shared experiences of working together directly to meet the needs of the people involved can be profoundly nurturing, profoundly connecting. Anarchism advocates direct action, itself a connection to the wild; it is to connect to our own will, individually and collectively. “The wildest things and people are the most self-willed, self-governing and, an-archic. Since will is wild, to damage someone else's will is both unkind and unwild” (Griffiths, 2006: 148). Indirect action – voting, lobbying, ethical consumerism, petitioning – all rely on submitting one's will to those claiming authority. This is undignified, unkind, unwild: disconnected.

Where it might be difficult for some people to take up the invitation of direct connection with the land for fear of getting dirty, or connecting with others in workshops dismissed as hippyish, other forms of direct action might be more appealing. As Franks notes, direct action is undertaken by those directly affected, thus connecting directly with their own immediate needs whether for housing, community, food or autonomy (2003). And, as others have noted, this can be profoundly empowering.

On the Green a hunched woman in her 80s was crying. She had always felt powerless, but when she pushed the fences down with hundreds of others, she said she felt powerful for the first time in her life. Empowerment is direct action's magic, and the spell was spreading (Anonymous, 2003: 14; see also Begg, 2000).

In addition to other empowering and therapeutic methods, ecopsychological practitioners might consider supporting themselves and others to nurture a sense of awareness of the hierarchical patterns of relationships (institutional and otherwise) affecting them and how they might act directly in order to transform, undermine or overflow them. After all, the textbook definition of stress is a perceived discrepancy between needed and available resources. Direct action, involving mutual support among participants and the sharing of resources emotional and otherwise, addresses the root of stress. As well as looking to practices of environmental direct action (see Best & Nocella, 2006; Seel, Paterson & Doherty, 2000), the evolution of ecopsychology might draw sustenance from other forms of direct action: autonomous feminist health movements (Gordon & Griffiths, 2007; Griffiths & Gordon, 2007; Lisa, 2008), anarchist mental health projects (e.g., The Icarus Project in New York) and Soma, a playful and political group therapeutic process developed in Brazil to undermine the psychological effects of military
dictatorship (Goia, 2008).

**Direct democracy**

Rather than any indirect system, including representative democracy, anarchist praxis tends to emphasise consensus-based decision-making and other forms of *direct* democracy so the people affected by decisions are involved in making them. Collective decision-making is counterbalanced by the appreciation of spontaneity and individual initiative.

Direct democracy is not a new improved system designed to replace an inferior one, but an ethic, a process. It's something that people work out how to do, together, with practice. As Carole Pateman has pointed out, “participation develops and fosers the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate the better able they become to do so” (1970: 42-3). Workers' cooperatives, housing co-ops (Radical Routes, 2010), neighbourhood assemblies, affinity groups, research & popular education collectives, community gardens, artists collectives, support groups, food coops, herb study groups, grass-roots unions and so many more forms of direct democracy contribute to vibrant anarchist(ic) cultures.

Ecopsychology can sometimes appear remote from everyday politics, focused on helping individuals (re)form their connections with the natural world but not addressing the dominant systems that rely on disconnection. Fulfilling Fisher's tasks to build an ecological society requires practising reciprocity in our relationships, addressing issues of isolation and disempowerment and critically analysing the underlying structures that maintain these divisions. While conventional approaches might turn to official forms of politics to address these, eco-anarchist Davidson (2009: 47) argues that “centralised systems of coercive powers” are not needed to organise ecologically sustainable societies. Indeed, they create institutionalised forms of disconnection.

Eco-anarchists have disagreements as to the particular forms direct democracy might take. Bioregionalists tend to have a commitment to autonomous communities, self-sufficient through their connection with the immediate landscape. For social ecologists, libertarian municipalism is key with village meetings offering a source of inspiration for decentralised cities and confederated eco-communities with a shared commitment to sustainability and freedom (Davidson, 2009). For green syndicalists, democratic control of labour and the
creation of ecological guilds are central (Shantz & Adam, 1999). Drawing from these rich and diverse anarchist traditions of direct democracy, ecopsychologists can contribute to the development of emotionally and ecologically sustainable political systems.

**Networks of networks**

That's all well and good for small groups, you might say, but how do you run a whole country (or perhaps a bioregion)? Fractally, in a word. Fractals are the geometry of nature: zooming in or out, we see replicating patterns. Forking of root and branch, the curve and sweep of coastlines from near or far, the iterative patterns of rivers, snowflakes and mountain ranges are all fractals. Hierarchies, too, are fractal. Patterns of domination found at the macro-level – wars between states and corporate ecological exploitation – are repeated at the mezzo and micro-levels of inter-group, interpersonal and internal relationships. This is not the only fractal pattern available to us. Inspired by organisational examples and theories, Sian Sullivan “affirms the possibility of a proliferation of democratic processes [...] in which people participate and which people self-organise, together with fostering the dynamic feedback possible via connectivity between scales. A fractal democracy, in other words” (Sullivan, 2005: 380, footnote 45). At large-scale actions, such as those held at organising meetings of the G8 or WTO or in solidarity with imprisoned migrants, the spokescouncil has evolved as one method by which small autonomous groups work together to make larger decisions. One temporary recallable delegate (rather than elected representative) from each affinity group meets with other delegates to feed in perspectives from their group and then to report back. With these feedback cycles, a large-scale horizontal and fractal decision-making structure develops. Similar methods were used in Buenos Aires during and after the popular rebellion of 2001 when the official economy collapsed and ordinary people found extraordinary ways of meeting their needs. Workers continued to run factories after wealthy bosses fled the country, realising that they didn't need a boss after all and that everyone could be a leader (Lavaca Collective, 2007). Neighbourhood assemblies involving people who didn't normally participate in 'politics' met to make decisions and to find ways to create an alternative infrastructure of organic gardens, community kitchens, bartering systems and transforming abandoned banks into community centres. Systems akin to spokescouncils evolved in order to build connections between neighbourhoods.
and workplaces. They call this *horizontalidad* (Sitrin, 2006). This network of networks continues to grow as social movements in Argentina make connections with other movements throughout Latin America and around the world including indigenous direct democracies such as the Zapatistas, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), and the Aymara, (on indigenous democracy without states, see Alfred, 2005; Conant, 2010; Coulthard & Lasky, in-press; Esteva & Prakash, 1998; Graeber, 2004; Grinde & Johansen, 1990; Scott, 2009; Smith, 2005; Zibechi, 2010). This 'movement of movements' is not anti-globalisation as some commentators have put it, but *alterglobalisation*: another world is possible. In this other possible world, the social practices of connecting as equals both directly and through symbiotic networks of networks (Halpin & Summer, 2008) are harmonious with other natural systems which work on the same principals (Litfin, 2010).

**Nurturing autonomy**

Autonomy is not a fixed, essential state. Like gender, autonomy is created through its performance, by doing/becoming; it is a political practice. To become autonomous is to refuse authoritarian and compulsory cultures of separation and hierarchy through embodied practices of welcoming difference. Becoming autonomous is a political position for it thwarts the exclusions of proprietary knowledge and jealous hoarding of resources, and replaces the social and economic hierarchies on which these depend with a politics of skill exchange, welcome, and collaboration. Freely sharing these with others creates a common wealth of knowledge and power that subverts the domination and hegemony of the master's rule (subRosa Collective, 2003: 12-13).

If a certain tendency in ecopsychology exists to overemphasise despair in the face of ecological uncertainty, a similar tendency exists in anarchism toward resentment in the face of inequality and control. Both can be radically disempowering, undermining capacities for autonomy. Both may function as an anaesthetising response to pain: why isn't the world the radically egalitarian, libertarian and ecological one in which you or I yearn to live?

Asking how ostensibly emancipatory political movements of the excluded come to focus on state-centred strategies which maintain their position as excluded minorities in need of protection, Wendy Brown turns to Nietzsche's notion of “*ressentiment*, the moralizing revenge of the powerless” (1995: 66). Liberal democracy, she suggests, makes promises of liberty and equality that it cannot
keep and is therefore particularly prone to ressentiment. This is strengthened by the individualistic logic of independence, rather than interdependence, at the core of liberal political philosophy. Encouraged to think of ourselves as independent individuals living in free and equal societies, who must we blame when we do not experience that freedom, that equality? Brown suggests we might blame either ourselves, doubling the pain, or we project that blame on to those we imagine to be other to ourselves in terms of race, class, sexuality, nationality, species or other social classification. Either strategy is one of disconnection and the reinforcement of hierarchy.

I suggest the same logic might be at work in environmental politics calling for state protection of our powerless and vulnerable (though sometimes angry and vengeful) Mother Earth. She, who existed for millions of years without humans and who will exist long after humans become extinct, is not weak and needing protection. Rather, it seems to me a certain kind of environmental politics project human desires for a particular ecological configuration which suits us (and other species) on to the planet as a whole, thus evading the vulnerability of speaking our own feelings and desires. This is a strategy which is both moralising – the good environmentalists who want to save the Earth versus the bad capitalists who want only profit – and putting both the environment and environmentalists in a position of powerlessness, dependent on the protection of the state. For those who recognise that the nation-state and the market economy are one and the same (Polyani, 2001), this strategy is particularly likely to lead to despair.

If holding on to pain, if basing one's sense of self on loss, resentment or despair, reinforces a sense of powerlessness, what is to be done with pain and loss? Brown argues that “all that such pain may long for – more than revenge – is the chance to be heard into a certain release” (2005: 74). Like Fisher, Brown reminds us that individual healing is insufficient. Instead, she asks, how might we nurture into being radically democratic – autonomous – cultures which do not both produce and depend upon subjectivities fuelled by ressentiment while at the same time recognising that individual healing is part of this process?

Whereas the liberal democratic state claims to be already achieved, based on a social contract to which we are all presumed to have consented, and freedom something we have because of the protection we receive from this, the subRosa Collective remind us that autonomy is a process, a practice. It's not something we
have, it's something we do. While anarchists and others advocating and practising politics without the state may be attracted to particular visions of an ecological social order (P.M., 2009) and may find those visions helpful in many ways, anarchy is necessarily organic. When it becomes rigid, as explored in Le Guin's The dispossessed, “an anarchist critique of anarchism” (Clark, 2009: 22) is required. Like any other ecosystem, social systems are living things constantly in process, never accomplished or achieved. And, like the ecosocialism Fisher (2009) looks to for inspiration, anarchism is prefigurative – practising in the present ethics and structures desired, thus contributing to the unfolding of the future.

In conclusion, this paper is a recognition of the anarchist influences in ecopsychology as well as an invitation to ecopsychology to nurture autonomy. The therapeutic practices of ecopsychology have a crucial role in this process of liberation. Anarchist ideas and practices provide a valuable complement, offering inspiration for egalitarian, libertarian and ecological social systems as well as renewing our relationships with ourselves, each other and the land. Anarchist praxis, when done with care, can offer the direct experience of just how nurturing autonomy can be.

References


Arbor: Pluto.


Sullivan, S. (2008b). “Conceptualising glocal organisation: From rhizome to E=mc² in becoming post-


**Acknowledgements**

I thank Paul Stevens for his intellectual stimulation and editorial support in the process of nurturing this paper into fruition. Comments from three anonymous reviewers were also immensely helpful for me in clarifying and adding nuance to the arguments in this paper. Thank you.

**Correspondence**

*Email: Jamie.Heckert@gmail.com*
Evolutionary ecopsychology

Jorge Conesa-Sevilla

Managing Editor, The Trumpeter

Abstract

It is argued that ecopsychology – as it moves into the arena of necessary ideas and practices, with humanity facing challenging, even dire, times ahead – needs to be grounded on tested and encompassing paradigms such as evolutionary biology. In this sense, ecopsychology can be seen as an application of, specifically, evolutionary psychology. A call is made for testable constructs that can move ecopsychology forward to become a significant, interdisciplinary contributing field – its integration into the natural sciences.

