

## Ecopsychology: Where Does It Fit in Psychology in 2009?

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*On March 26, 1999, I presented a paper, "Ecopsychology: Where does it fit in psychology" at the annual psychology conference at Malaspina University College. I posted the paper on my website and, somewhat to my surprise, it has proven to be quite popular. There have been frequent hits and downloads and it has been posted on other websites, assigned as reading in university courses, and cited in bibliographies.*

*Since 1999 there have been significant changes in our perception of the environmental crisis, notably the increasing salience of climate change and a major increase in public concern about the environment. At the same time, there have been a number of more recent publications related to ecopsychology. As I continue my studies, there has been a growth in my knowledge and understanding and my personal view of ecopsychology has evolved and developed. In the light of all these changes, I have revised and updated the earlier paper.*

Human economic activity is rapidly changing the atmosphere, soil, and water of the earth in ways that are harmful to other species and may be disastrous for us or our descendants.<sup>1</sup> Ecopsychology explores connections between this ecological crisis and the spiritual or psychological crises resulting from our increasing experience of separation from the more-than-human world. Ecopsychology looks for the roots of environmental problems in human psychology and society and for the roots of some personal and social problems in our dysfunctional relationship to the natural world. It is an explicitly moral psychology with the goal of discovering how people can connect with

the natural world in ways that are healthy and sustainable both for people and for the planet.

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## **What ecopsychology is not**

To avoid confusion, it may be important to distinguish between ecopsychology and a number of fields with very similar names or areas of interest. They are all related to ecopsychology to some degree, but there are important differences. Many of these relationships will become clear later in the article.

Environmental psychology. This term refers to the academic study of human-environment relationships. Confusingly, Roger Barker, one of the founders of environmental psychology, referred to his work as ecological psychology.<sup>2</sup> This field has traditionally focused on human-made environments and has influenced architecture and urban planning. In recent years there has been a shift in emphasis toward more consideration of the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Environmental psychology and ecopsychology are separated both by differences in subject matter and by different methodological commitments. While ecopsychology is related to philosophy, spirituality, and psychotherapy, environmental psychology remains mostly committed to the traditions of quantitative research and cognitive-behavioural psychology. Joseph Reser<sup>4</sup> has suggested that the questions asked by ecopsychologists could become more central to environmental psychology. Thus, ecopsychology might be seen as a sub-field of environmental psychology, although this would probably be resisted by many people in both fields.

Conservation psychology. With the creation of a list serve and with symposia at several conferences beginning in 2000, this field detached itself from environmental psychology.<sup>5</sup> By analogy with conservation biology, conservation psychology sees itself as having the specific ethical mission of reducing negative human environmental impacts. Saunders<sup>6</sup> wrote, “Conservation psychology is the scientific study of the reciprocal relationships between humans and the rest of nature, with a particular focus on how to encourage conservation of the natural world.” While the mission is, in many ways, similar to that of ecopsychology, the difference is highlighted by the word “scientific.” For the most part, conservation psychology shares the quantitative and cognitive-behavioural approach of social and environmental psychology, although conservation psychology has been more open than these more traditional fields to qualitative and speculative approaches and to input from other social sciences. In one model of the

social psychology of environmentally significant behaviour,<sup>7</sup> personal motives and existing schema, along with contextual factors, are seen as important in influencing how people deal with the natural environment. Ecopsychology is concerned with motives and schema, so many conservation psychologists would probably see ecopsychology as a sub-field of their discipline. Again, there would probably be resistance to this from both groups.

