THE WISDOM OF ECOPSYCHOLOGY

by Adrian Harris

Coined in 1992 by Theodore Roszak, ecopsychology grew from older roots including shamanism and nature mysticism. With a history like that it's no surprise that trying to define ecopsychology is like trying to pin down a blob of mercury; it looks solid enough but will all too easily split into half a dozen fragments that dash off in multiple directions.

For the sake of simplicity, I'll say ecopsychology is concerned with the relationship between the human psyche and the rest of nature. Ecopsychologists are a diverse bunch and include therapists, researchers, wilderness guides, shamans, activists and anthropologists. Our practice includes therapy sessions in parks, vision quests and researching the healing power of nature.

Psychology generally excludes the natural environment from its attempts to understand the human mind and so stands as a perfect model for Western culture; in general, nature isn't something we pay much heed to. As a result of that cultural madness, we're facing environmental catastrophe. Ecopsychology brings some sanity by reminding us of our place in the ecosystem. Far from being the isolated individuals theorised by mainstream psychology, ecopsychology reveals that we are "tangled up with" the natural world (Fisher, 2005).

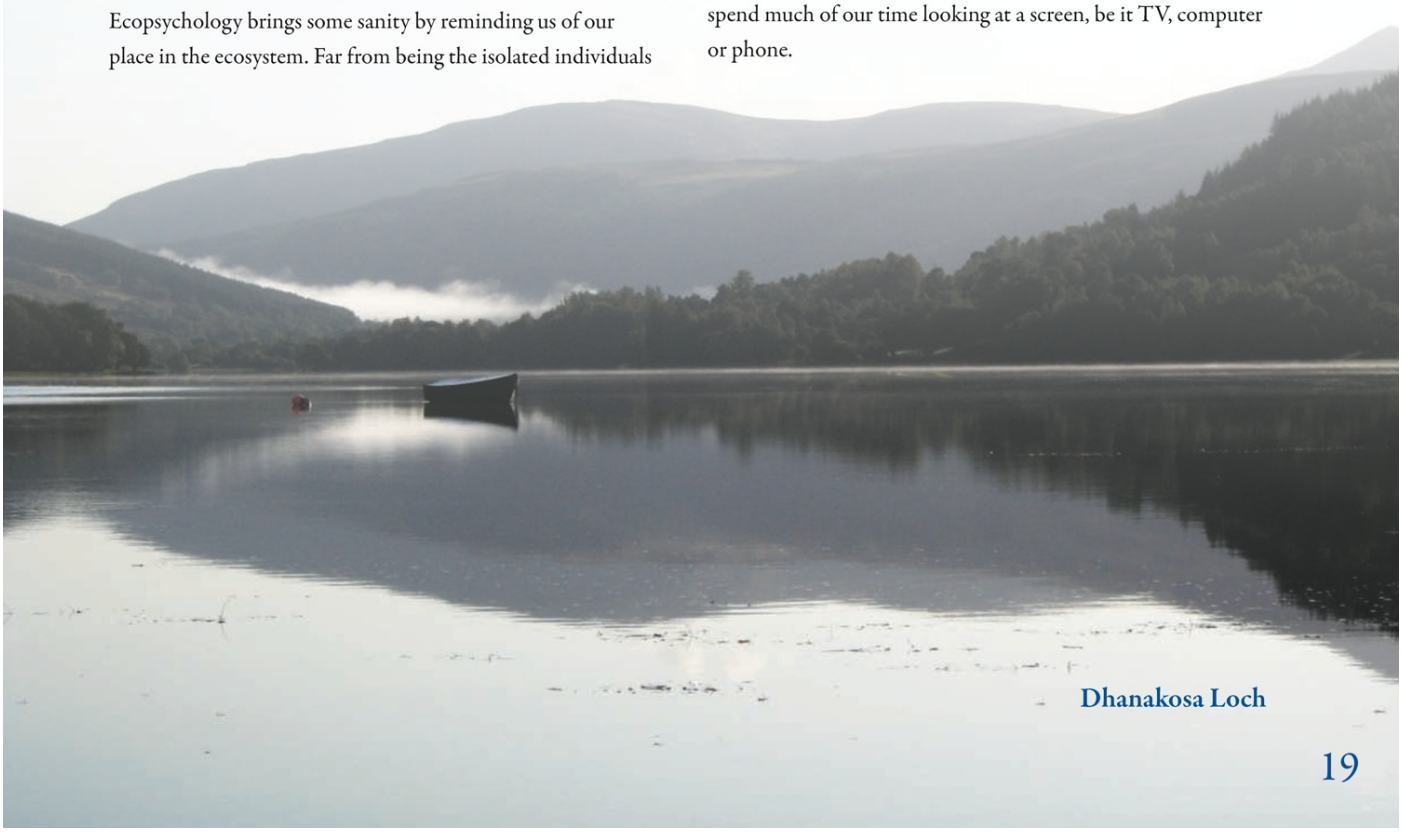
Ecopsychology is primarily concerned with three themes:

- the psychological roots of ecological crisis;
- nature and our wellbeing; and
- our psychological and spiritual relationship with nature.

While bearing in mind that all three are interrelated, I'll explore each in turn.

The psychological roots of ecological crisis

We have known about environmental destruction for decades, but very little is done to prevent it. Climate change is perhaps the best example, but the pattern is common; we know what is happening but, excluding minor cosmetic changes, do nothing. Why? Ecopsychology offers a range of diagnoses, but frequently emphasises our loss of relationship with the natural world. Most Westerners spend 95% of their lives indoors and our sensory perception has been dulled. While our ancestors toiled on the land and followed the pulse of the seasons, we spend much of our time looking at a screen, be it TV, computer or phone.



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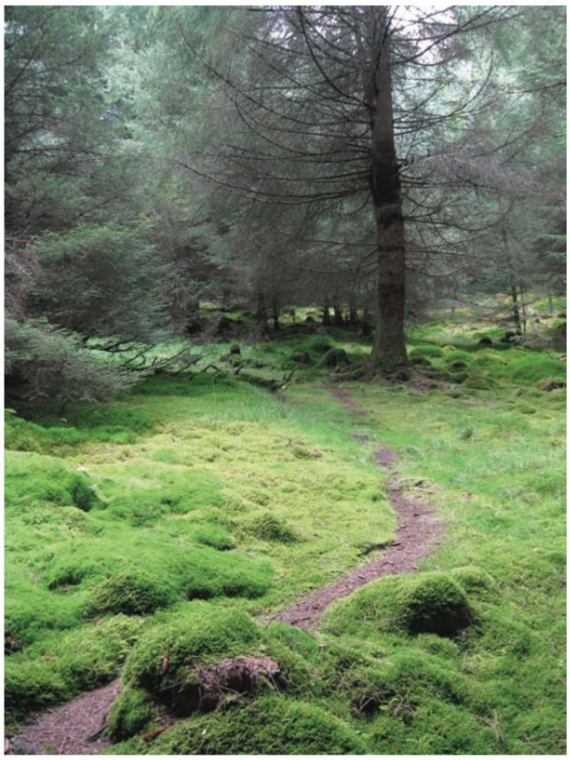
Is nature connection enough to empower us to defend our environment? Tom Crompton, a WWF campaigner, found that deepening our connection to nature is an effective way to encourage positive action. His experience echoes my own research into Eco-Paganism; I concluded that spiritual experiences with nature inspired environmental activists.

Nature and our wellbeing

Mounting evidence shows that spending time in nature is beneficial. Connecting with nature alleviates a range of mental health problems, reduces stress, increases concentration and even helps cut crime.



Into the Woods

Ecotherapy is specifically concerned with this healing strand of ecopsychology. Most of those using ecotherapy are psychotherapists who appreciate the healing power of nature. Some will work with their clients outdoors, typically in a park or garden. Jenny Grut, for example, helps victims of torture with a combination of psychotherapy and horticultural work. Others work with animals whose sensitivity and emotional intelligence can be astounding. Horses make especially good therapists. These intelligent and intuitive creatures live as part of a herd, so have a deep understanding of relationship dynamics. Horses respond to our unconscious body language and can thus help us learn about honest communication, boundaries, assertiveness, affection and much more.

