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Sanity, the Psyche, and the Spotted Owl

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How often do we come across reports like this?

”Washington D.C., March 8, 1997. Reviving a lawsuit over the Northwestern spotted owl, a Federal Appeals Court cleared the way yesterday for a new timber industry challenge to logging reductions that President Clinton ordered three years ago. Clinton’s plan was intended to protect old-growth forests inhabited by the spotted owl, which was declared an endangered species in 1990.”

Another hard-fought struggle to preserve a threatened natural beauty from destruction. The environmentalists involved are of course fighting with whatever they have, in this case the Endangered Species Act, the workhorse of the movement. But perhaps it is time to admit that the spotted owl has served the environmental cause beyond the call of duty - and not always in ways the public can appreciate. How many Americans understand that the species listed in the Endangered Species Act are not there as isolated animals, but as guardians of entire ecosystems? How well have environmentalists done the job of showing that assaults upon the remotest wilderness endanger human beings as much as any other species? Physically, morally, and emotionally we are woven into the web of life with old-growth redwoods and rainforests and dying lakes and polluted rivers. We need them, not simply as a matter of intelligent resource management, but for the good of our souls. The same toxins that kill them run in our blood, the ugliness of their suffering afflicts our eye, for all we know images of their dire fate haunt our dreams. And surely children who grow into life without knowing wild nature will be less than fully human.

If that seems hard to believe, find a copy of the remarkable photographic study *Clearcut: The Tragedy of Industrial Forestry* (edited by Bill Devall for Sierra Club Books and Earth Island Press, 1993). Sit down with the book and read through as much as you can before your eyes fill with tears. *Clearcut* was intended to be an environmental report. It is that, but it is also a psychological document. What you see in these heart-breaking photos of butchered redwoods is a picture of the human soul. Perusing the volume, I was reminded of the famous Oscar Wilde story *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the tale of a young man who kept himself beautiful by visiting his sins of debauchery and cruelty upon a portrait that he kept hidden in the attic. *Clearcut* is the portrait we are keeping hidden in our psychological attic. While ecopsychology certainly has its place in the practice of private therapy, some of us in this movement are also working toward a more public and political objective. What we seek is to integrate ecologists, psychologists, and therapists into a new profession that

has a clear environmental purpose. When we say that we are out to redefine sanity, that goal may seem abstruse. It isn't. "Sanity" is a hard legal term. It is used in courts of law to prosecute, fine, issue injunctions, incarcerate or let free. If environmentalists are to use the term with legal effect, we must have a professional consensus as powerful as the consensus that has grown up around the realization that "dysfunctional families" can damage the mental health of their members. That conclusion can now be taken into a court of law to warrant official intervention in families, even to the point of removing children from abusive parents.

Thirty years ago, when the Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing was insisting that the corrupted "politics of the family" was driving people crazy, he was considered a maverick. Now his ideas and those of other family therapists are being used in court rooms across America - and can even be heard echoing through most of what the television talk-shows are telling the nation every day about abusive families. As tawdry and sensational as such tabloid material can become, it nevertheless represents a widely-shared insight into the broader, interpersonal context of mental health.

Can the concept of dysfunctional environmental relations become similarly familiar? Can we develop an environmentally-based definition of mental health tight enough to find a place in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual - the American Psychiatric Association's official listing of neuroses?

If so, we might make such a definition available to environmental activists and lawyers as a basis for legal action and to government as the basis for policy.

For example, ecopsychologists might be able to argue persuasively that any institution, practice, or policy that diminishes ecological biodiversity is a direct assault upon the mental health of a neighborhood, community, bioregion, or the human species as a whole - and for that reason the activity must be stopped and an alternative found. The project could be made very specific. It would mean amending the Wilderness Act of 1964 to include the word "psychological" in the definition of "wilderness" as any area that contains "ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value."

Here is an excerpt from the Dedication of *Clearcut*:

This book is in memory of the plantlife, birds, insects, animals, and indigenous cultures that have been driven to extinction by the greed and delusion of human arrogance. All of us in the Industrial Growth Society must take the responsibility for this condition ... We must try to visualize extinction and learn to understand accurately how certain patterns of human behavior lead to the extinction of species. We do have the ability to enrich, not impoverish, our lives and the planet wherein we dwell.

Notice the language:

”greed, delusion and arrogance ...”

What are these but emotions that work at that secret level of the mind which is the special province of psychotherapy?

”to understand patterns of human behavior ...”

Is that not what psychology was invented to do?

The Ecopsychology Institute has been in touch with environmental lawyers who believe that having a hard, psychological consensus behind such legal categories as ”behavioral evidence” would be an invaluable contribution to their cause. It might be a better legal strategy than relying so exclusively on the Endangered Species Act. There is reason to believe that the endangered species approach is proving to be less and less persuasive with the public, which often cannot see its stake in the issue. Offering the environmental lawyers a body of well-researched, behavioral evidence would be the work of the academic psychologists; offering them a useful connection with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual would be the work of the therapists. Making an environmentally-based definition of mental health work in the policy-making arena is the task of environmental activists and scientists. Getting the whole job done involves creating a profession that commands respect when it speaks to both environmental and psychological issues. That profession is called ecopsychology.

The contribution below is a small sample of the effort we have made to inspire a dialogue between ecopsychology and environmental law. It is a magisterial paper by James Thornton, former senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, that comes close to being a definitive survey of the legal issues surrounding environmental sanity. We hope it will lead to further discussion.

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