Ecological psychology. In addition to its use by Barker<sup>8</sup> to describe his work in social and environmental psychology, this term refers to the perceptual and evolutionary theories of James Gibson<sup>9</sup> and others. In the light of the extension of Gibson's theories by philosopher Edward Reed<sup>10</sup> and the perceptual work of Laura Sewell,<sup>11</sup> ecological psychology may be more relevant to ecopsychology than was at first apparent. The phrase "ecological psychology" has also been used as the title of a book about the environment and psychology<sup>12</sup> and another book about energy conservation and recycling.<sup>13</sup>

Human ecology. According to Gerald Young,<sup>14</sup> human ecology is the study of the interrelationships between humans and their environment, drawing on insights from biology, sociology, anthropology, geography, engineering, architecture, landscape architecture, planning, and conservation. Some early workers in the field included biologist Gerald Young and sociologists William Catton and Riley Dunlap, who built on the work of Clifford Geertz, Paul Shepard, E. O. Wilson, and others. While it seems to be primarily environmental sociology, the field has maintained its interdisciplinary character with participation by anthropologists, environmental scientists, landscape architects, and others. Human ecology shares the view of most ecopsychologists that consideration of the human-nature relationship transcends academic disciplines. It differs from ecopsychology in involving more mainstream social and behavioural science and in lacking the therapeutic and individual focus of ecopsychology.

Environmental education. This term refers to teaching/learning about our relationship to the natural world and to many varieties of outdoor education. For the most part, environmental education has been included in the science curriculum in schools or the programs of park naturalists and interpreters, but there have been exceptions. For example, the work of Joseph Cornell<sup>15</sup> stands out as being primarily educational but closely related to ecopsychology. In his approach, called "flow learning," emotional and spiritual connections to nature precede learning and the emphasis is on experiential learning. It will be seen below that some of the earliest practices of ecopsychology took place in a context of environmental education.<sup>16</sup>

Deep ecology. This refers to both a philosophical position (ecosophy) and a social movement.<sup>17</sup> Both as a philosophy and as a movement, deep ecology seems to be distinct from ecopsychology. However, many deep ecologists describe their philosophy as being grounded in their contact with the natural world. This experiential basis of deep ecology is presumably the province of ecopsychology. Some deep ecologists, such as John Seed and Joanna Macy<sup>18</sup> completely blur the distinction by advocating practices that appear to be ecopsychology, but which they call deep ecology.

Ecospirituality. Connection to nature has been a persistent, if minority, activity in most faith communities. Taoism is focused on the human-nature relationship, Buddha achieved enlightenment sitting under a tree, the god of Genesis saw that creation was good, Jesus began his ministry with a trip into the wilderness, and Muslims believe nature is Allah's first revelation. Many indigenous peoples around the world share a spiritual connection to the cosmos and the places in which they live, and an ethics of care arises from that connection. Some Pagan traditions are explicitly nature religions.<sup>19</sup> Joanna Macy's deep ecology is grounded in Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> The writings of Thomas Berry,<sup>21</sup> the creation spirituality of Matthew Fox,<sup>22</sup> and the work of panentheist Christians such as Sally McFague<sup>23</sup> seem closely related, in many ways, to ecopsychology.

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## **What's in a name?**

Several writers have coined words or phrases to describe their work in order to distinguish it from ecopsychology, but the distinctions do not seem to hold up. I consider these fields to be so closely related to ecopsychology that the differences are not important.

Ecotherapy and ecoeducation. These words were coined by Howard Clinebell in his 1996 book, *Ecotherapy*. As far as I can tell, he is writing about ecopsychology as it relates to eclectic psychotherapy and counselling. Clinebell avoids the use of the word "ecopsychology" because he feels it is too narrow. Clinebell wrote, "The focus of this healing and growth work encompasses the total mind-body-spirit relationship organism, not just the psyche . . . my approach is on the application of ecopsychology but also ecobiology and ecospirituality in therapy and education." I believe most ecopsychologists would disagree with Clinebell and see this as an appropriate definition of ecopsychology.

Green psychology. This is the title of a 1999 book by Ralph Metzner. He avoids the term ecopsychology because he does "not mean to

advocate the creation of a new subdiscipline of psychology, to join clinical, social, developmental, and other forms.”<sup>24</sup> His work seems to be in the mainstream of ecopsychology as it is broadly defined below.

Organic psychology. This phrase was coined by Michael J. Cohen<sup>25</sup> to distinguish his practical work from more theoretical aspects of ecopsychology. As will be seen below, Cohen’s work is in the mainstream of applied ecopsychology.