Keywords: evolutionary psychology

Introduction

…roughly, 250 generations of civilized society lie atop 300,000 generations during which we have been hunter-gatherers living in small social groups. And selection would have had many eons to adapt us to such lifestyle. Evolutionary psychologists call the physical and social environment to which we have adapted during this long period the “Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness,” or EEA. (Coyne, 2009: 227).

The opening quote by Coyne (2009) illustrates, in my opinion, what psychologists (and all social scientists) must address as brute facts¹: the reality of having to embrace the ever-expanding evidence that a long existence as a very specific type of animal, and the consequences of this long existence and evolved adaptations, express themselves in psychological processes, responses, and social proclivities.

To make matters even more confusing, psychology, as a social science, has been distracted by a perverse adoration of human culture and society, anthropocentrically so, while disregarding for the most part the now conclusive edicts of evolutionary science (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Crawford & Krebs, 2008). That is, by conveniently ignoring the role that (for example) natural

¹ Spanish-American George Santayana’s phrase to describe the invariants of the universe.
selection might play in social constructs, their approaches have tended to a circular transductive loop, moving from one extant social construct to the next without grounding most of these on a, at least, 1.8 million-year odyssey of flesh, blood, bones, and minds co-evolving with the natural world.

In my mind, the above emphasis qualifies (but does not delimit) 'ecopsychology' as an application of Evolutionary Psychology and Evolutionary Biology. Specifically, this emphasis makes use of Evolutionary Psychology’s (Barkow, Cosmides & Tooby, 1992) insights as part of a general habit (perspective) of asking basic questions about mental health, most likely adaptations, and their implications to 'eco-therapy'.

Specifically, Cosmides, Tooby and Barkow (1992) propose the study of scientifically testable, domain-specific adaptations that could have emerged during the last 1.8 million years. Because natural selection works slowly – certainly for most of the integrated circuitry that orchestrate multi-modal psychological proclivities and behaviors – it is more likely that our mind/body systems continue an “existential expectation” (a genome momentum) that those particular behaviors, social organizations, and environments are still in place: small family units covering great distances in open savannahs, greater physical output during hunter-forager-scavenger daily activities, greater psychological and physical endurance, and the almost complete control of manufacturing “culture” with our very own primate hands (to mention just one generalized description). In their words:

Natural selection can generate complex designs that are functionally organized – organized so that they can solve an adaptive problem – because the criterion for the selection of each design feature is functional: A design feature will spread only if it solves an adaptive problem better than existing alternatives. Over time, this causal feedback process can create designs that solve adaptive problems well – designs that “fit” the environment in which the species evolved (1992: 9).

In this light, it becomes a central question for “eco-therapists” as well to ascertain whether some modern-day “dysfunctions” originate in severe and culturally-arbitrary divergences from ancestral adaptations. To the extent that we could agree that “nature estrangement and/or alienation” (Conesa-Sevilla, 2006), and its complex and multi-varied manifestations, is confounded with medical and psychological problems, then we have an “ecopsychology”. For any psychologist, these adaptations (challenges/problems and solutions) run the gamut from the

My limited sense at this historical juncture is that the future of ecopsychology will have to integrate these and more perspectives if it aims to extend its now more psychological, transpersonal and clinical (personal growth, therapy, counseling) foci to include a vast field of integrative and developing ideas, while engaging in potentially profitable interdisciplinary useful collaborations. The very term “eco” implies interdisciplinarity. This emphasis fashions a natural scientific approach to ecopsychology: an evolutionary ecopsychology.

**Evolutionary ecopsychology**

As a way of a very modest evolutionary ecopsychology manifesto, we can state the following: When humanity invents (speaks) itself extemporaneously outside “nature’s text,” it has not, on a fundamental level, escaped nature, for it is and always will be a product of nature. However diversely culture can be twisted by an inventive ape, if this culture is extant from “nature,” it is doomed to fail; cannot provide him with the physical and cognitive resources that would make him “happy” or, in other words, fully integrated in the circle of life.

My own phrase “evolutionary ecopsychology” might, in the minds of most ecopsychologists, conjure up the foundational work of Paul Shepard, and specifically his seminal book *Nature and Madness* (1982/1998), which I consider to be the original evolutionary (and developmental) ecopsychology manifesto. This paper is simply a more modest continuation and reiteration of his insights. As some of the readers may know, before there were any ecopsychologists around, Shepard used the word “subversive” to characterize the effects of what the science of ecology would have in radicalizing societies and minds (Shepard & McKinley, 1969). *The subversive science: Essays toward an ecology of man* (1969) introduces some of the arguments and themes that would later find a more expanded form in his later work.

Evolutionary ecopsychology does not do away with transpersonal ecopsychological approaches but rather allows for a more complete discourse participation, an enlarging of the scope of what ecopsychology could be about. In this sense, even though I agree with Raplh Metzner’s (1999) idea of a “green
Evolutionary ecopsychology

psychology” – a radicalized, mainstream- and (ironically) nature-decontextualized psychology – my own perspective is that it is in evolutionary science that the most green can be sought and found.

Lacking this sensitivity and/or training, one of the great dangers I sense in privileging a “spiritual” (whatever that means) view of humanity (if that is what some ecopsychologists are doing) is the accompanying anthropocentric myopia that has been rationalized as a “manifest destiny” to place ourselves arbitrarily in some teleological enterprise or journey that makes our march through history (another invention and myopia) a more significant myth (Nash, 1982). Ultimately, how we come to acquire a “significance” of self-place is, after all, a semiotically interior process whether it excludes small self from grand Nature or connects big Self to the rest of our biosphere. Perhaps we should start here.

Certainly, some myths are more “natural” (ecologically valid) than others, as even myopic history\(^2\) shows. Certainly, the human mind has mythic-cognitive proclivities (Campbell, 1988). In classical psychology, these mythical proclivities may be an aspect of an ideal super ego helping us conceive of a grander and better self. A few, however, are rationalizations of supremacy; reiterations of a divine entitlement to produce the most distorted forms of social organization and psychologies, resulting in environmental and ecological mayhem. Even in seemingly more benign “New Age” approaches, the new rationalizations aim to replace the dominant religious ideology with monstrous hybridized forms that speak of a greater ecopsychological need, but fail to address it, or that satisfy it with an easy “spirituality”, more Xanax\(^3\)-like than fundamentally useful.

If a respect and sensitivity exists for the knowledge that 300,000 or more generations of humans were doing very specific things (biology) that gave rise to a specific homo configuration of flesh, blood, bones, and minds, then many other scientific questions have to follow from this base. That is, even the phenomenon of transpersonalization (with its multifold varieties and implications) falls under the study of evolutionary ecopsychology and asks “simple”, functionalist questions: Is there survival value in having the cognitive capacity to put oneself outside of ego by any number of methods and practices? Is transcending ego boundaries adaptive?

---

\(^2\) “Myopic” if we neglect to include the longer period of pre-history (roughly 1.8 million years) when our human ancestors evolved our unique and shared homo and hominid characteristics respectively.

\(^3\) Tradename of a benzodiazepine class drug, often used to treat anxiety disorders and panic attacks.
Is transcending ego boundaries a sort of built-in mental hygiene, a sub-routine prescription for coping with the harsh existential realities of human existence? Why are humans morbidly and dangerously religious and/or spiritual?

These questions and more are in the domain of evolutionary ecopsychology (and of evolutionary psychology as well). In the next section, I will summarize with a wide brush the noble, courageous, and foundationally useful journey that ecopsychology undertook as one answer to the deep emotional distraught that gained prominence and maximum intensity in the 1960s and 1970s; a realization and insight of a shared and collective sense of greenness.

**Ecopsychology: The first phase**

While looking for common ground, I will venture a guess that most readers of the words that follow – a poem by Walt Whitman (1880), *The Dalliance of the Eagles* – would recognize it as a literary example of what I believe many ecopsychologists would classify as “nature-identification” or as a moment when a human “connected with nature”:

```
Skirting the river road…
Skyward, in air, a sudden muffled sound – the dalliance of the eagles,
The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
The clinching, interlocking claws – a living, fierce, gyrating wheel,
Four beating wings – two beaks – A swirling mass, tight grappling...
```

In this sense, ecopsychological insights are well represented in the history of ideas – in literature for sure. Whenever humans have felt a generalized or even specific 'connection' to or 'disconnection' from nature, and could translate these sentiments into an artistic form, they have done so. To the extent that there exists a significant canon of literature that addresses these sentiments, 'ecopsychology' is nothing new. Whitman, like Thoreau (1862), was an avid walker and an observer of nature⁴. More to the point, Whitman lived and wrote as if “nature mattered” (Devall & Sessions, 1985). His poem does not mention 'nature', 'connection' or 'ecopsychology' but, nevertheless, it implies all these. Therefore, much of what 'ecopsychology' is about has been tangentially defined – but it should not be. Neither should we discount the real urgency of understanding the psychologies of

---

⁴ Pertinent to the mis-significations addressed in this article, Whitman misidentified the eagles as male and female, not realizing that they were two males locked in aerial combat.
an ape that has produced so much environmental and ecological mayhem – equally a challenge for ecopsychologists.

**What is 'ecopsychology'?**

To the extent that the morpheme text 'ecopsychology' is conjoined, it suggests that two scientific enterprises, ecology and psychology, are partnering toward an emergence: a third interdisciplinary area from which to advance theories and hypotheses, and test them with known scientific methodology. For starters, there is an assumption that psychology is a scientific endeavor. Most textbooks of General Psychology define psychology, to paraphrase, as: The scientific study of 'mind' and behavior (mental and behavioral processes) both in individuals and in groups. Within psychology, however, there are differences of opinion about what constitutes valid psychology which have caused rifts and divisions.

Ecology is described by the British Ecological Society as:

...the scientific study of the distribution, abundance and dynamics of organisms, their interactions with other organisms and with their physical environment (B.E.S., 2009)

A reader or client seeking 'ecopsychological services' would assume that an ecopsychologist is trained or well-versed in a scientific study of systems in order to satisfy the 'eco' prefix related to their nascent profession and area of expertise. More importantly, viewing humans as animals, as another species, would mean that claims, concepts, theories advanced within ecopsychology should not diverge very far from robust (well tested) paradigms, such as evolutionary science, and would have a lot to say about the original and psychologically relevant contexts from which hominids emerged. It could be argued that the combined areas of evolutionary psychology, human ecology, and environmental psychology are already contributing a great deal to our 'ecopsychological' understanding (if defined in scientific terms).

On the other hand – out of historical necessity and need for affiliation perhaps – the first phase of ecopsychology has been mostly a humanistic, hard to test construction of 'relations' or 'connections' to the 'natural world'. When it comes to phrases that could become verifiable constructs, such as 'nature connection', or “Nature Deficit Disorder” (Louv, 2005) we enter the land of the conveniently fuzzy. This characterization may seem harsh coming from an ecopsychology
sympathizer. However, given this lack of scientific rigor, it seems that
ecopsychologists are mostly content with becoming another mystical enterprise
within psychology where evidence-based approaches are rarely, if at all, pursued.
When pursued, they are seldom if at all grounded in evolutionary theory (with the
notable exception of the works of Paul Shepard).

To boot, other than a few maxims cloaked in the language of psychoanalysis
(Roszak, 1991/2001), there are no credible theories (falsifiable) that direct the
work of ecopsychologists. Once again, let me reiterate that in a bigger tent of
ecopsychology, all approaches should, ideally, contribute to a noetic convergence
that makes our collective case an almost irrefutable paradigm. As alluded to
before, there are significant and few exceptions, namely, Paul Shepard’s human
ecological proposals which contain verifiable or testable historical, evolutionary,
and psychological insights (Shepard, 1982/1998). It is queer that few
ecopsychologists I read do more than pay lip service to Shepard’s contributions.
More often than not, I get the sense that they are unaccepting of the strong
evolutionary (scientific) message implied or present in his work. This may be an
unfair characterization of their text, but it needs to be mentioned when it is
blatantly absent.

