

EDITORIAL

**Ecopsychology and
the psychedelic experience**

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Turning topiary

On my travels in Mexico many years ago, last millennia in fact, I came across a psychoactive plant, known locally as ‘the shepherdess’, which was used by indigenous people for divination and healing. I was given the opportunity to try this foreign foliage and doing so had an incredible and entirely unexpected experience. Within moments of consuming the herb a strange sensation began seeping through my toes and fingertips and moved towards my core turning me rapidly into some kind of thorn bush. The metamorphosis spread quickly up my arms and legs, across my body and up to my head until I found myself completely transformed into a small spiky shrub. I was quite literally rooted to the spot and could not move.

Simultaneous to this, all the trees and all the plants, in fact every blade of grass across the large field within view, began laughing hysterically. Anything and everything before me that photosynthesised was in side-splitting fits and they were all cracking lines like “now you know what it’s like to be a plant, ha, ha, ha”, swaying back and forth, shrieking and howling with laughter. I didn’t find this particularly funny though, because I was absolutely convinced of my transmutation, and furthermore believed it to be permanent. Oh how the plants laughed. Then a disembodied voice spoke. Loud, deep and stern. A woman’s voice. She said something like, “you stupid humans think you run the show around here, you’re so arrogant, but you haven’t got a clue”. And then she proceeded to lecture me on species-centrism and our lack of harmony with others on Earth. I was terrified and ‘bewildered’ – in the literal sense too – for although I had hypothetically reasoned that everything might be inherently conscious, I had never expected to be chastised by the spirit of Nature or publicly ridiculed by grass.

The experience, mercifully, only lasted ten minutes, and quickly subsided as the voice drifted away and I turned back into a slightly more aptly named *Homo sapiens*

than before. The immediate psychological effects had gone, but the ontological shock remained indefinitely. I would say that this was my first serious shamanic experience with plant (or fungal) psychedelics¹, and since then I have never considered ecology in quite the same way as before.

Ecodelicately

So, this is my personal starting point for editing this special issue, but why *Ecopsychology and the Psychedelic Experience* anyway? Elsewhere (Krippner & Luke, 2009), I have indicated two simple reasons: that psychedelics may enhance the experience of Nature or, given that these substances readily occur outside of the lab, the consumer is therefore compelled to go into the wild to obtain them. But of course, psychedelic experiences and the encounter with Nature usually run much deeper than this, and may even lead to a direct communication with other species. When it does so it is often the same message, which usually runs a little like those received from psychedelic mushrooms by the mycologist Paul Stamets, which are "... always that we are part of an 'ecology of consciousness', that the Earth is in peril, that time is short, and that we're part of a huge, universal bio-system" (Harrison, Straight, Pendell & Stamets, 2007: 138). So there is good reason to explore psychedelics and ecopsychology, if only for the ecologically orientated and apparent interspecies communication that ensues (Krippner & Luke, 2009), or what Doyle (2009: 21) calls the "grokking of Gaia".

Clearly there is also a certain degree of overlap between psychedelic research and ecopsychology: They share common origins in the counter-culture, human potential, and transpersonal psychology and psychotherapy camps. Indeed, psychedelics themselves were very much intrinsic to the genesis of all these movements in the 1950s and 60s, and even had influence on the evolution of ecology and deep ecology movements in the 1970s. Importantly though, the psychedelic cauldron is also the crucible in which we find many core ecopsychological themes bubbling up, be they archetypes, animism, shamanism, paganism, green spirituality, transpersonal psychology, or eco-activism. In short, the two fields are deeply entwined, like two old trees that have grown up trunk to trunk. And yet the literature of the fusion between these two areas is somewhat nascent, with the only prior collection of this kind

¹ A psychedelic has been defined as a substance "...which, without causing physical addiction, craving, major physiological disturbances, delirium, disorientation, or amnesia, more or less reliably produces thought, mood, and perceptual changes otherwise rarely experienced except in dreams, contemplative and religious exaltation, flashes of vivid involuntary memory, and acute psychoses" (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1998: 9).

appearing as a special issue of the *Bulletin of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies* (MAPS, 2009), edited by David Jay Brown. Nevertheless, that issue was on *Psychedelics and Ecology* more generally, rather than ecopsychology specifically so this may indeed be the first such collection.

Nevertheless, as with my predecessors editing the last issue of this journal, on *Queering Ecopsychology* (Heckert, Milton & Barker, 2012), it occurred to me that many of the submissions were somewhat thin on psychology per se, and I too wondered if they were “psychological enough”. That said, when dealing with psychedelics in the context of ecology it is hard to avoid the interaction between ‘mind’ and ‘nature’, which Greenway (2009) reminds us is *the* core relationship of ecopsychology. Because, even if it is not explicit, psychedelics *de facto* imply psychology once you wade in and get your wellies dirty. For psychedelics are nothing if not ‘mind manifesting’, as indicated by the naming of them as such by Humphry Osmond in 1957. Somewhat more aptly these substances have also recently been dubbed *ecodelics* by Richard Doyle (2011) who suggested that the ecodelic insight arising from the ingestion of these plants and fungi is “the sudden and absolute conviction that the psychonaut is involved in a densely interconnected ecosystem for which contemporary tactics of human identity are insufficient” (p. 20).