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## History of the definition of ecopsychology

Ecopsychology can be seen as part of a much larger group of contemporary, post-modernist movements including nature writing,<sup>26</sup> fantasy,<sup>27</sup> ecology,<sup>28</sup> deep ecology,<sup>29</sup> transpersonal psychology,<sup>30</sup> economics,<sup>31</sup> Gaia theory,<sup>32</sup> popular education,<sup>33</sup> and systems theory.<sup>34</sup> Ecopsychology has had many roots and predecessors:

1. Daoist philosophy
2. Buddhist philosophy, particularly the practice of mindfulness meditation
3. The various mystical traditions within most religions
4. The romantic movement in Europe
5. The transcendentalist movement in the United States
6. James, Freud, Jung, Gibson, Skinner and other psychologists who have considered the human-nature relationship
7. John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Paul Shepard and other ecologists who have considered the human-nature relationship
8. Ecofeminists
9. Religious and spiritual thinkers, from St. Francis to Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox.
10. Conservation psychologists and behaviourists who have attempted to understand and modify how people behave with respect to the environment.

The immediate precursor of ecopsychology probably occurred in the 1960s when a few teachers began to use wilderness experience as a psychological tool. Wilderness settings were employed in college teaching by Robert Greenway and Art Warmoth for more than 30 years

under the name of "psychoecology."<sup>35</sup> At about the same time, the traveling Leslie College-Audubon Expedition Institute, led by Michael J. Cohen, eventually evolved into Project Nature Connect,<sup>36</sup> one of the first practical applications of ecopsychology

According to Robert Greenway, ecopsychology began a bit later: "In 1989 . . . a former student . . . Elan Shapiro, got together with some friends of his, Mary Gomes and Alan Kanner and a psychotherapist or two, and invited me to come to Berkeley once every two weeks for a discussion of "psychoecology" . . . in 1990 . . . Ted Roszak got wind of the group and asked to attend."<sup>37</sup>

The term ecopsychology and a vision of the field were first publicly articulated by social historian Theodore Roszak in his 1992 book *Voice of the Earth*, although many of the central ideas of ecopsychology can be found in his earlier work<sup>38</sup> and in the work of ecologist Paul Shepard.<sup>39</sup>

More detailed histories of ecopsychology, each from different perspectives, have been published.<sup>40</sup> Interested readers are referred to these articles.

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## **What is ecopsychology today?**

Roszak's original version of ecopsychology could probably better be described as "ecopsychiatry" or "ecops psychoanalysis" than ecopsychology, because he adopted the medical metaphor and the dynamic psychology of Freud and Jung in his conceptualization of the field. In the epilogue of his 1992 book, Roszak gave eight principles of ecopsychology which may be summarized as follows:

1. The core of the mind is the ecological unconscious.
2. The contents of the ecological unconscious represent . . . the living record of evolution.
3. The goal of ecopsychology is to awaken the inherent sense of environmental reciprocity that lies within the ecological unconscious.
4. The crucial stage of development is the life of the child.
5. The ecological ego matures toward a sense of ethical responsibility with the planet.
6. Ecopsychology needs to re-evaluate certain "masculine" character traits that lead us to dominate nature.

7. Whatever contributes to small scale social forms and personal empowerment nourish the ecological ego.
8. There is a synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being.

The first five principles are mostly an acceptance of Jung's analytic psychology and an inversion of Freudian psychoanalysis. The unconscious is recognized while the ethics of the *Superego* are re-defined to accept, rather than reject, messages from the *Id*. Freud's battle between nature and civilization continues, but should end when we create a civilization based on biophilia.<sup>41</sup> Even though the Freudian value system has been reversed, the psychodynamic model survives.

The next two principles tie ecopsychology to the related movements of ecofeminism<sup>42</sup> and bioregionalism.<sup>43</sup> The last principle echoes the primary perspective expressed by many contemporary ecopsychologists.