In the sections that follow, I address several problems associated with lacking
testable constructs, without which ecopsychology could become (or is) merely
another passing, New Age denial-therapy for yuppies and boomers. I have raised
similar issues in other work (Conesa-Sevilla, 2006; 2010).

**Nature connection**

The theoretical and therapeutical languages of ecopsychology often lead to an
inquiry of what is meant by (and a clearing of obstacles that impede) 'connecting to
nature'. The assumption is that a therapist can facilitate a process by which her/his
client can create, strengthen, or rescue such a connection. The difficulty of using
this terminology is that no ecopsychologist has put forth a credible (i.e., widely
accepted and testable) operational definition of what 'connecting with nature' is.
Alone, the operative words 'connection' and 'nature' are/have been difficult to
define. What is 'connecting'? Is 'connecting' a specific and measurable feeling or
emotion, an abstract or intellectual experience, a vague but certain 'spiritual'
experience? Is 'connecting' something that varies greatly from individual to
individual? That is, for a hunter, 'connecting' might mean the semiotic coda tracking-stalking-chasing-killing-butchering (skinning and dismembering)-carrying-sharing a kill. For a gardener in Manhattan, it could mean taking care of a few plants and a cat. Imagine any conceivable and actual way of 'connecting' to something the individual decides to identify and define (subjectively) as 'nature', and it is clear that an operational definition, hopefully based on credible ecological science, is sorely needed. Imagine further that different ecopsychologists have different ideas of what “connecting to nature” could mean, from wearing cardboard masks and pretending to be a non-human animal to kayaking to an island. In this range of possibilities it may be true that whatever works, whatever activity does the trick of transforming a 'disconnected' client into a 'connected' one can pass for a 'cure' – hindsight therapy.

Apropos, there is no standard measure (widely accepted and tested-normalized) to be used that could give us a baseline dysfunction or dys-affectation, a symptomology, of what qualifies as 'disconnected from nature'. For example, it may be true that any person who chooses to live in a suburb or a big city is automatically 'disconnected', by definition, in some sense of that word. It may also be true that a natural Yanomamo, forced to relocate to downtown Chicago, will be 'disconnected'. Equally (?), losing a pet, a plant dying, not being able to listen to the waves by an ocean or sea could potentially lead to cases of 'disconnection'. But, how are we testing it? What are we testing? Are there degrees of differentiation between the states of 'disconnection'?

The converse: a trip to sunny Mexico in the middle of a harsh Wisconsin winter could also qualify as 'therapy'. So why do I need ecopsychology or an ecopsychologist?

The symptomology of 'disconnection' may very well include measurable psychological and medical states such as depression, anxiety, fatigue, and an enduring sense of alienation (or estrangement). On the other hand, made-up disorders (e.g., Nature Deficit Disorder) are vague and untested. It is usually easier to define something in the negative. But 'connecting' and 'connection to nature' are altogether different matters. The positive definition of either, toward a testable psychological construct, must be complete, replete with testable options to insure that scientific or medical protocols are followed. Short of this, what we have is a pseudo-science – more pseudo-psychology.
Whose “nature” anyway?

The term 'nature' is even more problematic to define. Is nature a garden (Pollan, 1991), the 'wild', a farm, a river, the sea, my dog barking, a bird singing? Does the term 'nature' imply interactivity (walking, running, swimming, hunting, etc.)? That biosemiotician Kalevi Kull (1998) distinguishes between four types of nature is an indicator of the challenges that serious scholars and scientists encounter in defining 'nature'. Given Kull’s definition, what type of nature is to be found in an ultra-manicured Japanese garden? Is this landscape merely alluding to nature? The Japanese garden seems to be a lie\(^5\): natural 'nature' is never that peaceful, under human obsessive control, a one-dimensional focal space for tranquility and meditation, where lions and scorpions never shall intrude. On the other hand, at a cognitive and basic level the natural world – all survivable \emph{umwelten} – seems to afford us consistent and predictable existential tags that can be recognized and used by most organisms (Conesa-Sevilla, 2001).

Additionally, nature is neither masculine nor feminine, wrathful/vengeful nor loving/merciful, black nor white, past nor present, sea and/or mountain, or 'out to get you'. From an evolutionary ecopsychology perspective at least, nature has no motives, no intentions, no plans, because nature as a single-minded entity does not exist (never has). According to the best scientific evidence, nature seems to be a collection and interaction of complex energy exchanges: embodied; cyclical, continuing and ceasing; extremely diverse; expanding and contracting, or appearing and disappearing, to the whims of none. In short, there is no 'nature', only natural processes and living systems. Humans are aware of them or they are not; they are fully embedded or only-to-a-degree-involved in them, or they are not. As psychologists we must acknowledge that in all the above dichotomies 'nature' is a projection: both or either (male-female, negative-positive, good-evil, hard-soft) depending on custom or on personal psychological necessity. Both valences or sides are potentially useful for personal transformation.

In short, the degree and quality of these personal 'immersions', while taking into account individual differences, cultural practices, and evolutionarily real scenarios, could account for a vast array of accommodations, interpretations, and responses to the dynamics of nature. Ecopsychology, without evolutionary science, human ecology, or environmental psychology, is at a loss to describe these complex and

\(^5\) All gardens are “pathological” in this sense.
multivariate interactions. Facile and simplistic notions of what it is that some humans do when 'connecting to nature' define, thus far, the enterprise of ecopsychology.

A different but important question: Is an ecopsychologist who lives and works in a city and only seldom partakes of raw nature still an ecopsychologist? In other words, is s/he credible, comparable to the physician who smokes, as a counselor of better habits? Does the same ecopsychologist who speaks of nature in the abstract, or even concretely, when recommending a trip to Baja, really understand nature?

It is likely that, like most people, the ecopsychologist runs ahead with words farther than understanding can go, labeling objects, acts and states supposing that they are correctly (inclusively) signifying the phrase 'connecting to nature'. Like most people, the ecopsychologist enters the habits of languaging, copying others without due analysis and reflection on what these words could mean (Kull, 1998). In therapy this could be either annoyingly or disastrously vague.

**Ecopsychology as mature emergence**

In order to be helpful and to foster ideas that could end up as part of testable constructs, it may be better to make the distinction between diverse, natural environments or natur umwelten (from seaside, to desert, to mountain, to alpine meadow, etc.) and synthetic/artificial, built up (even solipsistically created) environs. The assumption here is that this continuum allows for testing specific hypotheses about what type of natural and synthetic environments and corresponding activities can be conducive to better mental and physical health (I make the assumption that many humans can, and apparently do, live happily in built-up environments. This fact should be as interesting to ecopsychologists as any other biophilic tendency that we could enumerate and test). Kaplan and Kaplan's work on the cognitive and affective reading of landscapes as complex, mysterious, legible, and/or coherent is useful in asking questions about innate cognitive capacities to resolve artificial versus natural complexity (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982, 1989; Kaplan, 1987).

Key to the above continuum is the idea of accepting the lack of personal control, or how we live with/without the lack of control. It may be safe to suppose that humans assume that synthetic/artificial, built up environs are more controllable – perhaps another expression of a personal fable. Laws, peacekeepers, good
neighbors, water, food and electricity on demand, with an almost certainty that a
citizen won’t be mugged or killed, all could add up to a sense of control (albeit
illusory and confabulated). Having too much control may also lead to boredom and
to the 'pursuit of happiness': unhealthy pastimes that engender a vicious
psychological circle where cyclical dissatisfaction and consumerism go hand in
hand. To mention the work of the Kaplans' once more, the continuum for both
artificial and natural environments runs a gamut from highly legible and coherent
but low in mystery and complexity (to put it another way: boring), to being legible
and coherent enough with enough mystery and complexity to keep us cognitively
engaged.

Returning to the issue of control: we lack control in natural environs, or a sense of
control is scaled down to the realization that our actions will never reach more than
a sustainable balance where we are never masters of the universe. The farmer is
reliant only on a fickle weather, in most cases, for her/his crops to come to harvest.
On a hike, in a national park or by the beach, a person cannot control whatever
forces are at play that create an ever-present sense of danger where caution is
required. As an example, one presumes that a Yanomamo from the Amazonian
rainforest could never really fully relax in a Venezuelan tropical forest and yet we
may think of her/him as the most ecopsychologically embedded individual on this
planet. One assumes further that the same Yanomamo can be equally unhappy and
happy, angry and content, sick or well, high on Yopo or sleeping it off, young and
old, and satisfied or dissatisfied.

These interactions are the purview of an anthropological and environmental
ecopsychology if it dares to construct falsifiable theories and hypotheses. The
question again is whether we should embark on this investigation employing
scientific means, in a time of crisis, in order to expedite remedies. More succinctly,
having a 'psychology' is like having a brain, a heart, or a 'mind'. The act of
possessing them does not make one an expert on their functioning. Saying
'ecopsychology' and, more importantly, saying that ecopsychology is about this or
that only, could oversimplify the vast ocean of meanings and sciences that could
contribute to a situation where interlocking definitions are giving rise to a better
and better understanding(s); to an emergence: first-order facts.

Words, no matter how often we use and repeat them, do not a real-reality make.
That is why both non-verbal, insightful, and direct phenomenological experiences
and scientific constructions can resolve the confusing middle ground of familiar but meaningless (or, at least, not very useful) *languaging*. A mature emergence of ecopsychology in the field of significant ideas, and as a practical vehicle for effecting change in the lives of individuals and societies, necessitates a well-orchestrated, well-integrated, and inclusive compendium of methodologies and worthy, exploitable constructs.

**Conclusion**

The word 'ecopsychology' denotes that 'eco', as in ecology, stands for 'house', or 'house/home' as in our planet Earth. In taking this prefix to be a metaphor, the 'ecopsychologist' may wish to see beyond the more humanistic (i.e., human-centered, including the untestable assumption of the 'spiritual' or the metaphysical), signifying that this planet has been, for a long period, more than a 'house'. The ecologist (and the human ecologist as well) views this planet as host to systems of (is 'home' to) living creatures, including humans, without losing a sense of wonder and awe. If and when an ecopsychologist disregards the facts presented by reputable and uncontestable scientific evidence and falls back on personal sentiments, hunches, and romanticized ideas of what this chunk of rock might be about, s/he ceases to be, in my opinion, an authentic green counselor. When the green counselor underestimates and obfuscates the full splendor of nature, its brutality and its gentler side, by contriving idiosyncratic ideas of what nature means to her/him, then her/his client is ill served. It is tantamount to sending a person to climb Mount Everest without fully explicating the rigors of mountain climbing – rocks falling, freezing temperatures, dropping oxygen levels: a strenuous physical endeavor. It is always easier to apply 'ecopsycology' to gardens and flowing rivers with gentle currents than to accept nature on its own, often brutal, terms. In this, we are always asked to accommodate to it, not the other way around.

The real task for a serious ecopsychology is indeed enormous. In fact, the task – the introduction and deconstruction of a narrative of place, geography, space, and psyche – is one that even the social sciences have yet to undertake in a credible way. According to Edward Soya (1989: 12): “…this reassertion of space in critical social theory is an exercise in both deconstruction and reconstitution. It cannot be accomplished simply by appending spatial highlights to inherited critical perspectives and sitting back to watch them glow with logical conviction”. These
radical perspectives propel us to study human-nature interactions from an even grander scale, that of organism-nature meaning interactions. In the words of Winfried Nöth (1998), “This definition presupposes that the center of interest of an ecological semiotics is not a \textit{homo semioticus}, but more generally, an \textit{organismus semioticus}”, all organisms acting as interpreters in ever expanding and interacting circles of meaning.

Dabbling in and dallying about ecopsychology as a purely humanistic enterprise would be acceptable if the very word that describes its purpose did not carry such baggage already. In addition to misrepresenting itself, it sounds too much like ecology without containing or representing the rigor of this science. Ecology too has been on the defensive within biology to the extent that it conjures up the cancellation, with scientific validation, of the privileges to do with nature as we please. Finally, ecopsychology, as written about or presented, rarely describes its methods as ecological science.