Shamanism is influential in ecopsychology. Some ecotherapists identify as shamans while many acknowledge that the tradition has been inspirational. Andy Fisher, an ecopsychologist whose practice we might recognise as animist, concludes that "the more I am able to attune myself to the natural world the more I discover that it is correspondingly attuned to me" (Fisher, 2006).

Ecotherapy is often practiced on a one-to-one basis but can work well with groups. James Jiler runs a project at a New York City jail that enables inmates to work with the soil. This is hugely healing and those who take part are far less likely to re-offend. Inmates who feel isolated and often have a history of violence and neglect, learn to nurture themselves as they nurture nature. Those who join my nature connection workshops have a less dramatic history but gain similar benefits. My workshops use simple exercises to enhance sensory awareness and explore our relationship with nature. I apply perceptual psychology and shamanistic practice to deepen our relationship with nature, allowing participants to shift consciousness from the mental churn of city life to a calm, flowing connection.

There is a risk that ecotherapy could become just another way of exploiting nature for human benefit. Instead of a respectful relationship, we might use nature for a short term 'feel good' factor. Ecotherapists are alert to this danger and most will ensure that their work is grounded in the understanding that we are fundamentally connected to all that lives. True healing cannot come without recognising our mutual interdependence.

Psychological and spiritual relationship with nature

Like many pagans, my spiritual path is inspired by nature: I have always known that connecting to the other-than-human world brings spiritual healing and understanding. It was a revelation to me to find that ecopsychologists shared that insight and had begun to explore the academic and practical ramifications. Roszak postulates a largely dormant "ecological unconscious" (Roszak, 1992) which can be awakened, while Edward Wilson's 'biophilia hypothesis' claims that we have an inbuilt affiliation with nature.

One of the best established theories of ecopsychology is the 'wilderness effect' which typically involves "feelings of expansion or reconnection" (Greenway, 1995). Many ecopsychologists recognise that this powerful spiritual practice can inspire environmental activism. Margaret Kerr and Dave Key apply the insights of ecopsychology to awaken environmental awareness in influential people. The Natural Change Project, a programme supported by the WWF, takes key decision makers in education, health, arts and the private

sector into the Scottish wilderness. Margaret and Dave work with the power of the wild to facilitate a transformation from a conventional 'egoic' self to one that is "transpersonal and interconnected" (Kerr and Key, 2012).

Although many ecopsychologists look to the richness of Native American traditions, the influence of British indigenous practice is less apparent. Perhaps it is just a matter of labels, as I would describe the work of UK shamans like Gordon McClellan and Barry Patterson as ecopsychology. My own ecopsychology practice is, of course, influenced by paganism and draws deeply on personal experience. Like most ecopsychologists, I weave together ancient and modern and I delight in finding resonances between cutting edge research and timeless indigenous wisdom.

Embodied connection

Many years ago I suggested that the wisdom of the body reveals our connection to nature. My ideas opposed mainstream psychology, which typically assumes that knowledge is lodged in the brain and that we are isolated individuals in a mechanistic world. However, my journey of exploration continued, leading to a PhD and ongoing research. It's now clear that the old mechanistic ideas are untenable; knowing is embodied and relationship is fundamental. Each individual is like a complex node in an infinite web: your body is "part of a gigantic system of here and other places, now and other times, you and other people, in fact the whole universe" (Gendlin, 1978). This connection can become especially apparent when we use a technique called Focusing, which is a simple means of listening to the deep wisdom of the body. Focusing is used by some ecopsychologists and is an especially powerful aid to nature connection.

Bench and Ferns

Conclusion

Although ecopsychology is very new, it has grown from ancient roots. It provides profound insights into our environmental crisis and offers valuable tools for change. Instead of a psychology based on mechanistic models, ecopsychology is founded on the understanding that our bodymind system is part of the wider ecosystem. Ecopsychology is inherently holistic; it recognises that human wellbeing entails a flourishing ecology and typically has spirituality at its heart.

Every age faces its challenges, but never before have humans been confronted with the prospect of an ecological meltdown of our own creation. There is still time if we can wake up from the dangerous illusion that we are separate from our environment. That's a tough call, but if ecopsychology draws deep from the well of spiritual wisdom, I believe it can answer that need.

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Further reading

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