More recently, the website of the Ecopsychology Institute, California State University at Hayward,<sup>44</sup> founded by Roszak, defined ecopsychology as:

1. The emerging synthesis of ecology and psychology
2. The skilful application of ecological insight to the practice of psychotherapy
3. The study of our emotional bond with the Earth
4. The search for an environmentally-based standard of mental health
5. Re-defining "sanity" as if the whole world mattered.

The heavy dependence of the earlier definition on psychoanalytic concepts is gone, but this description of ecopsychology still leans heavily on a medical model with the emphasis on psychotherapy and the use of the "mental health" and "sanity" metaphors. From another perspective within the medical/psychiatric model, Chellis Glendinning has tied ecopsychology to the psychology of post-traumatic stress disorder and addiction.<sup>45</sup> A Jungian perspective has been provided by Stephen Aizenstat.<sup>46</sup> Ecopsychology has also been related to Gestalt psychology<sup>47</sup> and transpersonal psychology,<sup>48</sup> two of the many schools that arose in reaction to psychoanalysis.

Other writers have tried to avoid the many assumptions and restrictions created by the medical metaphor and the dependence on psychoanalysis or analytic psychology. Instead, they have defined ecopsychology broadly as a field of inquiry rather than as a set of beliefs. Mary Gomes wrote in 1998 that "ecopsychology . . . seeks to understand and heal our relationship with the Earth. It examines the psychological processes that bond us to the natural world or that alienate us from it."<sup>49</sup> Deep ecologist John Seed saw no merit in tying ecopsychology to psychotherapy and took the opposite tack, defining ecopsychology as "psychology in the service of the Earth."<sup>50</sup> Metzner further broadened the definition when he wrote that "ecopsychology, within a systems worldview . . . would have to consider questions traditionally dealt with by philosophers, economists, biologists, theologians, or historians."<sup>51</sup> Andy Fisher echoed this view when he wrote that, "ecopsychology is best thought of as a *project*, in the sense of a large, multifaceted undertaking. This makes room for a great number of perspectives and interests and rules out the idea that ecopsychology will ever resemble a traditional discipline."<sup>52</sup>

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## **An overview of ecopsychology**

Ecopsychology can be seen as spanning a range of questions from ecology through religion, anthropology, sociology, and political economy, to the psychology of individuals. The concerns of ecopsychology are the role of our actions in the global ecological crisis and the effects of our environment (including the crisis) on our psychology. Out of this may come answers to the practical questions of how to change our actions in relation to more-than-human nature and how to overcome the difficulties that may have arisen as a result of our psychological alienation from nature.

1. Experiential learning will help people form a spiritual and emotional connection to the ecological systems of which they are a part. This has included wilderness experiences,<sup>53</sup> experiential exercises to help people reconnect to nature,<sup>54</sup> internet courses and workshops with experiential exercises on how to reconnect with nature,<sup>55</sup> deep ecology workshops for groups,<sup>56</sup> participation in environmental activist groups,<sup>57</sup> and habitat restoration.<sup>58</sup> There may be agreement among ecopsychologists that direct, non-mediated, non-verbal experiences with nature are both therapeutic for the individual having the experience and essential if the person is to become committed to living in harmony with the earth.



There is a perceived need for a language which is non-dualistic or nature-connected.<sup>59</sup>

2. An emphasis on small group, community, and face-to-face contact as a way to change ecologically significant behaviour and establish healthier human relationships. Because of this emphasis on individual or local community change, fields such as transformational learning,<sup>60</sup> community-based social marketing<sup>61</sup> and popular education<sup>62</sup> seem to be consistent with ecopsychological approaches even when they do not share a concern for the experience of nature. Some social psychological approaches to environmentalism have also been effective, but they may be more problematic due to their prior use by the advertising industry.<sup>63</sup>
3. A general agreement that healing the relationship between person and planet must take place on several levels. While the individual's spiritual development is seen as a central aspect of making a connection, family, community, economic, political, and cultural factors are also seen as being significant. In its emphasis on ecology and relationship, ecopsychology seems to reject both dynamic psychology's traditional emphasis on the individual self and scientific psychology's mode of explanation in terms of simple cause-effect relationships.
4. The idea of the "self" in contemporary psychology and culture is inadequate. There seems to be a consensus among ecopsychologists that we need a concept of the self which is relational and inclusive. Various similar concepts have been put forward by different writers, for example Roszak's ecological self, a psyche the size of the earth, the more-than-human self, or the primal matrix.<sup>64</sup>