So while there is a good dose of psychedelic ecopsychology in this special issue it is as much psychedelic eco-anthropology, eco-ethnobotany, eco-semiotics, eco-pharmacography, transpersonal ecology and ecosophy (as Schroll prefers), and even psychedelic ecology. But given that this is the *European Journal of Ecopsychology* I won’t even mention the fact that all but one of the contributors reside in the Americas, as this merely suggests we have some catching up to do in this arena on this side of the pond.

The voices of the Earth

Taking the historical perspective, **Rob Dickins** guides us through the early psychedelic and very much psychiatric ‘triplit’ of the first decade of (what he calls) pharmacography, spanning 1954-1963. In doing so, it is surprising that those early texts he dissects do not have an inherently ecodelic predilection – seemingly due to the laboratorial set and setting favoured at that time – and yet these proto trips paved the way for what was to come with the engendering of an intrinsic interconnectedness between the user and Nature within the psychedelic experience. But this transition was very much a steady evolution, so eventually – after *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (1956) – with the book *Island* (1962), we

see that “Huxley implicitly recognizes that the natural world is under threat”, although unfortunately “any ecological concern in the text is undermined by his pessimism; green awareness fades into the background of a pure white light of mystical experience and his darkly-coloured perception of the social world that threatens it”. Yet, despite Huxley’s gloom, there remained the interconnectedness that would later form the core of the psychedelic community’s coming embrace of trans-speciesism.

Nowhere is this interconnectedness more apparent than with one of the planet’s oldest surviving and most culturally intact indigenous psychedelic-plant using people, the Wixáritari (Huichol) of Mexico. A shamanic, animist and pagan people, the Wixáritari have a deeply ingrained relationship with, and reverence for Nature which weaves intimately around their use of the psychoactive peyote cactus, itself synonymous with the deer and the maize, forming their holy trinity of Nature on which they depend. For the Wixáritari, Nature is at the core of their culture: take away the maize, deer or peyote and the culture ceases to exist. Maintaining access to their sacramental cactus since leaving their homeland to avoid the Spanish conquistadors some 500 years ago, the Wixáritari embark, on foot, on a pilgrimage each year some 600 miles (as the crow flies) to collect the peyote from their sacred land. However, their fate as a culture is poised in the balance as Canadian mining interests seek to destroy the habitat in which their peyote grows (Luke, 2012). Exploring this intimate connection with the land **David Lawlor** explores the Wixáritari’s unique sense of place, quoting the anthropologist and filmmaker Barbara Myerhoff (1974: 259-60):

Ecologically, during the peyote hunt the Huichols achieve a spiritual relation to their physical environment – not a neutral setting, not a mere place to live or exploit for a living. The very landscape is sanctified – the caves, springs, mountains, rivers, cactus groves – and the features of the mythical world are elevated to cosmic significance. ‘Plants’ and ‘animals’ become only labels, conventions, mere human categories of thought. Distinctions between them are illusory. Man is nature.

As hinted at earlier, it’s not much of an ontological leap from the feeling of interconnectedness to the experience of interspecies communication (ISC), in the following case this is brought about through the music of Western Amazonian shamanism. In particular, **Christina Callicot** not only highlights this interconnectedness but emphasises the importance of recognising our interdependence, ignored as it by modern culture or lambasted by critics:

Anthropology has been long been criticized for its failure to characterize human interdependence with nature in a way that refrains from idealizing or essentializing indigenous peoples, or

portraying them as passive objects of environmental determinism. Conversely, modern industrialized culture fails to recognize our interdependence altogether, with drastic results for all species.

Leaving aside for a moment what we are supposed not to do, besides music, what better way is there to actively engage the interspecies conversation than with poetry? Thankfully **Dale Pendell** is on hand with a feisty bird he encounters and his thoughtful dog to remind me that psychedelic ISC need not necessarily mean parapsychologists (like me) labcoating around trying to measure ecodelic ESP:

...are we really thinking the same thoughts – are we really in telepathic communication – or is it merely seeming? Perhaps we could devise subtle experiments, with controls. Psychologists without enough to do could write a paper. Or we could continue, and let the continuing be the confirmation.

