

**Ecopsychology:  
Reconnecting with Nature  
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### **Ecopsychology: Reconnecting with Nature**

I couldn't sleep. For the first time in a long time, I had stepped out of the comfort zone I had made of my life in Texas and into an unfamiliar territory. I lay awake on the tattered brown couch near the window of a dense, Oregon landscape. As I watched my thoughts pass by like clouds, oblivious to the low hums of music still playing in the background, I felt the stroke of a familiar hand on my face. The gentleness in her touch and recognizable long fingers could be none other than my best friend, Ivory. She leaned over the couch. Her thick, red curls were wrapped in a hand-knit, yellow, scarf. "Let's go to the top of Mount Tabor and watch the sun rise," she said. Her penetrating blue eyes stared into mine, pulling me up from my seat. She then handed me a yellow overcoat that, appropriately, matched the scarf she was wearing and we headed out the door.

The spring air was crisp. I shoved my hands into my coat pockets to keep warm. White flowers cascaded from the branches of cherry trees as we followed the paved roads to the extinct volcano, now a 196 acre park in the middle of south-east Portland. Upon entering the park, the smell of wet fir and pine trees flooded my senses with an aroma so unlike the smell of the oak and mesquite trees I had grown accustomed to in Texas. Suddenly, the sound of pounding feet startled us. When I turned to see what was approaching at such rapid speed, a group of runners passed by. A young man, no older than 21years, slowed for a brief moment to greet us. "Beautiful morning," he said, smiling. I nodded in agreement. He then picked up his speed and joined the group ahead. *Nature seems to have an inspiring, infectious feeling today*, I thought.

Before long, we reached the trail-head and began our 20 minute ascent up the mountainside. Silence. The trees were watching, the wind whispering to us to follow. As I

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trudged up the trail, my mind became a silent reverie lost in the moment. Ivory was also quiet – absorbing the subtle hints of morning rain dripping from the canopy of Douglas firs onto her pale, freckled cheeks. With each step, I began to notice things I had never paid attention to before. A stone, which would have been meaningless to me in the past, glistened in a patch of English ivy. As I untangled it from the vines, I remembered a friend, Lakota Indian, who once told me that - in his tradition - stones were actually “stone people” and the history of our land was recorded within them. He said to listen to the stones and observe our surroundings - as what we see on the outside is a reflection of what is happening on the “inside” as well. Before that day, I didn’t realize that he was talking about our connection with the Earth.

We reached the top of the mountain. As we sat at the edge of the overlook and gazed upon the orange and red hues of morning light that graced Mt. Hood in the distance, a strange and beautiful feeling came over me. The birds, normally so distant from my daily thoughts, became a part of my soul. Song sparrows, robins, and crows joined together in an ensemble of joy, slowly voicing their song with the rising sun. The wind, blowing wildly through the leaves, swirled around me, opening my heart in the ecstasy of its arrival. A few drops of rain mimicked the tears that ran down my cheeks. Alive again! “Do you know what this means?” I asked my friend in a confirming voice – so as to reiterate what she already knew.

“Yes,” she said, “and this is a gift that nature has shared with you.” Her face was illuminated like the sun rising through the clouds - transforming my tears into laughter.

This was the first experience I had of a deeply, heart-felt communion with nature since childhood. It was this connection, on the top of Mt. Tabor, that lured me on the path of ecopsychology and prompted me to explore the importance that nature plays in our lives.

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Ecopsychology considers the connection between our self and the rest of nature to be essential to mental, and thus, ecological health (Ammel & Manning, 2009, p.14). In one way, ecopsychology offers a way to view the connection between the Earth and humans as symbiotic. Studies by Robert Ulrich have provided empirical evidence of the healing properties nature, and of the benefits being exposed to natural surroundings, has on a person's physiological health. Various studies show that being in and around nature reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, and even speeds recovery time for individuals who are ill and have a room with "view" vs. those without exposure to nature of any kind (Kweon et al., 2008, p.356).

Additional evidence shows that our relationship with the environment, as an adult, stems from our attachment patterns developed in early infancy. If our early experiences are mostly positive, and we have developed the capacity to relate, we are able to create meaningful attachments (including with nature) and thus, have the ability to regulate our emotional world and maintain good mental health (Jordan, 2009, p.27).

