

Applied Ecopsychology: The Unusual Language of Michael J. Cohen

John Scull

John Scull has had a long career as both a clinical neuropsychologist and as an environmental activist. He has been studying and practicing ecopsychology since he returned from a CUSO placement in the Solomon Islands in 1994. He lives in Maple Bay on Vancouver Island and is currently a director of the Land Trust Alliance of British Columbia and the Cowichan Community Land Trust. He may be contacted at jscull@island.net.

Permission Exercise

Go to something in nature that you like, that you find attractive. A park, a backyard, an aquarium, or a potted plant will do. When you get to it, notice how you feel. Can you thank it for your good feelings?

Now, treat this area fairly, with respect, as an equal or friend. Don't bully it, instead gain its consent for you to visit and enjoy it. Ask this natural area for its permission for you to be there. Doing this increases your sensitivity to the area. Ask it if it will help you learn from it. You cannot learn if you are going to injure or destroy it, or if you. Wait for about half a minute. Look for adverse signals of danger such as thorns, bees, cliff faces, etc. If the area still feels attractive, or becomes more attractive, you have gained its consent. If this portion of the natural area you visit no longer feels attractive, simply select another natural part that attracts you and repeat this process. Do this until you find an area where a safe attraction feeling remains for 10 seconds, then thank it.

Once you have gained an area's consent, compare how you feel about being there now with how you felt about it when you first arrived. Has any change occurred? ...Write down important things you learned from this activity.

From M. J. Cohen. 1997. *Reconnecting with Nature: Finding Wellness through Restoring Your Bond with the Earth*. Corvallis, OR: Ecopress, p. 22.

Michael J. Cohen is one of the pioneers of outdoor environmental education and ecopsychology. In the 1950s he started a long career as an environmental educator, he has written six books, and, now in his 70s, he is still supervising students, teaching email courses, and leading workshops. His website¹ has managed to attract students from around the world to a process he variously calls "applied ecopsychology,"

“webstring science,” “integrated ecology,” or “Project NatureConnect.” His unconventional approach, aggressive self-promotion, and often obscure language have, perhaps, limited his influence in academic circles.

My personal journey into his program began in 1998 when I very skeptically took Cohen’s online Orientation Course. The course was interesting and enjoyable enough that I signed up for the next email course, based on his book *Reconnecting with Nature*.² About half way through that course I finally “got it” and began experiencing what Cohen calls Nameless Intelligent Attractive Love (NIAL). Since overcoming my “deNIAL,” I have taken the more advanced email courses based on his books *Well Mind Well Earth*³ and *Connecting with Nature*,⁴ attended workshops and courses with Cohen at his home on San Juan Island, led my own “nature meditations” and workshops based on his work, and incorporated many of his activities and ideas into my practice of clinical psychology.

I have found Cohen to be a gifted teacher and group leader. His internet courses, featuring interaction among small groups of students, were enjoyable, rewarding, and ecologically friendlier than traveling to attend workshops. For a long time I was repelled and confused by his strange uses of the English language and the seemingly chaotic nature of his thought. I have come to understand that Cohen’s language has a pedagogical, rather than an explanatory, purpose. Cohen’s role is more that of a coach than that of a teacher or philosopher. He tries to use language to shake students out of habitual modes of thought so they will be more open to the lessons of nature.

I have also come to realize that beneath the idiosyncratic language, confusing website, corny jokes, and surprising metaphors, Cohen provides a practical experiential process for gaining deep understanding of our place in nature. His work has led him to a sound and profound theory of the relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world. Cohen’s process works for many people, and his ideas make a good deal of sense in terms of contemporary science and philosophy.

I am going to try to “explain” some of Michael Cohen’s central ideas. Cohen himself refuses to explain these things because he believes the answers are to be found out in nature and not in his explanations. Cohen would suggest that you spend some time outdoors in a natural area with these ideas, or take one of the on-line courses and see if the ideas fit with what you experience. In the box at the beginning of this article is the “Permission Activity,” the beginning of Cohen’s program and the foundation for all his later activities. I will be referring to this activity

throughout the article. I recommend that the reader, preferably with one or more partners, do the activity before continuing.

Cohen's jargon is a barrier for many people who might otherwise be interested in his work. For people who understand his process, his words can provide a specialized language for communicating with each other. Unfortunately, it also serves to exclude the uninitiated. In what follows I will try to express some of Cohen's key concepts in plain English.

Overview: The Natural Systems Thinking Process

The early exercises in Cohen's program are aimed at helping people learn to recognize the reality of sensory attractions and quiet the voice of the Wrangler (see below) in their heads. As they become skilled in the use of nature-connected language, they come into progressively closer contact with the ways nature works, described by Cohen's acronyms—NIAL for "Nameless Intelligent Attractive Love" and the NSTP for "Natural Systems Thinking Process."