Using psychedelic plants, or indeed fungi, to join the interspecies conversation also forms part of Graham Harvey's *Animist Manifesto* because "Maybe sometimes the mushrooms just want to help us join in the big conversation that's going on all around us" (Harvey, 2005: 128). There's no denying either, that once you start talking with fungi you are very likely well on the road to the kind of animism we see at play in possibly every shamanic culture utilizing psychoactive flora, fauna (rarely) and fungi². **Robert Tindall's** story is no exception and he puts forward a fascinating discussion and account of the use of the psychedelically-informed animist worldview to heal human ailments, calling on what shamans call teacher plants, or even doctors:

Both the medicines and the patient are sung over with icaros, the magical melodies that contain and transmit the healing virtue of the plants. As well, ayahuasca ceremonies are utilized to better enable the curandero to direct the spirits of the plants and other 'doctors', and for the patient to more thoroughly integrate the healing received.

² Indeed, "a survey into people's exceptional experiences with psychedelics found that encountering the 'spirit' of the ingested plant or fungus was the most widely reported of a range of 17 'paranormal' and 'transpersonal' type experiences occurring with those taking psilocybin-containing mushrooms (Luke & Kittenis, 2005). According to the respondents this encounter also occurred quite frequently, and was the second most prevalent experience with any one substance, preceded only by experiences of 'unity consciousness' on LSD. Additionally, the encounter with 'plant consciousness' was the most widely reported transpersonal event for several other psychedelic substances too, such as ayahuasca, *Salvia divinorum*, and the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom" (Krippner & Luke, 2009: 13-4). Curiously, the experience of encountering the spirit or intelligence of the ingested substance for synthetic compounds or pure molecules (e.g., LSD or DMT) was much less commonly reported, as might be expected, though the fact it was reported at all throws up some interesting questions (not explored here) about the perceived sentience of plants/fungi versus molecules alone.

Such traditional shamanic practices that utilise psychedelic lifeforms are probably at their most vital and widespread among the prehispanic cultures of Latin America, and yet neo-shamanic practices which incorporate elements of these culturally-bound traditions can be found proliferating across much of the industrialised world. Fifty years since Leary, Metzner and Alpert (1964) published *The Psychedelic Experience* as a guide for fledgling psychonauts at the beginning of the popular era of psychedelics, pioneering ecopsychologist and psychedelic researcher **Ralph Metzner** here explores the activity and utility of these psychedelic neo-shamanic groups for ecopsychological means, particularly within the United States. Informing us that:

The revival of shamanic ritual practices and an animistic worldview can be seen as part of a worldwide human response to the degradation of ecosystems and the biosphere. These groups and individuals are expressing a new awareness, as well as a revival of ancient awareness of the organic and spiritual interconnectedness of all life on this planet.

Nevertheless, in places like the United States – where there exists no continuous cultural use of psychedelic plants – if neo-shamanic groups intend to make use of such mind-blowing biota then they are likely to encounter the problem of natural local supply. Exploring the 100-mile diet and issues of bioregionalism **Eleanora Molnar** explores the practical ecological challenges of sourcing one's favoured flora, asking if:

In trying to attain a level of elevated consciousness and understanding, are psychonauts actually acting in ways that are disrespectful of plant spirits, indigenous cultures, and the biosphere in general? Are psychonauts participating in yet another folly of an industrialized, materialistic, and consumer-based culture?

Re-framing the respect required for the negotiation between human mind and Nature at large, and moving from bioregionalism to biogenetic structuralism **Michael Winkelman** presents a co-evolution of psychonauts and psychedelics from our primate antecedents to their current *Homo* descendants. Furthermore, Winkelman looks to the future too to identify that the:

common features of shamanism, psychedelic metaphysics and ecopsychology illustrate that they involve common origins. Their commonalities point to a biologically based ecopsychology, one that is the product of human evolution and evolutionary adaptations. These biological bases suggest that shamanic ecopsychology and psychedelic therapies still have relevance for humans today. Our very health and survival as a species may depend on our ability to re-establish these relations with nature.

Not only may our health as a species rely on a reconnection with Nature but maybe, as David Orr notes, by healing the planet we heal ourselves, and **Mark Schroll**,

taking an autobiographical approach to the issue, indicates that nothing less than a transformation of consciousness is required to solve our current ecocrisis. The catalyst for this conversion, Schroll tells us, resides within Nature's most potent plants, because the:

psychedelic experience provides us direct access to universal archetypal truths that transcend the boundaries of culture and the limitations of spacetime. Psychedelic experience allows us to encounter visionary mystical insights about the human condition, Gaia consciousness, deep community and cosmic unity.

Drawing together this overview, if there is an overarching theme here in this special issue, it is that psychedelics – with the right set and setting – can give rise to a sense of deep connection with Nature, which may extend as far as interspecies communication or the formulation and maintenance of an animist worldview, subsequent healing, and ultimately ecocentric activism as opposed to egocentric action. Coming full circle then to my own animistic dialogue with Nature under the influence of a psychedelic plant all those years ago, if there is a metaphor in my own metamorphosis it's that we as a species must change or be changed if we and other species on this planet are to survive. The starting point for that transformation into becoming a part of, rather than apart from, our ecosystem is our own individual consciousness.

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