Also confusing to readers is that the 'eco' part is connected to the 'psychology' part. To a reader already fatigued and testy with Oprah, \textit{Cosmopolitan} or \textit{Psychology Today} versions of psychology, ecopsychology may prompt the expected comment: What will those silly psychologists think of next? Psychology already has problems with not being taken seriously, generally speaking, by the medical profession or the rest of academia. To the extent that well-intentioned but scientifically ill-prepared ecopsychologists push for acceptance within a larger psychological body of professionals, then, sooner or later, their credentials, abilities, professional training, and claims will be tested and scrutinized.

Whitman’s eagles can afford dangerous or daring amorous play or dalliance – even if they are both males. They are, after all, eagles, and in my book, eagles can do whatever they like. Ecopsychology could be like the dalliance of eagles to the extent that it seems not that interested in being recognized as a bona fide scientific enterprise, or interested in being treated with respect when that respect comes from clarifying central issues and defining terms in a satisfactory manner: \textit{protocolizing} language so that it serves the scientific enterprise.

Neither should ecopsychologists be annoyed or surprised that, when 'selling' their area of interest to the masses or other professionals, these folk scratch their heads in disbelief or confusion when that ecopsychologist is in a tangle or in ignorance with respect to the basic terms s/he uses while describing her/his enterprise,
oblivious to the wisdom of the natural sciences.

References


Conesa-Sevilla, J. (2010). Two “ecopsychologies” (?): transcendental and constitutive ontologies as they pertain to green counseling. *Presentation at the XV International Congress of Philosophy, Mexico, Mexico, Jan. 10, 2010* (“Ontologías transcendentes y constitutivas en el ámbito de la terapia eco-psicológica”. *Simposio: Diálogo entre diferentes, diálogo en radicalidad*).


Acknowledgments

My gratitude to Michael Caley, Chief Editor of the Trumpeter, for suggestions that led to improvements in the first draft.

Correspondence

Jorge Conesa-Sevilla, Managing Editor: the Trumpeter.
Email: Chitola@shaw.ca or jconesa@pdx.edu
Abstract
Ecopsychology has a rich history of embracing knowledge and practices from many traditions. This large umbrella has widely embraced religious and spiritual practices while at times rejecting mainstream psychology. Considering the future of ecopsychology, is there room in such an inclusive discipline for a naturalist approach? This essay explores the current metaphysical approaches in ecopsychology and making a case for naturalism. It explores both the metaphysical and methodological implications of naturalism and suggests ecopsychology is strengthened by a methodology that seeks reliability and validity. Naturalistic methodology allows space to recognise the importance of anecdotal accounts of spirituality and avoiding a completely secular ecopsychology.

Keywords: ecopsychology, naturalism, spirituality

Introduction
It is easy to feel like an atheist at a tent revival when one is a sceptical ecopsychologist. In popular culture, scepticism is seen as being cynical or close-minded even in the face of overwhelming evidence, as with the phrase 'global warming sceptic'. However, scepticism is a questioning attitude in which claims that could be taken for granted are open to doubt. Scientific scepticism is questioning the reliability of doubted claims without systematic investigation (Gardner, 1957). Many times this in done through empirical methods, however it’s simply a process of gathering evidence for claims made. Of course, the scientific approach is the subject of much debate and rightly so. However a certain cynicism has emerged in the field of popular ecopsychology: doubting the doubters. Coupled with this mistrust of the scientific method, there is a call to emphasize that which science cannot measure: spirituality (Glendinning, 1994). There is room for empirical work in the scholarly pursuit of ecopsychology, as many publications...
would support. However this author’s experience of ecopsychology as a practising field has been one in which those who adopt a sceptical stance on concepts like spirituality, mysticism, religion transcendence and so on, often get boxed in a category of Skinnerian black-box psychologists. What follows then is pressure from some ecopsychologists to adopt, for lack of a better term, a 'spiritual' world view.

An excerpt from the European Ecopsychology Society’s (2006) “Manifesto for Ecopsychology” states an ecopsychologist is characterized by:

A wider vision of humanity which recognizes an interaction between physical, affective, cognitive, and spiritual elements which is coherent with Deep Ecology, Humanistic-Existential Psychology and Transpersonal Psychology

Firstly, this manifesto lays out specific theoretical orientations for ecopsychologists and one can assume neuro- or cognitive psychologists need not apply. However more importantly it explicitly states that awareness or acceptance of spirituality is an essential characteristic of ecopsychology. Terms like transcendence, spirituality and mysticism are very subjective and defined in a variety of different ways. This essay will not delve deeply into defining these terms; they have not been defined by organisations such as the European Ecopsychology Society and so must be taken in the most general sense.

Undefined spirituality may create a wide umbrella for different religious and spiritual approaches; however, it leaves a certain sense of ambiguity for those who are uncomfortable with traditional or even non-traditional spirituality. Thus the knee jerk reaction is to reject and drop out of ecopsychology entirely. Rozak (1971) suggested a potential split between environmentalists who adopt an organic animistic orientation and those who develop a more 'modern' perspective of the mind. In other words, two stands appear to be emerging in ecopsychology; one which accepts this 'wider vision' and one which is quite sceptical of it.

Giving voice to the sceptics, this essay attempts to provide a springboard to begin a healthy debate about naturalism and supernaturalism in ecopsychology. It is intentionally provocative and understandably may ruffle feathers. However, if this debate is not welcomed and instead ecopsychologists are pushed into the environmental or ecopsychology camp as Rozak (1971) implies, it will surely be the demise of vibrant development in ecopsychology. While it’s true that
psychology in general has become a haven for naturalists and sceptics, it doesn’t necessitate that ecopsychology become a haven for supernaturalists. Divergent ontological beliefs can be a part of fruitful discussion. In this vitally important issue of the European Journal of Ecopsychology, the theme includes the future of ecopsychology. The fundamental assertion of this essay is that there is enough room for both the naturalists and supernaturalists to take the field into the future. There is no need to send the naturalists packing to the environmental camp. It is important that non-naturalists take note of the current biases of the popular field of ecopsychology before naturalism can be an equal partner in the future of ecopsychology.

Despite the difficulty defining the terms used in the European Ecopsychology Society manifesto, two terms will be consistently used: natural and supernatural. Every attempt will be made to use these words within the common usage implicit in the most basic definition. Despite the emphasis on spiritual in ecopsychology writings, the term supernatural will be used instead. To attempt to define spiritual in any specific sense would inevitable exclude many spiritual people’s subjective definition. In addition, there are attempts to create a very naturalistic spirituality and religion (Stone, 2009). For the sake of argument, supernatural will be used as anything beyond the realm of physical nature. This is restricting and perhaps religious language would be more comfortable with words like spiritual, divine or even God. It’s also uncomfortable for the naturalist to describe supernatural because they may argue that there is nothing that exists beyond the natural. However supernatural is a more appropriate term because it not be based on any specific religious ideology, it merely refers to a power or force outside the natural material world. Another limitation of this term is its dualistic worldview of the material and immaterial (e.g., spiritual and physical). Understandably this is not a view shared by all ecopsychologists or naturalists, but the term supernatural catches the mystical otherness that the previously mentioned manifesto implies.

**Metaphysics**

In order to accurately propose naturalism in ecopsychology, it is essential to touch briefly on metaphysical ontology. In philosophy, the field of metaphysics deals with the nature of reality. Individuals that identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, materialists, rationalists, secular humanists, brights and sceptics typically share a common naturalistic worldview (Carrol, 2003).
Naturalism is a theory within metaphysics that holds that reality can be explained mechanistically or often referred to as 'natural phenomena'. This worldview is contradictory to the view that there are natural and supernatural layers to reality or even more contradictory to a monistic ideology that would hold the 'infinite' is the only true reality. Naturalism is in stark contrast to many pantheistic philosophies in which 'god' is the world. The divine essence of the natural world comes across in some ecopsychology authors’ writings:

Gaia herself seeks to have our species leave its adolescence behind and assume its responsibilities of adulthood. This task is going to take the harvesting of the gifts and wisdoms granted to us by all 31 of the civilisations of the last five thousand years. It needs the insights and abilities of all the first nations’ indigenous cultures of every continent. We need to distil the wisdom and insights of all sages, teachers, and spiritual students, swamis, gurus, prophets, saints and martyrs that have ever existed. Nothing can be left out, nothing forgotten. (Croft, 2007)

Without getting into the specifics of this kind of mentality, it can be disconcerting to some ecopsychologists to use the 'wisdom' of ancient traditions. What 'distillation' process will we need to implement and what regurgitated ideas from past religions should be embraced? For example it’s obvious to most clinicians that harvesting ancient ideas like mental illness originating from demon possession is very damaging.

Look at a potential scenario: if ecopsychology embraces an ontological belief called idealism, it’s in direct opposition to the claim that the true nature of reality is based on physical substances (materialism). So in this scenario, an ecopsychologist might adopt the eastern philosophy of the Vedas where reality is best described as a dynamic consciousness of living entities that originates from a supernatural divine cosmic source (Flood, 1996). Fair enough for the individual, but when popular writings of organisations within ecopsychology adopt this view of reality, it will alienate the naturalist. A naturalist does not simply reject the 'divine' cosmos: that’s atheism. Naturalism makes spiritual or mystical explanations an unnecessary hypothesis and essentially supererogatory to scientific investigation (Carrol, 2003). Rozak’s (1971) impending spilt becomes inevitable. Is it possible to avoid this division by using language that does not imply ontological worldviews?

55
Uncritically critical

In essence, being a sceptic is about asking important questions without accepting things at face value. People can claim to be sceptical, yet unfortunately some will accept things without much critical evaluation. Ecopsychologists will fall prey to this very easily by embracing self-titled critical psychology. Critical psychology thrives on a rejection of traditional patriarchal obsessed western culture and rightly so. A 'western worldview' adopts a technology and consumer-orientated mentality that in turn treats natural resources as a commodity, not an entity; this undermines the earth’s natural systems (Glendinning, 1994). However simplistic it is to categorise an entire hemisphere of the earth as a worldview, there are important implications of this criticism. But rejecting one worldview merely to replace it with another is not actually critical thinking: “A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices” (William James, cited in Miller, Brewer & Spoolman, 2008: 3). The destructive elements of any culture should be critically evaluated. However there is a significant risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Being concerned about the lobbying power of the pharmaceutical companies does not mean that psychiatric science is invalid.

The counter response from naturalists is to re-assert the importance of natural explanations of human behaviour. One such area is in the discussions around consciousness. Rejecting mystical causality, philosopher Daniel Dennet advocates naturalism by using the analogy of magic: Magician Lee Siegel writing a book on magic was asked if his book was about 'real magic', by which real magic means miracles and supernatural powers. Bemused she had to say no, the book was on magic that involves conjuring tricks, not 'real' magic (Dennet, 2003). Dennet uses this story to highlight the non-naturalists view of consciousness. His argument is that some people equate 'real magic' with the supernatural, while the magic that is staged or mechanical is not 'real magic'. Turning back to consciousness, if it is explained in mechanical physical properties as a naturalist would do, somehow it is deficient or not 'real consciousness'. The 'magic' will always escape explanation if it is presupposed to be an unexplainable mystery (Dennet, 2003). Therefore when non-mysterious explainable ways in which the brain can create consciousness are used, it is rejected outright.