By going to nature with questions, according to Cohen, we learn to think and feel the way nature thinks and feels. We learn lessons about natural systems—interconnectedness, mutualism, sensory contact, transience, diversity, unity, and so on. There is really no limit to the depth and breadth of what we can learn from nature. Each guided experience in nature, in addition to having its own special content, helps us to recognize our sensory attractions and overcome our resistance to following them. As a result, we are better able to learn with each successive activity. This developmental process in which our understanding of NSTP is deepened, layer by layer, is the essence of Cohen's applied ecopsychology.

In his years of teaching, Cohen has prepared, tested, and published more than 200 different exercises. These can be found on his website and in three of his books, *Reconnecting with Nature*, *Well Mind Well Earth*, and *Connecting with Nature*. There is nothing unique about any of these activities; they merely set up a question, nature provides the answers, and post-activity conversation or email discussions help the student assimilate the experience. This is the experiential essence of Cohen's process. He believes a deep understanding of ecology should be grounded in sensory experience—based on "self evidence" rather than on logic or theory. In the course of doing the exercises, participants develop specific skills in "nature-connected language and thinking" in addition to generally deepening their knowledge of, and connection to, the natural world. Participants learn how to talk about

their own experiences using sensory language and listen to others' experiences without critical analysis. Besides connecting individuals to nature, this process connects the human community together and a strong bond is often formed among participants in Project NatureConnect programs. Groups functioning according to the NSTP are usually peaceful, co-operative, and fulfilling for all the members.

Key Concepts

An explanation of Cohen's process for connecting with nature entails dealing with five key concepts in addition to the Natural Systems Thinking Process. *Webstrings* describe the sensory attractions underlying both ecology and nature-connecting. Cohen has four concepts in his explanation of the psychological separation from nature: *Tropicmaking* describes the process by which people have become bonded to technology, with a consequent separation from nature. *Old Brain* describes the process of sensory thinking while *New Brain* describes post-literate, dualistic thinking. Cohen's process involves temporarily overcoming this dualism by bringing old-brain sensory experiences into the new-brain linguistic system. The *Wrangler* graphically describes the inner voice of our nature-disconnected culture.

Webstrings

Cohen's key concept is that of "Webstrings." The word begins as a metaphor from the "web of life" activity⁵ used by Cohen and many other environmental educators. In this game people stand in a circle and each person takes on the role of a plant, animal, or physical feature of the earth. One person then takes a ball of string, describes a connecting relationship to another natural being, holds the thread, and sends the string to the person representing that being. The process is repeated until the group is richly connected by a "web" of string which provides a model of the interactions in an ecosystem. The properties of the web are then explored by having participants pull their threads, drop some threads, drop all their threads, cut threads, etc. This educational activity often leads to interesting and provocative discussions and a deeper appreciation of the interconnected nature of nature.

The Web of Life model is a metaphor for ecological systems, showing graphically how the actions of one species or one abiotic feature touch and affect all the others and how each individual depends on the whole web. It is similar to the Net of Indra, where each knot is a jewel reflecting every other jewel. Once someone has played the Web of Life Game, the word "Webstrings" evokes a whole range of images, experiences, and ideas including memories of the fun, laughter,

confusion, and insights from playing this game with different groups of children and adults. It provides a grounded and experiential basis for the understanding of abstract terms such as “interbeing” or “interdependence”.

There is more to Cohen’s “Webstring” model than just this metaphor. Cohen has gone beyond the metaphor and asked about the physical reality being modeled by the game. What are the physical bonds being represented by the string in the Web of Life Game? In terms of scientific ecology, the strings might represent energy exchanges. In Cohen’s ecology the strings represent the exchange of information between organisms. Living beings are interconnected with other beings by their senses. All animals and plants have senses, sensitivities, or perceptions which connect them to their biotic and abiotic surroundings, and these sensitivities are represented by the webstrings. Consciousness is seen by Cohen as residing, to different degrees, in all living beings, with each being conscious of those aspects of its environment which, in the course of evolution, have been important to its survival. For plants and animals to behave adaptively, the energy resources studied by ecology must be detected in the form of sensitivity to the environmental indicators of those resources. Cohen claims that humans have inherited 53 senses⁶ from their evolutionary and cultural past; senses necessary for survival. Thus, for the word “Webstring,” he can substitute a word like “sensation” or “sensory experience” or “sensitivity,” gaining a bit of precision but losing the metaphor of the web of life game. The concept has become one of “senses/webstrings.”