Without the acknowledgment that the earth is a necessary extension of ourselves, and that we have been depleting it of its natural resources, we are not only in danger of losing the land in which we are inherently reliant upon, but we are endangering our overall physical and psychological health as well. For that reason, the therapeutic goal of ecopsychology is to awaken the inherent sense of environmental reciprocity that lies within the ecological unconscious, healing the alienation of person and planet (Jordan, 2009, p.27). If one experience in nature provided me with a sense of peace and appreciation, I am interested to know if ecotherapies can do the same for others, and possibly sustain this feeling of health and well-being.

### **Defining our Connection**

Since my experience on Mt. Tabor, I have struggled to find, not only the right words to express my experience, but a path that acknowledged and integrated the healing benefits and innate connection between humanity and the natural world. As an undergraduate student in psychology, I began to investigate ways in which nature could be incorporated into a therapeutic practice. Nearly a year ago, while searching the web for graduate schools, I came across two educational programs that offered integrative approaches of “healing through nature”: Naropa University’s low-residency MA program in Transpersonal Psychology with an Ecopsychology concentration, and Project NatureConnect’s online program of *Natural Attraction Ecology*.

When I found Dr. John Davis, a lean man with short, unkempt, russet hair that complimented his light brown eyes and studious glasses, I was intrigued by his debonair appearance. As professor and director of Naropa University’s MA program in Boulder, Colorado and staff member of the School of Lost Borders, I imagined that his graying facial hair and button up dress shirt distinguished him from his students. On the Naropa University website, beneath his picture, was an impressive biography and email address that, ultimately, became an opportunity for me to contact him regarding ecopsychology.

Davis graciously accepted my request for an interview and, by email, responded with a brief introduction of his work in the field, “Before the term [ecopsychology] was used, I taught stress management programs. I recognized that I went to nature - backyard or wilderness - to manage my own stress. Also, wilderness experiences were powerful transformative experiences for me. When the term ecopsychology began to be used, it fit for me.” In the 1980s, Davis was an activist in preventing nuclear war. After the Cold War ended, he recognized that

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environmental destruction was an enormous threat to human life and especially to children (Davis, 2009). “My work with environmental action also fit well with what I understood ecopsychology to be,” he added. After graduating with a BA in Psychology at Wake Forest University, Davis continued his education at Naropa University and, in 1977, obtained a Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology at the University of Colorado. Since then, he has been teaching, developing, and implementing various programs that promote and encourage healing through personal growth and our natural environment.

A successful introduction with John Davis inspired me to contact Dr. Michael Cohen, the creator, director, and teacher of Project NatureConnect’s Applied Ecopsychology on-line courses and degree programs. When I called Dr. Cohen one early Sunday morning, I did not expect an answer. After only two short rings, he surprised me with an energetic greeting and was more than eager to provide information about his program of *Natural Attraction Ecology*. Michael, as he preferred to be called, has an extensive background in natural ecology. Since 1959, Cohen has committed his life to living, learning and teaching in nature. While leading a group, in 1966, near the Colorado River in Grand Canyon National Park, he had a transformational experience during a freak thunderstorm (Cohen, 2009). “The profound geological effects of that storm on the landscape convinced me that the Earth and I both acted homeostatically, and there was nothing that I did that it couldn’t do, except be literate. It therefore had to be alive, since I knew I was, and we were identical,” Cohen said about his experiences in nature that encouraged him on the path that he still walks today.

His enthusiasm and intrigue in the subject and desire to spread the message of our innate connection with the Earth motivated him to email me several links (over 60 pages) of dissertations, books and articles he has written over the years to assist in answering my

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questions. With a degree in Biology, MA in teaching and a Ph.D. in Applied Ecopsychology, Natural Attraction Ecology, and Environmental Psychology, he has a wealth of knowledge about the natural world. Nevertheless, when it came down to the actual interviews, both Davis and Cohen were neck and neck with imparting, what they consider to be, important information on the topic of ecopsychology and the perspectives in which they hold to teach others along the way.

The concept behind ecopsychology is not new. Yet, like my own struggle to convey the experience I had with nature by defining the connection, there is a continuing debate of what ecopsychology means on a personal level. “In its simplest conception, an ‘eco-psychology’ places psychology in its ecological and biospheric context” (Doherty, 2009, p. 2). Both Davis and Cohen believe in the interconnectedness of person and planet. For Davis, ecopsychology is “a seamless connection between humans and the natural world. Both arise from the same source,” he explains; “there is a mutual contribution of ecology and psychology that manifests through two sides of ecopsychology” (Davis, 2009). He describes these two sides as a dialect between both fields where, together, they: 1) bring the healing and growth potentials of direct contact with nature into psychotherapy and human development and 2) bring more psychological sophistication to environmental action (Davis, 2009).