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## **Ecopsychology and mainstream psychology**

Early ecopsychologists claimed, with some justice, that mainstream psychology had paid very little attention to the human-nature relationship. However, they were not the only ones to notice this deficiency and a process of "greening" psychology has taken place alongside the development of ecopsychology. In 1992, the same year that Roszak coined the word "ecopsychology," Paul Stern published a review of earlier work and provided a theoretical framework in an article entitled "Psychological Dimensions of Global Environmental

Change.” A 1993 paper reviewed behavioural research on environmental preservation.<sup>65</sup> In 1995, the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* had a special issue on “natural psychology” which included an important (for ecopsychology) theoretical article on the restorative benefits of nature.<sup>66</sup> Two books on the psychology of the human-nature relationship were published in 1996.<sup>67</sup> The May, 2000, issue of *American Psychologist* was devoted to psychology and the environment. The field of conservation psychology emerged in 2000.<sup>68</sup>

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## Where does ecopsychology fit?

When Roszak coined the word “ecopsychology,” he was trying to fill a large gap he saw in psychology. Before *Voice of the Earth* in 1992, the pioneers in nature-connecting and experiential environmental education were truly “voices in the wilderness.” However, since then the gap has started to close as the human-nature relationship has become an area of interest to many psychologists and social scientists. Does ecopsychology fit anywhere in psychology or will the gap close completely, crowding it out? Is there something unique about ecopsychology that justifies it continuing as something separate from related disciplines and perspectives?

I think the answer is “yes.” Ecopsychology has the potential for breaking down barriers between many disparate approaches to the human-nature relationship. We can locate ecopsychology at the intersection of three different dimensions, as illustrated in Figure 1, with very fuzzy boundaries between ecopsychology and neighbouring disciplines:

1. Ecopsychology is experiential. This is represented in the front-to-back axis in Figure 1. In its emphasis on mindful and feelingful contact with the natural world, it blends into nature spirituality—what Christian theologian Marcus Borg called “eyes open mysticism.” Moving the other way on the dimension of experience, it blends into the best of experiential environmental education, natural history, and science. We can learn about nature and ecology through attentive contact with the natural world.
2. Ecopsychology is speculative, philosophical, and theoretical. This is represented on the horizontal axis. Building on a foundation of direct experience with nature, ecopsychology is about formulating a language and set of models of the human-nature relationship. On the more objective scientific side it blends into conservation psychology, environmental

psychology, and human ecology. On the more philosophical and speculative side it blends into deep ecology, transpersonal psychology, and the depth psychologies.

3. Ecopsychology has practical applications. This is represented on the vertical axis. Ecopsychology can inform environmental activism as it explores how certain experiences can motivate and inform action in defence of nature. On the other hand, ecopsychology explores how experiences in nature can help prevent or solve human psychological problems, including problems that arise from our abuse of the natural world.



Figure 1. The position of ecopsychology in relation to other sub-disciplines. The boundaries are fuzzy and ecopsychology is informed by all these neighbouring fields.

Perhaps each ecopsychologist (or the same ecopsychologist at different times) can be located on this three-dimensional chart, closer or farther

away from the related fields of study. While this diagram may help define the edges of the field, it does not resolve what might be found at the “core” of ecopsychology, at the centre of the diagram where the axes cross.