Cohen then introduces another layer of meaning—if senses/webstrings are the stuff that holds the web of life together, they must pull at each other. Senses/webstrings draw organisms into contact with the web. There are other words for being drawn—affinity, attraction, pull, allure, enticement, appeal, call, liking, love, tropism, and so on—Cohen has chosen “attraction.” The entire biosphere, from micro-organisms to redwood trees, is seen by Cohen as being held together by attractions/senses/webstrings. Without senses or sensitivities, entities would not be able to experience attractions. Without attractions, they would not be participants in an ecosystem. Just as the solar system is held together by mutual gravitational attraction, an ecosystem is held together by mutual sensory attraction.

Thus, it follows from Cohen’s work that all things exist only in relation to other things and that everything is interdependent through a web of mutual attractions. Attractions/senses/webstrings seem to be closely related to Ervin Laszlo’s “subtle energy” that may underlie the other attractive forces in the universe.⁷ A synonym for attraction and caring is

“love.” Cohen claims that by being in nature and being mindful, we can directly experience this love. To achieve this, the Permission Activity begins by instructing the participant to pay attention to, and follow, his or her attractions. This is not as simple and straightforward as it seems and most participants in nature-connecting activities have difficulty recognizing their own sensory attractions, free of culture-based value judgments.

The psychological disconnection from nature

Cohen’s understanding is that “nature” includes all of human physiology and social life. Human feelings, contact with other humans, and contact with human-built technology are viewed as sensory events just like contact with more-than-human nature. Yet his applied ecopsychology is aimed at connecting or reconnecting us with nature, implying that we are somehow disconnected. Cohen sees the “disconnection” as beginning to arise at two points in human (pre)history, leading away from the world of nature towards, first, the world of artifacts, and then towards the world of ideas. The two forms of psychological alienation from nature reinforce each other.

Tropicmaking

Humans evolved in tropical Africa where they invented a few tools for fishing, hunting, and digging. Some of them migrated to Eurasia and beyond. As they moved into temperate zones they needed new technologies such as clothing, fire, and shelters to make the world resemble their tropical homeland. Invention, not adaptation, became the key to survival. Later, ice ages, increasing population, conflict, and other factors led to improved housing and clothing, defence, food storage, agriculture, and so on. This tendency to modify the outside world to maintain homeostasis has continued to the present day. Thus, most of the human-built environment, while it is certainly the result of natural processes, serves to separate and shield us from nature. We are like people who have been raised in a closet built by our ancestors. When we do actually go out into an environment which was not built by humans, we are limited in our ability to recognize, understand, or appreciate what we find there. We become frightened, bored, or uncomfortable and retreat back to our closets.

Old Brains and New Brains

A further psychological separation from nature came later in history than tropicmaking and arose from the use of dualistic language.

Cohen's "Old Brain Language" talks about sensory experiences in the present tense. This sensory language is spoken by non-human beings as well as by humans. We humans usually use words, but words are not always necessary. Many artists, musicians, and poets use a great deal of this language, as do some descriptive and narrative nature writers. The arts can provide the human languages of sensory connection.

"New Brain Language" talks about language, so it is disconnected from sensory experience (and hence, disconnected from attractions). It is always symbolic and verbal. It results from our being bonded more to words than to experiences. It is the language of logic, argument, criticism, and discussion. Higher education in our culture focuses on gaining proficiency in this abstract, disconnected language.

Cohen's idea about how this dualistic language arose is the same as David Abram's⁸ suggestion that it is the result of literacy. In a non-literate culture, spoken words are sensory events to be experienced in time, not objects in space, open to study and analysis. Pre-literate language is usually about experience; with widening literacy language increasingly refers to previous language. Once reading and writing have been mastered, words become objects and stories that may persist in time and that can move from place to place. The words of philosophers began as events about which people could tell stories. Once the words were written down they became objects which students could study and criticize. Literacy and the consequent analytic language has been a great benefit to human communication and thought, but as Abram says, it has also taken the magic out of the world. In non-literate societies, as in Cohen's old brain world, every being and object speaks. In literate, new brain societies, only humans and ink-on-paper, or pixels on a computer screen, speak.

Once we have acquired literacy we cannot turn off our literate, analytical mind and its attraction to reason. We do not forget how to ride a bicycle, but we do not need to ride every bicycle we see. Literacy is a more compelling skill: We cannot usually look at a printed word without reading it. Thus, connecting with nature cannot be a matter of becoming de-literate. Instead, it is a matter of bringing our sensory experiences into our analytical language. Cohen's activities are structured to let this happen. People go out in nature, then they gather back together (in person or on the internet) and share their experiences using sensory, nature-connected language. This serves to bring sensory experience to the attention of the "new brain" of analytic thought. Nature connecting is not a matter of doing away with analytic thought, it is a matter of informing it with sensory experiences and, through them, learning how nature itself "thinks."