Although Cohen agrees with Davis when he says, “The human mind, body and spirit are a seamless continuum of nature’s life-giving flow in, through and around us,” he also adds, “humanity alone thinks and feels through literate and abstract stories that are foreign to nature. Ecopsychology is an investigation of the relationship and the adverse effects of human stories that demean nature’s self-organizing and self-correcting intelligence” (Cohen, 2009). Despite the

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subtle differences in opinion, it appears that most ecopsychologists, including Davis and Cohen, agree that direct contact with nature is healing.

Ecotherapy, a form of healing through nature, is currently being viewed as “critical” for therapists to incorporate into their practice when dealing with some of the catastrophic earth-related disasters that have caused psychological damage to individuals (Berger & McLeod, 2006, p.80). Davis, who leads wilderness rites of passage trips and trains wilderness rites of passage guides through the School of Lost Borders, agrees that ecotherapy works because, “nature reflects or mirrors our wholeness and inner coherence. It also helps the tension, agitation, and defensiveness of the ego relax while promoting fascination, curiosity and love” (Davis, 2009). Through ecotherapy, clients relate directly to the natural world in which opens them up to transformation (2009). In spite of this, Davis does not take nature for granted. “I don’t want to dismiss the ways in which ‘nature’ can kill and eat us. I think the real edge of danger has an awakening effect because we are connecting with a part of our selves that has been unconscious or split off” (2009).

According to Cohen, ecotherapy only works, “depending on the nature of the process involved and how hurt or deadened an individual’s 53 natural attraction senses are and how many, or how strongly, they can be revived” (Cohen, 2005, p.1). Cohen describes these 53 senses through his courses in *Natural Attraction Ecology*. There is no guaranteed success through any one ecotherapy because, “sometimes we are blind to what is good for us” (Davis, 2009), or “one has to find what they are looking for through trial and error” (Cohen, 2009). However, ecotherapy offers different “nature-informed” approaches that can allow for human communities and the natural world to reconnect - for the benefit of the physical planet as well as for the well-being and happiness of the people within it (Berger & McLeod, 2006, p. 81).



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From personal experience, I know that being in nature can feel healing, even empowering. To Davis, one way to incorporate nature into our lives is to “recognize that you are nature – human nature – and take joy and comfort in the deep connections with what you are. At the same time, welcome the chance to be the world caring for itself through you,” (Davis, 2009). Cohen, on the other hand, says that most of us have experienced “ecopsychology in action” whenever we have had a renewing experience in a natural area but that most of our senses have “deadened” as a result of the socialization and prejudice against nature that we have learned since birth (Cohen, 2009). Cohen also deems that “since nature is self-correcting, when we are in contact with a natural setting, we connect the nature of our psyche to nature’s healing ways and strengthen both in the process” (Cohen, 2009). The goal is to get past our avoidance of nature, whether through venturing into nature on our own or experiencing ecotherapy in one form or another, so that we can begin to understand and heal both the Earth and ourselves, as a whole.

### **Ecotherapies: Healing through Nature**

“Experiencing the healing energies of nature more often and in greater depth is an essential objective of the ecotherapeutic process,” Howard Clinebell, PH.D. explains in his book, *Ecotherapy: healing ourselves, healing the earth* (Clinebell, 1996, p.194). However, it is not always easy to get “back to nature.” Over the past few years, my connection with nature has also changed. Despite my studies in ecopsychology, the obligations I have acquired as a full-time student and mother have shifted my priorities from outdoor adventures to domestic duties and deadlines. Regrettably, my relationship with nature has come to exist, primarily, within the context of philosophical and environmental discussion. As a result of this separation and subsequent “gained knowledge” of environmental issues, I often succumb to feelings of guilt and

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anxiety. Eco-therapists refer to this type of anxiety as “eco-anxiety” and claim that, “getting back [to nature] doesn’t have to be difficult” (Walsh, 2009). Joanna Macy, ecotherapist and eco-philosopher, prescribes three things to help relieve this anxiety and grief: take some action, however small, to defend our natural environment and animal/plant siblings; begin to build a better, more sustainable society, starting at home; and be open to shifting consciousness by discovering new ways to see things cognitively (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009, p. 53).