Naturalists would be very critical of a non-physical or supernatural connection between human consciousness and nature. Supernaturalists in turn would see
material explanations of this connection as not being 'real' ecopsychology, instead relying heavily on non-material explanations. For example, ecophilosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling sees supernatural agency as an integral part of everyday life. Mind and nature are spiritually one, thus favouring a theistic interpretation of the human earth connection (as cited in Wolfe Bolman, 1967). Modern ecopsychologists may try to redefine 'god' as Gaia, presence or 'spirit', perhaps portrayed as psychologically meaningful metaphors. Derrick Jensen (2004) suggests conscious awareness of the our relationship with nature has been silenced by both western religion and science. He states that humans live in a "make-believe world" in which the delusion that everything is okay with the planet and despite being alienated from it:

If we celebrate life with all its contradictions, embrace it, experience it, and ultimately live with it, there is a chance for a spiritual life filled not only with pain and untidiness, but also with joy, community, and creativity (Jensen, 2004: 142).

It is right to challenge the delusions about global warming and the abuse of natural resources. Perhaps certain cultural ideas have contributed to this delusion. Unfortunately it appears ecopsychology is to substitute one “make-believe world” for another, merely replacing western religion with eastern and indigenous spirituality. The naturalist is concerned about knowledge construction via religious tradition, for example neuroscientist Sam Harris says:

The difference between science and religion is the difference between a willingness to dispassionately consider new evidence and new arguments, and a passionate unwillingness to do so (Harris, 2006).

Although this is a harsh and perhaps unfair judgement on religious faith, it draws upon the concerns of naturalists. If ecopsychology is built predominantly on the past and under the guise of being critical of western society, then it is a shaky foundation. A foundation housed in religious ideology concerned predominantly with doctrine preservation while masquerading as critical evaluation.

**Teleological purpose**

Another essential difference between naturalistic and supernaturalistic philosophy might best be understood in terms how explanations are used in the description of phenomena. When describing specific events, naturalists do not expound upon
“teleological explanations” that admonish purposes or design on the grand scale (Carroll, 2003). Explaining how a clock works is much different than explaining why measuring time is important or who invented that clock in the first place. Naturalism might take issue with the depth at which ecopsychology tends to define purpose and meaning to the connection of human and nature. Ecopsychologist Plotkin (2008) has developed a very interesting “soulcentric or ecocentric” model of human development. One of the precepts in his work is that if human beings are to thrive socially and psychologically, among other things, they must embrace spiritual traditions. This implies a specific purpose in the human nature interaction:

She must learn her people’s way of treating sacred things properly and maintain good relations with the spirits, gods, animals and landforms (Plotkin, 2008: 135).

Naturalists do not need to make such claims of teleology on a large scale. Granted, individual motivation and judgement is a part of the human condition. However a study of ecological systems need not be seen as purposeful or even sacred. What is concerning is the admonishment to establish relationships with spirits and gods. That’s not to say spiritual traditions are worthless, but they are not mandatory in understanding ecological systems and human behaviour. When it does advocate 'shoulds' and 'musts', ecopsychology is in danger of becoming prescriptive rather than descriptive. This 'wider vision' admonishes the spiritual as an interpretive framework, and in turn a teleological one as well. The extent to which depth and purpose is advocated in ecopsychology traditions is perhaps what makes it so appealing to many, moving away from shallow mechanistic explanations of the world and exploring how humans encounter the natural world in a deep a meaningful way. Yet great caution should be taken in this endeavour. Ecopsychology can become far too pontificating without much effort.

**Methodology**

In looking at the naturalism, there needs to be a distinction between a metaphysical belief system and methodology. One could argue that a naturalist would hold that ideas should be tested and that which can not be tested should be rejected, in this case spirituality. This results in a rejection of ideas that may be true because naturalists do not hold that only that which can be tested and detected by current methods is actually real (Forrest, 2000). There may be things that exist which are not currently testable, as advocated in quantum physics for example. But there is a
difference in what to believe about reality and a method of investigation to understand that reality.

The supernatural can be arbitrary and hard to quantify, often relying on an a priori use of mystical agency, and therefore is not an important matter of scientific investigation (Forrest, 2000). However, that does not mean a supernatural reality doesn’t exist or that certain belief systems present a supernatural framework that is internally logical and consistent. Perhaps one way to prevent the potential split in ecopsychology is to avoid focusing predominantly on metaphysics. Instead, naturalistic methodology (regardless of ontology) could be used to explore ideas in ecopsychology. Practitioners and popular authors in ecopsychology are wise to include ideas outside the realm of psychology, thus incorporating many modes of knowing. Still, the heart of ecopsychology is psychology, which distinguishes itself apart from religion and spiritual traditions in its dependence on the scientific method.

So can the future of ecopsychology be strengthened by methodological naturalism? Yes, because it is a methodology that relies on the scientific method, grounded in empiricism as opposed to a purely metaphysical naturalism which holds to the inadmissibility of the supernatural into scope of reality (Forrest, 2000). Ecopsychology would do well to move away from metaphysical assertions and instead bolster the methodology on which it’s built. What is proposed is a methodological naturalism as an epistemological approach within ecopsychology; one that asserts knowledge is gained from the natural world and that methods of accessing this knowledge should be separate from metaphysical views. Of course this approach affects what is said about ecology and psychology. Ecopsychology would then promote hypotheses which are testable and rely on causal agents which are explained by natural forces. Effects from observable events are considered to be from natural causes or mechanisms, not from super- or supra-natural forces.

Again, this is an epistemological, not an ontological position. Instead of speaking to what exists in the human nature interaction, it addresses how this existence is known. In other words, is it possible that supernatural forces impact the human being connection to the environment? Of course it is possible, but that’s not the same as a knowable (Carrol, 2003). Methodological naturalism does not speak to existence but that which can be known. Ecopsychologists can embrace naturalistic methodology in reference to epistemology without a metaphysical naturalism.
Yet why not consider supernatural explanations in the relationship between human beings and nature? Shouldn’t all modes of knowing be valued? This approach is very susceptible to Drummond’s (2010) “god in the gaps.” If the causes of an event are unexplainable and unidentifiable, it must be something supernatural. The tendency is to postulate supernatural forces to explain phenomena for which scientific naturalism cannot. The future of ecopsychology is in danger when it ascribes inexplicability to the supernatural, if only for the simple reason that the gaps in which a 'god' can fit are growing increasingly smaller. Because of the newness of ecopsychology, there are significant gaps that exists inviting many to propose supernatural explanations. Great disservice to the credibility of the ecopsychology occurs when arguments from ignorance are explained by supernatural forces. Patience should be exercised as methods of investigation continue to be developed, avoiding the idea that naturalism cannot understand everything.

Frost (2000) makes the distinction that transcendent spiritual forces are logically possible, but their status as existential possibilities remain problematic (Forrest, 2000). There can be all sorts of mysterious spiritual forces and forms that can be imagined up from nowhere to explain the complex nature of the world (Strahler, 1992; Forest, 2000). It logically impossible to prove the existence of something about which nothing can be known, a mystery. It also 'procedurally' impossible to prove the existence of something about which nothing can be known through investigation and gathering of evidence (Forrest, 2000).

Ecopsychology should seriously consider the viability of its future without solid epistemological grounding. Even the naturalist must concede that although there is no successful procedure for knowing the supernatural; strictly speaking it does not logically preclude its being known at all through prayer, intuition, revelation or some other transpersonal approach (Forrest, 2000). However these ways of knowing do not lend themselves to the same standards that one would expect when designing an aeroplane or choosing the best medical option for a severely ill child. In these cases, no level of intuition or divine revelation is satisfactory. Why is it when it comes to psychology interacting with ecology, practitioners and theorists are not willing to hold ecopsychology to the same rigour? The future of ecopsychology should seek to ways of understanding human and nature interaction, but in ways that allow for the establishment of legitimacy. Until a method of knowing the supernatural is developed in a valid reliable and consistent
manner, comparable to the knowing the natural, this is not a viable explanation for the interaction between ecology and psychology.

**Avoiding secularism**

Despite the emphasis on naturalistic methodology, ecopsychology does not need to be entirely secular. Secularists would support a society devoid of all religion and spirituality due to its destructive nature. They may define religion as oppressive divisive and unhealthy. Although an interesting political and sociological discussion, this view on religion is not necessary in naturalism. Naturalists do not advocate removing spiritualism from the subjective experience of people's lives. People's phenomenological experience of the supernatural provides enough support to allow the possibility of it.

How can ecopsychology avoid becoming completely secular? In the same way psychology on the whole has, ecopsychology should support the incorporation of subjective qualitative, albeit anecdotal experiences of individuals. Subjective experience is crucial for hypothesis generation and motivates researchers to investigate many different phenomenons. To deny the personal subjective experience of billions of people around the world is ridiculous. Spiritual traditions and beliefs need not be abandoned nor even divorced from the dialogue. Yet it must not dominate the field either. Naturalism is not about creating a secular society. However, it is about creating a secular methodology.

**Conclusion**

Ecopsychologists who do not embrace naturalistic methodology are in danger of using epistemological approaches that operate as though metaphysical supernatural forces were true as regulatory principles (Frost, 2000). In addition, the challenge to naturalist ecopsychologists is to avoid reductionism limiting explanation for complex ecological systems. Despite the emphasis on natural processes, nature must be understood in different levels of observation, both at the micro- and macro- level: from electrons to complex organisms, cognition to culture (Kurtz, 1998; Forrest, 2000) Of course methodology changes ontology: it should. If the future of ecopsychology is one in which naturalists are allowed to participate, it must be open to the ideas that emerge. Historically there are countless explanations for human behaviour that were once based on supernatural explanations that have
now been changed to natural ones. It’s difficult to find many naturalistic explanations of human behaviour that have been replaced by evidence from supernatural explanations. If solid evidence is discovered that replaces a supernatural idea with a natural one, it should be embraced and vice versa. That is the true spirit of open-mindedness. If ecopsychology can explore people’s subjective spiritual experiences without circumventing probable natural explanations, it will thrive as a respectable field.

References


Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors and authors of this first issue of the *European Journal of Ecopsychology* for engaging in divergent yet fruitful discussions on the developing theoretical framework within our field.

Correspondence

Dr. Mark Hoelterhoff  
Applied Psychology  
University of Cumbria  
Fusehill Street  
Carlisle  
CA1 2HH

*Email:* mark.hoelterhoff@cumbria.ac.uk
Out of the consulting room and into the woods? Experiences of nature-connectedness and self-healing

John R. Hegarty
Keele University, UK

Abstract

Nature-connectedness is a core concept in ecopsychology. It could be a proxy concept for hypothetical ‘biophilia’. Focussing on people’s experiences of nature-connectedness, and how far people have found them to be emotionally helpful, may help social and health-care professionals in their work with clients. This study aimed to explore this idea by asking people to describe their personal experiences. Members of a scientific panel on “green care” (n = 17) and a group of postgraduate counselling trainees (n = 26) described experiences of connectedness and disconnectedness to nature, and gave examples of how they had found nature to be a positive force for personal healing. Participants described the positive emotional effects of being in contact with nature, contrasted by the feelings of isolation, sadness and other negative consequences of being disconnected from nature. Contact with natural settings appears to generate a range of positive feelings to the extent that therapy and support professionals should consider routinely asking clients about their connectedness to nature and explore with them how their relationship with nature could be enhanced. However, we can all use nature-contact for “self-healing” at times of emotional or physical dis-ease.

Introduction

In this paper I explore the notion that many of us readily feel a connectedness to nature and that this is good for us. A key implication for social care and health professionals is that they could use a person’s positive nature-relationship as a starting point for their intervention and ongoing support – or, to put it another way, leaving the consulting room for a walk in the woods. If we don’t have a professional helper, of course, we should consider doing this ourselves.
A throb in the heart-beat of the ecopsychology movement is the concept of biophilia, “the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes” (Wilson, 1984: 1). Kellert and Wilson’s (1993) book on biophilia refers to its existence as an “hypothesis”, since it cannot be directly observed, only inferred from examples of people preferring natural environments. Nor can it be easily shown that nature-contact has healing properties. Indeed a recent multidisciplinary project to conceptualise “green care” (Sempik, Hine & Wilcox, 2010) shows how wide-ranging the concept is, which makes it difficult if not impossible to find an agreed way to establish the therapeutic efficacy of contact with nature. However, “nature-connectedness” can be thought of as a manifestation of biophilia and, as I explore here, people frequently describe nature-connectedness experiences when asked, and recognise that nature-contact is good for them.