In the Permission Activity, the participant is invited, through asking permission and expressing gratitude, to enter psychologically into a reciprocal and egalitarian relationship with the natural world. The instructions are written to the “new brain,” the exercise directs us to attend to our “old brain” feelings before and after asking permission, and then to explain, in writing, these ideas to the “new brain.” Cohen’s ecopsychology seeks connection with both nature outside and with the nature inside ourselves.

The Wrangler

“The Wrangler” is Cohen’s colourful name for the “voice” of nature-disconnected culture. It is similar to Freud’s “Superego,” the “Parent” of Transactional Analysis, or the “Dysfunctional Beliefs” of Cognitive therapies. The Wrangler is the internal, authoritative voice of our tropicmaking, literate, new brain, dualistic society.

A dictionary⁹ gives two meanings for the transitive verb “wrangle”: “1. to obtain by persistent arguing, 2. to herd and care for (livestock and esp. horses) on the range.” Cohen’s Wrangler seems to be a combination of both meanings—it keeps us corralled by arguing with us, and like wrangler (2), it claims to keep us in the corral for our own safety and care.

The Wrangler is at the very foundation of dualistic Western philosophy. Not long after the Greek alphabet was invented, Plato wrote how Phaedrus asked Socrates why he almost never ventured out beyond the walls of Athens to wander in the open countryside. Socrates answered, “I am a lover of knowledge, and the men who dwell in the city are my teachers, and not the trees or the country.”¹⁰ The Wrangler, like Socrates, tells us that there is nothing to learn from trees and open country, only from other people. The analytic mind declared its hegemony at the beginning of literate society. Cohen follows the lead of contemporary empirical science in rejecting this Platonic view but he does not join science in often valuing the dualistic work of the theorist above that of the observer or experimentalist.

Disobedience to the Wrangler can lead to punishment from anxiety, guilt, anger, or a feeling of “wasting time.” The Wrangler exerts control by telling nature-disconnected cultural “stories” in which we are actors. The Wrangler creates bonds and attractions with cultural values and artifacts, distracting us from sensory contact with nature, other people, and our own bodies. The Wrangler creates a verbal and physical reality and code of conduct inconsistent with the enjoyment of sensory experiences, following attractions, or learning from nature. Whenever there are thoughts about getting out of the corral, the Wrangler argues

us back in or rewards us for staying behind the fence. The Permission Activity draws our attention to the Wrangler telling us that nature is not deserving of the common courtesy and respect we would show to another human being.

Conclusion

Beneath Cohen's colourful language—webstrings, tropicmaking, new brains, old brains, and the wrangler—is a model of our connection with the rest of the natural world. His view of ecology will be familiar to many deep ecologists, wilderness therapists, trackers, and ecopsychologists and Cohen does not claim to have a new theory. Instead, he refers to his work as a “process” which helps people come into contact with nature and integrate these experiences into their everyday thinking. There are several unusual qualities to Cohen's activities: They can be done briefly and near home. Done with others, either in person or on the internet, his nature-connected communication builds community with both the human and the more-than-human world. Nature is the teacher, and participants in his programs often reach common understandings surprisingly consistent with both scientific ecology and mystical spiritual practice. The deepening connection with nature fostered by the process leads naturally to a life that is more in harmony with nature.

Cohen has been one of the pioneers of ecopsychology, teaching a process by which each of us can discover and validate our own understanding from our experience of nature. He provides a path to a sensory and experiential understanding of our place in the natural world, our place in community, and of the natural world to be found inside each of us. Cohen's activities create “moments that let earth teach.”

References

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Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary. 1971. Toronto: Thomas Allen & Son Limited

Notes

¹ <http://www.ecopsych.com>

² Cohen, M. J. 1997. *Reconnecting with Nature: Finding wellness through restoring your bond with the earth*. Corvallis, OR: Ecopress.

³ Cohen, M. J. 1997. *Well mind well Earth: 97 environmentally sensitive activities for stress management, spirit, and self-esteem*. Roche Harbor, WA: World Peace University Press.

⁴ Cohen, M. J. 1989. *Connecting with Nature: Creating moments that let Earth teach*. Eugene, OR: World Peace University.

⁵ See, for example, Clover, D. E., S. Follen, and B. Hall. 2000. *The Nature of Transformation: Environmental adult education*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

⁶ A list of the 53 senses is available in Cohen 1997, pp 48–40. His list includes many items that most psychologists would probably describe as perceptions rather than sensations, but Cohen's point, like everything he writes, is pedagogical: That we have more senses than we think we do.

⁷ Laszlo, E. 1996. *The whispering pond: A personal guide to the emerging vision of science*. Boston: Element.

⁸ Abram, D. 1996. *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York: Vintage Books.

⁹ *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*. 1971. Toronto: Thomas Allen & Son Limited.

¹⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, translated by B. Jowett, widely available on the internet.