

Daring to Dream? The Grounding of Ecopsychology in Public Debate, Global Alliance, Language, and Practice

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Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing. —Arundhati Roy

Imagine a world in which we consider the impact of our decisions on the earth and on the seventh generation ahead, in which humans no longer see themselves as the superior species, in which all aspects of the web of life are truly respected as equals, in which rationality and intellect can sit beside our animal selves (feeling, intuition, and our bodily senses) as equal partners in our guidance. Imagine a world in which humans express gratitude toward all who support us in every breath. Imagine.

Our consumer-driven individualistic culture nearly always fails to consider the other-than-human. Despite our familiar cry of “I love nature,” despite our rush to the exhilarating peak experience in mountains or the calming-the-nervous-system seaside for holidays, despite our valiant attempts to save charismatic megafauna, industrial growth culture still treats the other-than-human world as “it,” an object, a bunch of resources to be used. Most of us are taught that we live on top of the land, not within a living interconnected web of life with whom we are in relationship. The heroic drive toward onward and upward in pursuit of progress is a flight from backward and downward that completes the circle of life, a flight from our inevitable and continual return to the darkness of the earth, from death.

For me, this vision of revolution in worldview lies at the heart of ecopsychology. Gratitude to the many mentors who offered me teachings on these matters: my dog, who taught me about extended mind, unconditional love, the pleasures of rolling in the grass, and the harsh reality of death; the wild open sea and beaches of my childhood, where I connected to the sacred; and the first generation of ecopsy-

chologists, who laid very solid foundations for an ever-expanding field of study to be experienced, dialogued, and articulated. I do not believe this field needs to be revised in its essence—but certainly unpacked, challenged, debated, refined, and further articulated.

At this point it seems important to note that similar ideas and practices are to be found under a diverse range of different titles such as deep ecology, systems theory, nature spirituality, human geography, ecolinguistics, some strands of environmental education, and many, many more. This is part of a process that is happening globally, which Paul Hawken describes as a new movement

that has no name, leader, or location, and that has gone largely ignored by politicians and the media. Like nature itself, it is organizing from the bottom up, in every city, town, and culture and is emerging to be an extraordinary and creative expression of people’s needs worldwide. (2007)

He notes that even the word “movement” is too small to describe what is happening. So the vision I describe does not belong to ecopsychology; rather, ecopsychology is one of the many manifestations of this vision that is emerging as a co-creation between us, as a response to the worldview of industrial growth culture, now sweeping across the globe.

I would like to see this vision become more grounded in the following four ways: making the ideas of ecopsychology more visible in the public debate about sustainability and ecological crisis; creating a language of ecopsychology that is more accessible to mainstream culture, with greater sensitivity toward diverse audiences; developing ecotherapy theory and practice in the caring professions; enabling ecopsychology to take root as a practice of reciprocity in the world. These four “arms of ecopsychology” are not in any order of priority, but each will support the other; essentially it is about relationship. I will now say a few words about each of these four arms.

This is a grand vision and seems far away from the reality we inhabit. Yet in the time that I have been aware of the ecological crisis—nearly 40 years—there are signs, albeit very small signs, of change. For example, take the latest media comments on the release of the IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report. I was interested to hear that John Broome, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford University, UK, is one of the lead authors on ethics. He writes:

Many people, some living, others yet to be born, will die from the effects of climate change. Is each death equally bad? How bad are those deaths collectively? Many people will die before they bear children, so climate change will prevent the existence of children who would otherwise have been born. Is their non-existence a bad thing? (Broome, 2008, 96)

Such thinking is a quantum leap from even just a decade ago, when climate change was only just creeping into mainstream consciousness. An ecopsychologist might add to this discussion that climate change affects many other beings besides humans! Is it ethical for us to take actions that cause other species great harm or extinction?

For ecopsychologists to find an international presence in this kind of public debate, care must be taken over language. A key word in ecopsychology is "nature," which has such a variety of meanings, often used interchangeably and rather too loosely. It is common to find scores of workshops and articles using phrases such as "the need for humans to reconnect with nature," or "it is healing for humans to spend time in nature." What does it mean to "go into nature" when we are already "in nature"?

Surely it is time to grow beyond this dualistic language that describes humans as separate from nature—the very old paradigm view that ecopsychologists are trying to challenge. This highlights our lack of vocabulary, and I suspect that many, including myself at times, fall back into inaccurate use of language because it seems too cumbersome to use terms such as "the other-than-human world," "land unmanaged by humans," and so on.

Furthermore, place shapes language. The UK has virtually no land left that is unmanaged by humans—a very different story from the US, South Africa, or Australia, where ecopsychology has flourished in part because of easy access to wilderness. We either have to travel long distances to get there, or we spend time in gardens, parks, by the sea, or in relatively small areas of moorlands and national parks. What does this mean for our psyche? One of the consequences is that we have been forced to rethink the meaning of "wild nature," which is often used to mean "land that is unmanaged by humans." Yet wild nature is in my body, in the microcosm of the garden, or just two feet

under the tarmac—as well as in my psyche. So in our attempts to create a shared language that more accurately reflects a changing worldview, there is a need for sensitivity to cultural difference.

Perhaps one of the most crucial aspects of ecotherapy in theory and practice is about how spending time in the garden, in the woods, or by the sea is an important part of child development. Slowly but surely, this is being replaced by a relationship with technology; the seduction of the screen fills ever more of people's time, and we will not know the effects of this for some time. Ecopsychology has an important role in bringing a rigorous and critical view on how technology might be changing the psyche of the next generation. More worryingly, when the technological tools we are all using so blatantly abuse land, creatures, and peoples in their making, how are we to engage with this?

It is interesting to note that many excellent projects, which are good examples of ecopsychology in practice, are still little known about. The green prison in Norway, on Bastoy Island (James, 2013), is living proof that when you treat inmates humanely, when they grow their own food and spend time in the rest of nature, then violence toward staff is negligible, and the reoffending rate is lower than anywhere in Europe.

Landscape architect Clare Cooper Marcus has spent many years of her life trying to persuade hospital architects to include gardens and green views in the design of hospitals (Marcus & Barnes, 1999). As ecopsychologists know, access to the other-than-human world is proven to speed up the healing process.

The Natural Change Project in Scotland has been very successful engaging "people who hold positions of influence in society, offering them life-changing experiences of wild places. It then goes on to support the growth of these personal experiences into leadership and social action for an ecologically sustainable future" (Natural Change Foundation, n.d.). Yet despite their success, they have great difficulty securing funding.

All three examples would save governments money, time, and trouble. Why are they not put more widely into practice? Is it that Bastoy Prison challenges the notion that prisons are for punishment and that change is created through disciplinary force? Is it that healing gardens in hospitals challenge the idea that healing is solely in the hands of doctors? Perhaps the Natural Change Project is simply too radical for mainstream culture? My guess is that these projects challenge key elements of the Myth of Progress—a story that is embedded in our lifestyles as well as in our relationships and inner worlds. Changing our ways is a process that is often impeded because there is deep resistance to changing how we see ourselves as humans in relation to the world. As Freud pointed out in the early days of

psychoanalysis, it is important to pay attention to the resistance in the process of change.

So the grounding of ecopsychology needs great skill—in finding the right language, in communicating the message to diverse audiences, in forming bridges with our many global allies, in understanding and having compassion for the old paradigm ways, and in daring to continue to dream.

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