The starting point for my work in this area was Mayer and Frantz’ (2004) paper describing a self-report scale aiming to measure “nature-connectedness”. Their 14-item questionnaire appears to reliably measure where an individual is on an ideological continuum ranging from a feeling of inter-connectedness with the natural world to alienation from it. The authors report that they found “a moderately strong positive relationship between the CNS (Connectedness to Nature Scale) and eco-friendly actions” (p. 512) and offer it as “a way to monitor attempts to change people’s world-view to one that is more environmentally sensitive” (ibid.). Whilst this scale is a valuable tool for quantitative research, I thought that the fourteen questions took a narrow view of what nature-connectedness might mean for individuals. I wanted to find out what people’s own experiences were.

I was also interested in the implications of nature-connectedness for psychological healing. Several authors have demonstrated how nature can be used alongside other psychotherapeutic strategies. Burns (1998) is an inspiring manual for integrating nature experiences into hypnotherapy. Linden and Grut (2002) used allotment gardening as a key element in their psychotherapeutic work with torture victims. Berger and McLeod (2006: 80) present “an alternative approach to therapy, conducted in creative ways in nature, addressing the environment not merely as a setting but as a partner in the process”. Neuberger (2007) has extensively developed the “phyto-resonance theory” of Paul Shepard in his work with psychiatric patients and gives examples of specific horticultural activities that create “self-reflective processes […] that set impulses to understand and change
personal problem solving strategies” (Neuberger, 2007: 153). More broadly, one could cite the horticultural therapy and ecotherapy movements as affirming the healing power of nature. These are examples of a tripartite therapeutic partnership between the client, therapist and beneficent nature, but I am particularly interested in this paper in how far people have spontaneously experienced nature-as-healer, and whether they seek out nature experiences at difficult times.

The work I report here, then, stems from two questions. Firstly, what are people’s everyday understandings of the term “nature-connectedness”? Secondly, do people report seeking out natural settings to feel better? I devised a simple questionnaire to find out. Here I present data from two samples, using the first version of my questionnaire (Appendix 1): a multidisciplinary sample of scientists and practitioners attending a meeting on “green care” as part of the European COST 866 action, and a group of postgraduate counselling trainees at a British University.

Method

Design

The study was conceived as qualitative, narrative, and ethnographic: I wanted to collect examples of people’s self-reports of nature-connectedness and their unprompted use of nature for self-healing. I contrast this with a “survey”, which collects quantitative data on the prevalence of particular views or experiences. More broadly, the work sits within phenomenological approaches to research. George Kelly’s (1955) “personal construct theory” is also personally influential. Kelly argued for the importance of understanding an individual’s view, or construction, of the world: a person-centred, idiographic approach to research. In this study, I reproduce verbatim many of my participants’ questionnaire responses and keep my own interpretations to a minimum.

Construction of the questionnaire

My questionnaire (Appendix 1) begins with an introductory paragraph designed to orient participants to the purpose of the research. Questions 1 and 2 ask for people’s experiences of nature-connectedness and its contrasting construct, “disconnectedness”. Question 3 is a single Likert-scale question asking for people’s agreement with the assertion that “Being connected with the natural world is a
positive force for healing” and Question 4 invites people to share an experience of this, after a priming Yes/No question.

**Study participants and procedure**

**Sample 1:** 17 members of a European research group (EU COST 866, accessed 19th May 2010 from http://www.umb.no/greencare/) on “green care and health” agreed to complete the questionnaire at the end of a meeting. They were scientists and practitioners in a range of professions including social and health care, agriculture, veterinary science and psychology, from many European countries. Nine other members of the group declined to complete the questionnaire, some confessing that they felt their command of English was not sufficient. Although the topic was broadly familiar to them, they had not been introduced to my research or questionnaire before completing it.

**Sample 2:** 26 university postgraduate counselling students ranging in age from 22-62 years completed the questionnaire as part of a workshop on general research methods. Students had a range of personal and professional backgrounds but had a common interest in supporting and helping others. The workshop included exercises on research methods and students were asked to volunteer to complete the questionnaire at the end of the session. Ecopsychology had not featured in their course, and was not mentioned in that session, so the experiences that they drew on in completing the questionnaire were from their personal or professional backgrounds. All completed the questionnaire.

**Data analysis and presentation**

People in both samples seemed to find the questionnaire interesting and stimulating. Whilst some people answered the questions with just a few words, others wrote lengthy personal accounts of experiences and emotions. Some were moving and poetic.

I considered at length how best to convey this richness and diversity of experience here. I felt that a detailed, reductionist content or thematic analysis, whilst potentially of interest, would destroy the flow and immediacy of individual narratives. I therefore decided to present the answers question by question, and to quote from them as fully as space allowed.
A striking initial impression for me was just how much people wrote, particularly for Question 4. I convey this by a brief analysis of the word count for each question and between each sample. Secondly, it was clear that there were many similarities in people’s accounts. I highlight these at the beginning of my analysis of each question. Finally, I reproduce a representative selection of people’s answers, grouped into categories or themes that appeared during my extensive reading and re-reading of the data.

Results

In the following extracts respondents are identified by group (GC = Green Care group, sample 1; CP = counsellor psychology trainees, sample 2) and by an arbitrary index number. Personal details such as age, nationality and gender were not identifiable.

Connectedness (Question 1)

Everyone answered this question and indicated that connectedness did have resonances for them, with contributions that ranged in length from a few words to paragraphs. The median length of contribution was 20 words (range 3-61) in the European Green Care sample and 24.5 (range 4-71) in the UK counseling psychology sample. This difference, however, is not statistically significant (Median test, $\chi^2 (1) = 1.12, p = 0.29$, 2-tailed).

The shorter responses convey a positive response to the idea of connectedness but tell us little about the individual respondent. Examples include:

- Silence, grace, wholeness. (GC8)

- Beauty, growth, outside, countryside, view therapeutic, oxygen, escape, healthy. (CP7)

- Pleasure generated from nature. The positivity that nature can evoke. The wonder of natural beauty. Respect, well-being, relax, empathy, more senses in use, pleasure, learn new skills. (GC11)

- Feeling at peace with nature. Feeling calmness and acceptance of nature, slowness. (CP23)

- Relaxation, release, feeling free. (CP25)
The longer contributions disclose more of the individuals’ views and thinking about the topic of connectedness, for example:

I like the idea of being connected with nature, to me it means being a part of my natural surroundings and particularly where there are no buildings. For me it is important to be by the sea and I find this refreshing, calming and de-stressing. I also find these feelings when working in my garden, or on a lesser scale, watching the birds in the garden before I go to work. (CP1)

CP1’s contribution has a number of elements that were echoed in many others. There is an overall positive tone, here stated explicitly (he or she “likes the idea” of a connection to nature). This connection involves an identity (“being a part of”) with nature. This is a natural, not constructed environment (“natural surroundings and particularly […] no buildings”). A personally-important location is mentioned (“for me […] important to be by the sea”), and there is a positive emotional effect (“refreshing, calming, de-stressing”). The final sentence generalises the experience to other natural settings. Similar elements can be seen in many accounts.

The positive emotional tone runs through all the contributions to Question 1 (in contrast to Question 2, as we shall see, which asked about disconnectedness). Participant CP1 above mentions explicitly a relaxing effect, and implies a personal value gained from being part of natural surroundings. Other mention similar feelings, that connectedness is spiritually meaningful, God-like and emotionally helpful, as in the following examples.

Not being religious in the traditional meaning I do feel a larger meaning with life or being part of a larger being when I am close to or feel part of Nature. It is like being part of life, being real, being active. (GC1)


My strongest experience is the undersea environment when you become part of the environment. (GC2)

Come closer with my real self, or God. (CP5)

This resonates with me. Nature is calming, helps put the rest of life in perspective. Seasons link us with the seasons of life – Spring – growth. Winter - death and loss. Links us with natural cycles and our own life cycles. (CP8)
Involvement of many senses. Feeling “at home”. Feeling of being supported. Stress relief. Drop shoulders. (GC9)

Spirituality – idea of seeing God in creation – that as humans we are all part of creation. By being close to nature [you] can connect with God and the inner life. (CP9)

Link to “from where all life starts”. The nature of things – how things really are. (GC10)

At peace in natural surroundings such as open air – green fields, trees, particularly woodland – touching wood – natural, berries, bringing me back down to earth – something pure, safe and real – something which has always been there. (CP12)

That humans are connected to nature with all their physiology, culture, emotional and social context but are not aware of it any more most of the time. (GC13)

A spiritual connection with the universe through nature. Encouragement from “alternative” gurus to get in touch with nature and as means of balancing, healing, calming the spirit. (CP17)

I feel that we are a part of nature, because the creator of nature is also the one who may have created us (no, I don’t think it’s God). Connectedness with nature for me would be being in the presence of our own i.e. what was made with us. (CP20)

Not everyone’s passage conveyed a deeper spiritual link, however: some just reported that being in nature felt good, or was associated with pleasant feelings.

Trees, relaxation, animals, fresh air, long walks, brightness, mountain, picnic. Relax, being calmer, clearing thoughts, catharsis, get in touch with inner self and soul. (CP6)

Autumn colours, short winter days, snowing, bright winter days – sun is shining and snow is full of diamonds, spring time when nature is awake – all getting green, garden in the warm evening when seeds are sown and the earth is black and warm, summertime with flowers, rain and sun – long bright days, butterflies in sunny forest and in meadows. (GC7)

Pleasure generated from nature. The positivity that nature can evoke. The wonder of natural beauty. (CP13)

Peacefulness, walking, mushrooms, swim in the lake, weekend, summer, skiing. (GC15)

I think natural elements are very therapeutic i.e. walking through woods, fields is calming and relaxing and allows me to unwind and think freely. I feel particularly drawn to the sound of a
river or even the water feature in the garden. Away from the house and chores I feel more relaxed and stress free. (CP16)

Another theme was that individuals were drawing on activities they regularly took part in, such as walking and gardening (below), or underwater swimming (GC2, above), that brought them satisfaction.


Being connected with nature makes me think of health, walking, exploring, wildlife, beautiful scenery, calmness and purity. (CP21)

When I go for walks in the lake district I feel very calmed and relaxed by being surrounded by nature. (CP24)

Walking in mountains remote from areas of population. I find that wildness and rugged nature of this type of environment very challenging and stimulating. (CP26)

There were contributions that seemed to convey very deeply-held principles:

“Nature never did betray the heart that loved her” (...Shaw) It is important to me that I live in rhythm with nature, not cut across the natural grain. (CP4)

I wish the world was “constructed” differently so that it wasn’t such an effort to be physically connected to nature. The modern world is too mechanical. I feel “connected” with nature is the way we were meant to be. (CP11)

Mother Earth and the fact that we only have one earth, can’t grow more land and that land provides food sources and nurture. (CP18)

Finally, some were idiosyncratic or enigmatic:

My everyday life, working on our own ecological farm or advising farmers to solve their problems in ecological farming. (GC3)

Tree hugging, Green man, Robin Hood, Lady Chatterley, Ancient woodlands, National Trust. Inevitability of death, numinosity, chaos theory, primordial swamp, elemental weather. (GC22)

Empathy, Goethean phenomenology. (GC17)
Only one contributor wrote that she did not feel connected with nature, although enjoyed it:

I don’t really feel “connected” with nature but I like spending time in nature (relaxation) and enjoy nature and wildlife. (GC4)

I have quoted in full many of the 43 responses to Question 1 above to give a representative picture of what respondents contributed. The choice of those to include was in a sense arbitrary, as any of them could have been included, and those omitted were similar. Although the above examples reflect personal and individual experiences, the overall content is consistent. Participants are reporting emotionally positive experiences that have arisen whilst they are in touch with natural places or things, that are frequently associated with activities (such as walking or gardening), and which often have a deeper, spiritual meaning for them. The associations “disconnectedness with nature” (Question 2) that people described are in clear contrast. Disconnectedness seems to imply many negative emotions such as tension, isolation, bleakness, emptiness, stress, meaninglessness and fear.