Clinebell claims that through telling our “ecological story” by expressing our thoughts, images, and feelings about the earth (including the perils we have had in confronting it), we are helping to reconnect with nature - despite any feelings of separation (Clinebell, 1996, p.3). This therapeutic approach in story-telling, along with the approach of keeping a nature journal to record time spent outdoors, often encourages individuals to step “outside the box” –both literally and metaphorically. Dr. Cohen, however, reiterates that “there are other stories – our *prejudice against nature stories* – that make our consciousness reject and lose contact with the therapeutic and renewing ways of natural systems, in and around us” (Cohen, 2009). These contradictory “stories” reflect an imbalance that has occurred within us – a push-pull relationship with our natural environment and ourselves that have resulted in ill-health and environmental crisis. Although ecotherapy works to address these issues, not every ecotherapeutic process will work for each individual. Because we all have our own personal “story” and experience nature in our own way, it is up to each of us to determine which therapy will work best for our needs.

At the age of 26, prior to my awareness of the growing field of ecopsychology, I graduated from the New Mexico Academy of Healing Arts with a certificate in Polarity Therapy (a holistic alternative medicine health system using energy fields) and Massage Therapy. Shortly after, I moved to the Colorado mountains, set up a table in the meadow near my home and began,

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what I called, “meadow massage.” This was my first attempt to bridge nature into my healing practice and my first experience, as a practitioner, in ecotherapy. Ecotherapy encompasses a variety of methods - whether at home, clinical settings or out in nature - to assist in re-establishing our connection with the Earth. Even within our busy schedules, we can connect with nature by, simply, stepping out into our own natural surroundings - backyard, parks, or wilderness - or posting scenic landscape pictures in rooms without a view (Kweon et al., 2008). Furthermore, when we make conscious decisions to recycle and buy local, organic products, or choose to incorporate animals and plants into our lives (Buzzell and Chalquist, 2009, p.51), we are taking responsibility for our actions and developing healthy choices for ourselves and the planet as well. Other ecotherapeutic approaches include – but are not limited to - various forms of experiential methods such as adventure or wilderness therapy, horticulture therapy, and ritual. Because of the diversity of approaches offered, I have focused on the experiential methods (which peaked my interest) concerning adventure therapy, wilderness therapy and ritual.

Adventure therapy, also known as activity-based psychotherapy, uses adventure activities - ropes courses, initiatives and games - as one type of intervention in the client’s overall treatment plan (Newes & Bandoroff, p.10). While some therapists use nature as the primary location for these activities (Berger & McLeod, 2006, p. 81), they are, more often, held in settings at or near the therapeutic facility of the client, in a park-like setting, or in an open space using mobile elements (Newes & Bandoroff, p.10). First established and used, primarily, for individuals and young adults with special needs, boundary issues with authority, body complex issues and those suffering from psychiatric illness (McLeod, 2006, p. 82), adventure therapy helps clients to incorporate team-building, problem solving skills, and trust within a group setting (Newes & Bandoroff, p. 10). Ultimately, clients experience increased group cohesion and

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confidence as each challenge is successfully overcome. Prior to the ecotherapeutic movement, “some adventure therapists gave nature little if any mention when it came to the therapeutic success” (Beringer, 2004, p. 51). Nevertheless, as ecopsychology evolved, other forms of adventure therapy branched out to include more ecotherapeutic roles – and destinations.

Wilderness therapy, a nature-informed approach to healing and branch of the adventure therapy model, challenges participants to face their fears by exposing their body and senses to the elements of nature while, subsequently, learning about their own human-nature in the process. Frequently described as experiential education (Newes & Bandoroff, p.2), participants are guided by trained professionals into nature for days or weeks. Depending on the guides, therapists, and programs involved, wilderness therapy can function in a variety of ways. For example, ecopsychology pioneer and nature guide, Robert Greenway, requires considerable periods of silence, listening, pondering and contemplation during his wilderness trips. Yet, unlike other nature guides, he does not look at words as an “enemy” in the process (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009, p. 134). Greenway believes that, “In the backcountry, our perception can change at very deep levels. Dreams change, as does the desire to manipulate the world in ways that damage it” (2009, p.138).

