

EDITORIAL

Ecopsychology: Past, present & future

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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 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

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