**Disconnectedness (Question 2)**

Everyone replied to this question. Contributions were briefer than to Question 1. The GC sample made shorter contributions (Median = 10.5 words, range 1-28) than the CP sample (Median = 15 words, range 4-32) and the difference approaches statistical significance (Median Test, $\chi^2 (1) = 2.83, p = 0.09$, 2-tailed).

The overall tone of the responses to Question 2 which, as one might expect since it is asking for the opposite pole of the construct “connectedness”, is distinctly different than the answers to Question 1. This contrast is illustrated by Participant CP16 who specifically linked questions 1 and 2:

Q1: I think natural elements are very therapeutic i.e. walking through woods, fields is calming and relaxing and allows me to unwind and think freely. I feel particularly drawn to the sound of a river or even the water feature in the garden. Away from the house and chores I feel more relaxed and stress free.

Q2: Conversely, to be in a cluttered room or a room full of objects and people with no natural light or fresh air can feel stressful, draining and tiring.
Another contributor (GC12) offered a string of word-associations for questions 1 and 2 which again shows a clear contrast:

Q1: Tree-hugging, Green Man, Robin Hood, Lady Chatterley, ancient woodlands, National Trust [UK charity preserving nation’s heritage]. Inevitability of death, numinosity, chaos theory, primordial swamp, elemental weather.

Q2: Urban warrior, yuppie, metropolitan, reductionism, medical model, dead animals on the road, high-tech, steel and glass buildings.

Contributor CP6 also feels the two are very different:

Q1 Trees, relaxation, animals, fresh air, long walks, brightness, mountain, picnic. Relax, being calmer, clearing thoughts, catharsis, get in touch with inner self and soul.

Q2 City life, fast-moving society, pollution, cars, busy, moody faces, being practical.

Many answers to this question had similar elements to the above three, illustrated in the examples below. Contributions frequently referred to contrasts in place (outside, contrasted with being inside), in activity (walking against being in a room), to the qualities of place (the “sound of the river” versus “room full of objects[…] with no natural light”), and to the effects on the individual (“more relaxed and stress free” in contrast with “stressful, draining and tiring”).

The built, urban environment as a place was cited by many people, particularly in the CP sample:

Disconnected from my core nature, from my first environment. Be closer to technocratic world, materialistic world. (CP5)

City life, fast-moving society, pollution, cars, busy, moody faces, being practical. (CP6)

Inside, no view, imprisoned. (CP7)


Being disconnected suggests the idea of the absence of living things - the metaphor of the concrete jungle – sick building syndrome etc. (CP9)
Urban context. Stress, fatigue. (GC14)

Being in the city – no trees or open spaces, noise, fumes, no quiet places. (CP18)

Factory, cars, every kinds of pollution, fashion. (CP19)

“Being disconnected” reminds me of my city life, where nature is missing and is replaced with synthetics and man made instead of original and natural. (CP20)

In the above examples the urban environment is mentioned but the emotions that people associate with it are largely implied. Other contributions focus less on place than on the feelings that they associate disconnectedness with, as the following examples show.

Being alone, being petrified, being unhappy, being isolated, being outside. (GC1)

Alone, isolation, stressed. Ugly, Soulless, empty. Frightening. Overwhelming. (CP2)

Being disconnected = sadness, loneliness, a big part of the life quality missing. Routine life, driving a car. (GC2)

Lonely isolated afraid rejected. (CP3)


Anger, isolation, speechlessness, being upset, loneliness. (GC9)

Spiral-ing away from the meaningful. Over-rationalisation, over economisation \textit{[presumably meaning in the sense of economics as material gain]}. (GC10)

No resonance – feeling separate almost alien. Not understanding or feeling meaning – alone – untouched – untouchable. (CP12)

Cut off – from part of myself. Dark nights – withdraw from life into myself. Not aware [of being] connected to natural rhythms i.e., seasons/changes in bird migration. (CP13)

Loss and fear – alone in my own inner wilderness – I am invisible to the world. Disconnection relates to the safety where no-one can get me or hurt me, my emotions have left. (CP22)
Sadness, confusion, feeling different from other individuals, hopefulness that things may change, feelings of aloneness. (CP25)

The above contributions focus on how disconnectedness made them personally feel. Only three contributors focus on other people:

For me, being disconnected with natures makes me feel that that people don’t care about nature, don’t respect nature or don’t have the opportunity to spend time in nature. (GC4)

Not appreciating nature. Not respecting nature, for instance, by damaging trees that [have] spent many years growing. (GC5)

I have little respect for people who feel disconnected with nature. (GC15)

I conclude this section with two of the longer answers to this question. They make personal as well as more general points.

I think my generation (I am 27 years old) is really disconnected with nature. Especially when you are living in the western part of the Netherlands. I even live in the “countryside” with lots of forest but nature is for me more a kind of “theatre” or “background”, where you can walk in it or run in it. It rushes you along and you do not have the time to see the details for instance how things grow. (GC6)

Busy, unhealthy, fake, out of touch with what’s really important. The thought makes me wish for time-out. I connect time-outs with nature cos you get to just appreciate everything around you. (CP11)

The answers to Question 2 hint at those to the final question, showing that people found nature-contact personally meaningful and emotionally valuable. Asking them specifically about the value of nature-connectedness produced a wealth of additional detail, as we see in the next section.

**Connectedness and self-healing (Questions 3 and 4)**

Having encouraged respondents to think about the idea of connectedness to nature, the questionnaire ends with asking them how far this is linked to their wellbeing. It seemed to find a strong resonance. Thirty-eight of the 43 respondents said that they ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement in Question 3 (3 circled “neutral” and 2 “disagree”): “Being connected with the natural world is a positive force for
healing”. Three people wrote nothing in the follow-up question to this (Q.4) which asked them to share personal experiences. The remainder wrote more in response to this question than to the others: the median word length for the GC sample was 29 words (range 5-97) and for the CP sample, 42 words (range 10-121). The median difference between the two samples, although apparently large, is not statistically significant (Median test, $\chi^2 (1) = 1.12, p = 0.29, 2$-tailed).

The answers make fascinating reading and many have similar features. For example, consider the following two extracts:

When I am particularly stressed or run down I feel better able to cope and feel better in myself if I am able to be in nature in some way – this means taking time out to just “be” outside sometimes. (CP1)

Walking outside for calming down, relax, recreate, feel better when depressed. Instead of walking outside, these effects can also be reached by spending time with animals, doing sports outside. (GC13)

These accounts talk about the occasions on which nature was used and the specific nature of the problem (“when[….] particularly stressed”, “when depressed”), the activity engaged in (“taking time out to ‘be’”, “walking outside”), the place in nature accessed (“outside”, “spending time with animals”), and the therapeutic effect (“better able to cope”, “calm down”). One can see these themes in many of the following accounts:

Every time I have to live in an urban environment etc for shorter or longer periods (study-years, work etc) especially in big, loud, stinky cities coming back into farming (practically, hands-on) is healing, makes breathing free again. (GC4)

If I am lacking clarity, inspiration or feel “closed down” I walk high hills / mountains – it is where I re-connect. Relaxation – near water, especially moving water, rivers, falls, sea. Trees – give them a hug, their energy is powerful and giving. Colour – flowers, leaves – invigorates. Meditation involves these things. The above are all a part of me! (CP4)

During the winter days with sunshine makes me much better. Outdoor activities, walking, cleaning up your garden etc. stabilises my mood. (GC5)

I walk regularly in the countryside which I feels provides me with an opportunity to de-stress and escape and it feels very healthy and therapeutic. (CP7)
To stay alone in nature and wilderness for some hours or days to feel contemplation, reflection, meditation and relaxation. (GC8)

Family members who are depressed go to Scotland to walk. This always has a healing outcome. When feeling stressed I always find a walk in nature helps. When you are alone in Nature you can finally listen to yourself. Nature helps us to leave the busy world behind. (CP8)

Just simply walking by a lake or river, being under trees and looking up at a mountain fills me with joy and revives me spiritually. I can’t really explain it other than a spiritual experience or being in touch with creation – and perhaps the creator! (CP9)

Too many to count but it’s mentally therapeutic to be placed somewhere you NATURALLY belong (in nature) away from all the technology. Meditation is an example of every-day-stress-relief-therapy sort of thing. Although you can meditate away from nature, it facilitates and inspires the process. There’s just something about the smell of mountain air or freshly cut grass isn’t there? (CP11)

I have since a child taken a huge comfort from being in the countryside – just a certain smell in the air can literally transform the way I am feeling. I am choosing to walk in the countryside for 2 hours each day in order to prove a fruitful area for meditation and reflection. (CP12)

Walking outside for calming down, relax, recreate, feel better when depressed. Instead of walking outside, these effects can also be reached by spending time with animals, doing sports outside. (GC13)

Yes: I use nature and garden to balance my mind. (GC15)

I find that walking in the fresh air cures my migraine attacks better than taking tablets/medication. It also makes me feel very happy on days when I am run down. (CP21)

I often go on a long walk in hills or open countryside when I want to clear my mind and/or when seeking inspiration. (CP26)

Looking across all the answers to this question, I was struck by the fact that three times as many people described their use of nature for self-healing in a way that was habitual, as distinct from relating a particular incident or time in their life. Of the nine in the latter category, the following are vivid examples.

I had had an argument with my mum which was vicious. I opened my back door and a hawk had brought down a pigeon. The pigeon was bleeding at the neck and the hawk just stood and stared at me before it flew off. The pigeon died. This made me recognise how cruel I had been
to my mum - I wanted to hurt her. I felt vicious but did not want her to die. I later apologised for how I had treated her but not for what I had been trying to say. Who was the pigeon, who was the hawk? (CP3)

For about 10 years ago I was very tired of too much work and responsibilities with work and family. It was late summer and the doctor gave me two weeks free from the work [...]. I went to the forest and picked blueberries for the first 3-4 days. I needed to do something different but I had to do something! Nowadays I grow willow (different parts for weaving) and harvesting the different colours from yellow to purple and making baskets is a great recreation for me. (GC7)

Whilst visited by the family finders whilst in the process of adopting our son. They picked and ate a strawberry from the hanging basket outside the back door. They commented on its sweetness and how lovely to find strawberries in September. I still have those strawberries, they come back every year, they relate to an important part of my life. They helped me connect to two strangers who were important in their decision to match us to our son. The visit went extremely well and it was a powerful and positive experience. We had a fire recently which took away most of my garden and the loss of the strawberries was greatly felt more than anything. Thankfully they have re-emerged! (CP13)

When I wanted to die and had lost all hope, I went to the [place is named] and sat high on a hill, when I looked around me I felt life growing in me, I experienced a deep sense of connection and freedom with all the beauty surrounding me. I felt cleansed and fresh, hope and wonderment leapt into me and I wanted to live. This place is now symbolic for healing to me and I believe my life was saved from direct contact/experience with nature. (CP22)

I have lived in Central London for 2 years because I was bored with country life as the pace was slow and boring. In the 2 years I have been away I have been doing everything – (from actions to emotions) – at a speedy pace – has not been good for my health – as I need to slow down – and “go back to basics”. I have been back two and a half months. I find it hard to adjust to the slow pace yet have realised how calming nature can be. I appreciate it more and take more time to appreciate and respect it. I has allowed me to take my time and slow down and look after myself more. (CP23)

Most contributors wrote in the first person, but two contributors in the Green Care sample wrote about their work experiences, or made more general points:

Violent patients never damaged plants during last years. The ones that participate in the horticultural therapy respect the plants: they have never been object of a violent aggression. (GC2)

More in the converse – how unnatural environments particularly psychiatric wards are clearly
detrimental to healing unless a holistic view is taken. How much difference things like green space, running water, wooden furnishings, outdoor seating, natural light etc. have. (GC12)

**Discussion**

I have illustrated, by extensively quoting in full, a wide selection of responses to a simple questionnaire on how people experience nature-connectedness, nature-disconnectedness, and nature as healer. Although these two samples (a scientific group studying green care, and a counselling group studying therapy) were positively biased by their interests and professional orientation towards the two concepts I am exploring, I feel that their answers support the notion that connectedness to nature is a concept that is in at least some people's everyday experience and that they can relate it to their health. Furthermore, their responses show that some individuals regularly seek out nature-experiences to help their emotional or physical health, or link a nature-connected experience to an important psychological time in their life.