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## **The core of ecopsychology**

I suggest that the “unitive” experience of being an essential, interconnected part of a larger reality occupies the core of ecopsychology. While this “peak experience” of interdependence with the rest of the universe defies accurate verbal description, it has been reported often over many centuries in many cultures. David Abram and Andy Fisher, two of the most important writers in the field, have placed experience at the heart of ecopsychology, citing the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>69</sup>

Following a unitive experience in nature, an individual can be led to change in a variety of directions. Thus, without deeply considering the exact nature of these experiences, we can see two questions addressed by ecopsychology:

1. What can ecopsychologists do to facilitate these experiences of rich interconnection with the rest of nature?
2. What are the consequences for the individual and for society of these experiences of being part of nature?

Ecopsychology as a psychology of the direct experience of nature can be related to different philosophies, psychologies, spiritualities, and ways of living. This has only been a framing of ecopsychology within the discipline of psychology. It has been suggested that experiences of unity with nature is a core for ecopsychology, with fuzzy and permeable boundaries between ecopsychology and related fields of psychology, philosophy, and social science. The many pictures that can go in the frame are still being created.

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## Notes

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- 1 Winter and Koger, 2004
- 2 Barker, 1968
- 3 Gifford, 1995
- 4 Reser, 1995
- 5 Saunders & Myers, 2003
- 6 Saunders, 2003
- 7 Clayton & Brook, 2005
- 8 Barker, 1968
- 9 James Gibson, 1950, 1986
- 10 Edward Reed, 1996
- 11 Laura Sewell, 1995, 1999
- 12 Winter, 1996
- 13 Howard, 1997
- 14 Young, 1984
- 15 Cornell, 1998; Cornell & Deranja, 1994
- 16 Cohen, 1978; Greenway, 1999
- 17 Devall & Sessions, 1985
- 18 Macy & Brown, 1998
- 19 York, 2003
- 20 Macy, 1991
- 21 Berry, 1999
- 22 Matthew Fox, 1983
- 23 Sally McFague. 1997
- 24 Metzner, 1999
  
- 25 Cohen, 2003
- 26 e.g., Dillard, 1975; Lopez, 1979
- 27 e.g., Quinn, 1992
- 28 e.g., Leopold, 1949; Shepard, 1982
- 29 e.g., Naess, 1983; Devall & Sessions, 1985
- 30 e.g., Fox, 1990; Hillman & Ventura, 1992; Metzner, 1999
- 31 e.g., Daly & Cobb, 1989
- 32 Lovelock, 1979
- 33 Clover, Follen, & Hall, 2000; Freire, 1990

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- 34 e.g., Bateson, 1972; Capra, 1997  
35 Greenway, 1999  
36 Cohen, 1978, 1988  
37 Greenway, 1999  
38 Roszak, 1979  
39 Shepard, 1982  
40 Greenway, 1999; Hibbard, 2003; Schroll, 2007; Scull, 1999  
41 Fromm, 1964; Wilson, 1984  
42 e.g., Griffin, 1995  
43 e.g., Snyder, 1995  
44 Ecopsychology Online, 1999  
45 Glendinning, 1994  
46 Aizenstat, 1995  
47 Cahalan, 1995; Swanson, 1995, 2001  
48 Metzner, 1999  
49 Mary Gomes, 1998  
50 Seed, 1994  
51 Metzner, 1999  
52 Fisher, 2002  
53 Adams, 1966; Greenway, 1995; Harper, 1995  
54 Swanson, 2001  
55 Cohen, 1997  
56 Macy & Brown, 1998  
57 O'Conner, 1995  
58 Shapiro, 1995  
59 Greenway, 1995; Cohen, 1997  
60 Clover, Follen, & Hall, 2000  
61 McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999  
62 Freire, 1990  
63 Stern, 1992  
64 Roszak, 1992; Hillman, 1995; Conn, 1995; Glendinning, 1994  
65 Dwyer, Leeming, Cobern, Porter, & Jackson, 1993  
66 Gifford, 1995; Kaplan, 1995  
67 Clinebell, 1996; Winter, 1996  
68 Oskamp, 2000; Saunders, 2003  
69 Abram, 1996; Fisher, 2002