During a six month back-packing journey through Mexico and Guatemala, I had the opportunity to experience nature in the same way Greenway described. With only a hammock, sleeping bag and back-pack, I spent my days swimming in lakes, climbing mountains and volcanoes, trekking through jungles and playing on the beach. My nights were wrapped in fire-side conversations, starry skies, full moons, and rituals - inspiring me to create new meaning in my life. I taught myself how to play the guitar, trusted my voice when singing, and learned the value of my own skin’s natural oils as I communed with nature – away from the artificial

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elements of air-conditioners and electric heat. My body was becoming “one” with the Earth and my mind, quieting, in the presence of the Earth’s beauty. I developed a deep respect for nature which changed the way I viewed the world, along with my writing style, into a more “earth-based” reflection of life that I still use today.

Rituals, such as a ceremonial rites of passage or vision fast, are sometimes incorporated into wilderness therapy. As a wilderness guide through the School of Lost Borders, Dr. John Davis integrates a variation of this ritual into the expeditions. With the intention of a transformational experience or “vision,” participants are encouraged to meditate, reflect, or pray as they fast (without food or water) for a day or longer – alone, in the wilderness. The vision fast, or modern day vision quest, “is a border crossing practice. When one steps across the threshold and into the unknown wilderness, boundaries begin to dissolve and our vision begins to expand. The threshold place is a dreamscape, where everything is pregnant with meaning, and nature, once again, speaks to us in the voices of rock, tree, and wind. Following the ancient pathway of this rite of passage, we step into our true nature and remember our home among the wild. We become who we were born to be” (School of Lost Borders, 2009, pg. 1). Although the experience of a vision *fast* is similar to that of a vision *quest*, Davis (during the course of our interview) discouraged the use of this name [*quest*] out of respect for the “relationship of its use with Native American Indian practices” (Davis, 2009). While the term, ritual, can be applied in many forms and interpreted in different ways, the reality that it has been used for healing within varying cultures around the world and is now being practiced in clinical and nature settings within modern western therapy, demonstrates the necessity of the process involved. Although it has a history with “paganism” and “witchcraft” that has stirred controversy over its use in modern therapy, “the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (DSM-IV),

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which is the bible of mainstream mental health practice, now recognizes that spiritual and religious beliefs can play a mitigating role in psychological disturbances” (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009, p. 260).

Despite the devastating environmental challenges we are encountering in the world today, along with a decrease in our overall physical and psychological health, most people are still unaware of the connection between our symptoms, the pressures of modern civilization, and our destructive lifestyles (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009, p. 47). However, by raising awareness of our place in the ecosystem and the importance of our connection and involvement with the Earth, we can begin to take responsibility for our actions and work toward restoring the catastrophic divisions that we have made with ourselves, others, and the environment in which we live. Thus, whether we choose to use ecotherapy as a source of healing or find healing in nature on our own, ecotherapy reminds us that our relationship with the Earth remains to be the most important relationship we have in sustaining the lives of future generations.

### **Realizing our “Human-Nature”**

When I was a child, I had a natural attraction to the Earth. I wanted nothing more than to play outside, sleep under the stars, climb rocks and swim in every lake, river or ocean I could find. My parents didn’t teach me about this connection. I was born with it – as I believe each of us are. Over time, although I was unaware of what was happening, I began to spend more and more time indoors – school, work, social activities – and lost my connection with nature. I stopped caring for the Earth the way I did as a child. Yet, after my experience on Mt. Tabor, I realized that “Nature” had never stopped caring for me. From that point on, I chose to be accountable for my actions. As eco-philosopher and ecotherapist, Joanna Macy, suggests, I

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began recycling, buying local, organic products, and even helped create the *Green Earth People Center* - a local, art-inspired barter program that neared non-profit status. Today, ecopsychology allows me to relate with the natural world in all that I do – thus, promoting healing on a personal and environmental level. If everyone reached (even a small step) back to nature, we could begin to understand our own “human-nature” and realize that, with every choice we make toward healing ourselves, we are initiating a step toward healing the Earth as well. Besides, what more could our children ask for...than the hope of a better future?

About the author:

My name is Tatiana. As a mother, massage therapist and intuitive energy worker, I have a deep interest in the human-nature connection and the “inner” world which creates the “outer” world we live in today. I also see the necessity in bridging the technological/nature divide which led me on a journey to Naropa University where I am, currently, writing my thesis on this topic for my master’s degree in Transpersonal psychology with an emphasis on Ecopsychology. For any questions, you may reach me at: [intuit\\_tati@yahoo.com](mailto:intuit_tati@yahoo.com) and to view my blog, I can be found at: [www.temptingfatewithtatiana.blogspot.com](http://www.temptingfatewithtatiana.blogspot.com) . Stay tuned for a developing website titled, *Reconnecting with Ecopsychology*.

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