Of course, these are preliminary findings. Further research is necessary to investigate how far such experiences apply in other cultures, with younger people, and in people with different kinds or degrees of contact with nature, such as participants in outdoor sports, or those who regularly work in natural settings, perhaps contrasted with people who have very little contact at all. A major limitation is that it is not possible completely to exclude experimenter effects: how far my personal enthusiasm for ecopsychology and nature-based therapy, as well as the wording of the questionnaire, led to the findings reported here. Nevertheless, at least for these samples, and with the limitations of this questionnaire, I feel we have revealed a wealth of genuine personal experience which people seemed pleased to share.

The GC group wrote less on their questionnaires than the CP group, possibly because, for many of them, English was not their first language, or they were tired at the end of a long day. However the median differences did not reach statistical significance and the general content and tone of the contributions from the two samples were broadly similar. As noted above, there is considerable scope for further research; however, participants from Spain, Greece, and the United States who completed the questionnaire since this study report similar experiences to those presented here. I tentatively suggest that these experiences are widespread.
Based on the data reported here, nature-connected experiences seem to be strongly emotional, and positively so. Emotions include not only relaxing and pleasant ones but also those which are described as religious. Other researchers have found this too. An important and original work by Paffard (1973) describes the responses of 400 sixth-formers and university undergraduates to a literary extract describing a powerful nature experience. Over half of these young people (55.5%) described experiences of “nature-mystical joy, awe and fear” (p. 102) they had encountered through contact with nature. Paffard embarked on the study after wondering whether young people could identify with the nature-poetry of William Wordsworth in which he details many experiences he had whilst growing up in the English Lake District. Paffard painstakingly categorised his respondents’ accounts according to the kind of emotion they describe (for example, joy, fear, awe), and noticed that many could be described as akin to religious experiences, even transcendental. He decided that the word, “numinous” (implying the experience of God in nature) was particularly appropriate to describe these transcendental moments.

Understanding the developmental growth of nature-connectedness is important. Kahn’s (1999) detailed work on children’s moral reasoning about nature is relevant, whilst Cynthia Thomashow (2002) describes work she has done with children on nature projects such as the design of a zoo exhibit or the protection of a wildlife sanctuary. She found them ready to engage with environmental projects and felt that it gave them a chance to explore their “raw, wild nature” (p. 266) and indeed manage the tensions of adolescence. The children’s narratives she has collected show their contact with nature and she powerfully argues for the educational value nature has in emotional growth:

Through nature, adolescents are privy to models of living other than the cosmetically-driven world of magazines and movies and to rhythms and cycles that are different from those imposed by the constructs of a school day. Through nature they gain access to the wild and untethered, the naked realities of life and death […] and come face to face with their biological origins and the underpinnings of human purpose and meaning (Thomashow, 2002: 264).

The recent surge in interest (in the UK) of giving children a school lesson in nearby woodland each week (‘Forest School’) is a practical instance of how this can be done in practice, and evaluation reports show not only the strong support this idea has from teachers, parents and children but also the value it has for children’s personal growth and physical health. For example, O’Brien and Murray (2006: 4)
recommend from their detailed study: “Forest School should be used on a wider basis as a vital part of children’s outdoor learning experience”.

I wondered, at the beginning of this article, whether one could more usefully take one’s therapy client for a walk in the woods, if connectedness-to-nature experiences were already in place for clients and emotionally positive, than stay in the consulting room. I think this idea should be thoroughly explored, given what my participants have shared in this study. It is not without its difficulties of course. Moving the focus on counselling and psychotherapy from the dyad or group in a room to natural settings outside a building is a challenge because it changes the client and therapist expectations about how to conduct therapy, moves the physical dynamic from face-to-face contact to side-by-side (as on a walk) or one that is even more distant (as in adventure therapy), alters the commercial relationship (can one charge the same fee for a walk in a wood to an hour in a consulting room?) and is subject to physical constraints such as closeness to natural settings, bad weather, and the client’s ease of mobility. As a compromise, one can use guided meditations (imaginal as opposed to in vivo experiences) and 'homework' nature-contact exercises for clients. Experience suggests they are useful ways of linking with nature, if not quite as good as the 'real thing'.

Yet if one looks away from conventional psychotherapy models to ones that specifically use nature as a healing medium, one can see many examples where benefit is gained from starting in the woods, rather than the consulting room, so to speak. 'Green care' is a useful phrase that includes a variety of nature-approaches to therapy. Sempik, Hine and Wilcox (2010) have edited the contributions of 15 researchers, therapists and practitioners drawn from the COST 866 scientific panel to a “conceptual model” of green care. This reviews a wide range of therapy and care approaches to the needs of different client groups from practitioners across many disciplines in a variety of international settings that include agricultural holdings ('care farms'), city and school farms, social and therapeutic horticulture gardens and allotments, and wilderness experiences.

Outside the domain of social and health care, there is an increasing interest in connecting (or reconnecting) with nature through gardening, travel to more natural places, 'green shifting' to country living and so on. This seems to echo the theme of this paper that we intuitively know that we need nature-contact and that it is good for us. As well as gardens, parks and holidays, community-supported agriculture
(Relf, 2006) and community land ownership through community land trusts (for example, Fordhall Farm: Hollins & Hollins, 2007; Hegarty, 2008) are ways to increase opportunities for many people to visit farms and natural places, whilst the growing movement of care-farming (Hassink & van Dijk, 2005; Dessein, 2007) makes such access possible for older people, those culturally-disadvantaged, and many clients with special-support needs.

I have used the term, 'self-healing' in this paper. I think that this deserves especial further study. If people have inner resources that they can turn to at times of trouble that arise in freely-available natural settings, health and social-care professionals have a cheap and plentiful resource to offer their clients. Instead of relying on expensive pharmacological or other resource-intensive treatments, people may find confidence in using more traditional approaches that they themselves can access and control. Even in helping people to recall previous important nature-experiences, the therapist may find his or her work effortlessly augmented.

References


**Acknowledgements**

I am so grateful to Dr Joan Woodworth of Appalachian State University for introducing me to ecopsychology, and for her continued collaboration. I also thank the students and professional colleagues who took the time to share their personal experiences of nature-connectedness.

**Correspondence**

Dr John Hegarty  
School of Psychology  
Keele University  
Keele  
Staffordshire  
ST5 5BG

*Phone:* +44 1782 733386  
*Email:* j.r.hegarty@psy.keele.ac.uk
Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Nature-connectedness and self-healing survey

I’m interested in how people feel “connected” with the natural world, or “disconnected”, whether people see this connectedness as linked with health and well-being, and whether they “self-medicate” in any way by seeking natural experiences. If you are happy for me to use information anonymously in my research, then please leave your completed questionnaires behind at the end of the session.

Many thanks,

Dr John Hegarty, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Keele University

[N.B. blank lines for people to contribute their responses to each question are omitted here]

“Connectedness”

1. What resonances if any does the idea of “connectedness with nature” have for you? [please share any words, ideas, phrases, or personal experiences]

2. Conversely, does the opposite idea – of “being disconnected from Nature” seem to suggest words, phrases or experiences for you personally?

“Nature-connectedness and healing”

3. How far would you agree, for you personally, with the following: “Being connected with the natural world is a positive force for healing”

(Circle one of the following, from Strongly Agree through to Strongly Disagree)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

4. Do you have any personal experiences that fit in with the idea of nature and self-healing? If “Yes”, it would be interesting to share any experiences of this kind that you have had…..
**INSIGHTS**

Is 'Horticultural Therapy' a myth?

Cherry Tree Nursery

The view from a well-established horticulturally-based charity in the United Kingdom.

**Horticulture or community?**

Groups of the vulnerable, excluded, forgotten and needy have, for hundreds of years, found working in land-based projects to be beneficial to their mental and physical wellbeing. Projects have been set up for a wide variety of groups including prisoners, refugees, the blind, the elderly, those with learning difficulties, physical disabilities, mental health problems, migrants, the homeless, and those struggling with addictions. It has long been assumed that the undoubted benefits of these projects arose from the value of horticulture as a therapeutic activity, and the projects came to be referred to as ‘Horticultural Therapy’ projects.

In recent years, the name ‘Horticultural Therapy’ was felt to be somewhat demeaning, and ‘Social and Therapeutic Horticulture’ was preferred. People running such projects began to define themselves as practitioners of this profession, and to draw up guidelines and offer specific qualifications in this form of horticulture.

Cherry Tree Nursery is a commercial plant nursery producing quality garden plants and hardy nursery stock on a four and a half acre site in Bournemouth, United Kingdom. The 150 volunteers, who work in all aspects of the nursery, for as long as they wish and need, have severe and enduring mental illness. For many of them the nursery offers a safe haven and a lifeline. In-house research carried out by the project indicates that they benefit from being in a location where they can feel safe, unjudged and unthreatened. Ask them why they value the project, and it is the meaningful occupation, the purpose, the dignity it gives them, and the companionship of being part of something bigger, that they really value. Horticulture is rarely specifically referred to. Since the project’s inception, there have been a number of volunteers who have returned to open employment as a
result of the therapeutic environment that exists at Cherry Tree Nursery, and many of them have recovered their mental stability and learned to laugh again.

Horticulture provides the right environment, the ability to feel the wind and the sun, to listen to the birds, to watch the butterflies. It provides the opportunity to work together and meet others, and a useful environment to produce something people want to buy to help keep the project going, in fact plant sales cover half the projects’ running costs. However, many volunteers are not interested in plants, and this lack of interest will not necessarily change. Not everyone will stay, some are scared of plants, seeing them as something frightening, poisonous, dangerous, prickly, causing rashes or illness, something to be avoided, even dreaded. They have a lack of connection, don’t like, or are afraid of, being outside, of getting their hands dirty. The project’s great value, and what has helped literally save lives, is that it provides a community. Cherry Tree Nursery is like a village, somewhere people come together, learn to care for and support each other. To quote one of the volunteers “it wouldn’t matter if we made pies, it’s the working together that counts”.

Whilst only a small number of the volunteers love plants, for the majority, plants are the means to an end: friendship, warmth and laughter. It is quite possible to work at Cherry Tree Nursery for years without doing any horticultural work, and many volunteers still can’t name any of the plants. In fact, research has indicated that there are a large number of volunteers who would not attend the project if it only offered horticultural work.

As a profession, horticulture is far from therapeutic. The suicide rate is high, as it is for agriculture, the pressure can be intense, the life is often isolated, and wages are low. For the struggling nurseryman or market gardener, the concept of therapeutic horticulture might seem laughable. For example, one of Cherry Tree Nursery’s wholesale providers grows over 2.5 million plants every year, and employs a total of 82 staff, all of them from Eastern Europe, because no British worker has applied for a job at his nursery for five years.

As Cherry Tree Nursery approaches its twentieth anniversary, experience has led to the conclusion that the definition of ‘therapeutic horticulture’ is approaching the issue from the wrong end. Rather, it is the use of horticulture to provide a therapeutic community, where people have time for each other and value and cherish each other.
Correspondence

Cherry Tree Nursery
Off New Road Roundabout
Northbourne
Bournemouth
BH10 7DA

Phone: 01202 593537
Email: contactus@cherrytreenursery.org.uk
Web: http://cherrytreenursery.org.uk/