

Defining Ecopsychology: A New Name for an Old Psychology

Jorge Conesa-Sevilla © (2006). Based on a keynote presentation during the 1st European Ecopsychology Society (EES) Conference, Sept. 29th-Oct.-1st, Aosta, Italy, and on previous publications

Ecopsychology explores *causal connections* between the existential conditions “nature estrangement” and “nature alienation” and diverse situations where psychological wellness is compromised in various degrees of severity—a new name for old afflictions.

Some of the illnesses or mal-adaptations that ensue from “nature estrangement” and “nature alienation” may be, at present and in the past, misdiagnosed, and while using modern medical terminology, treated from an “urgency” intervention model-bias that is insensitive to life-long “natural prevention.” These practices are biased toward resolving most matters of illness in pharmaceutical, costly-technological and trauma-like fashion. The old affliction is our new *hysteria*, multi-determined, multi-defined, and multi sub-classified as decontextualized illnesses that owe their etiology to a widespread degradation of bodies, intellects, spirits, and planet.

Ecopsychology assumes that in the absence of or by neglecting and ignoring long-established ancient (biological or cultural) adaptations or traditional practices that were once, and still are, conducive to a simpler and more manageable life in the presence of RAW NATURE or sustainable cultivated nature, and in the midst of aberrant and extreme changes to these “body-spirit” good adaptations and traditional practices, the human psyche is assaulted, overwhelmed, and made ill by artificial and unjustified complexity.

Compromised psychological wellness originates in extant developmental practices (bad ontology) where education and the family circle fail to provide ample and sustainable opportunities to bond with Nature (an intimate and subjective affiliation and interpretation) or fail to teach an understanding of how to live within natural parameters that enhance human-Nature, sustainable development. By “happiness” ecopsychology means “ecopsychological wellness” with the accepting of responsibilities to ourselves, to others, to non-human animals, and to our planet. A balanced ecopsychology within and without are the aims of our science and endeavors.

Compromised psychological wellness originates too in extant cultural practices (bad culture and *text*, in a semiotic sense) where state policies and commerce fail to maintain a harmonious structure and equilibrium of “prosperity” where natural as well as human needs are equally balanced. In some instances, when no human “needs” are apparent, Nature comes first and human animals come second or last. Human “needs” are never assumed to mean profit-driven, consumer-driven, or the greed of a few at the expense of most others and the planet. The greedy corporate glutton and the selfish and uncaring neighbor are as ecopsychologically ill as are their victims.

Additionally, *compromised psychological wellness* originates in sub-standard, superficial, unfulfilling human relations. For example, assuming Paleolithic or smaller population standards, ecopsychology can infer or test whether maintaining deep affections and interrelations with 30 to 100 individuals was or is conducive to wellness. Ecopsychology cannot avoid addressing

interpersonal conflict but it readdresses these problems with natural systems as their existential backdrop.

Ecopsychology, as theory, science, therapy, and counseling, addresses all the issues mentioned at the same time as it models pro-Earth activism. The modeling of pro-Earth activism is an ongoing criticism of hyper-humanistic and anthropocentric egotism as solipsism or fetishes, whether expressed individually or collectively. Our pro-Earth activism is also and always a criticism of an industrialized and colonial engine that still wants more for less, or demands more without ever investing in the local and global realities of lasting peace, ecological balances, or independent thinking. The industrialized and colonial engine demands artificially famished consumers, obedient workers, administrative drones, and weak or repressive governments. Most definitely, ecopsychologists should not be in the business of “patching up the urban patient” then forcing him/her to accommodate to intolerable and unjustifiable social complexity.

Our individual and collective task as ecopsychologists is daunting, unfair, impossible, life-long, idealistic, opportunistic, social, political, individual, personal, but nevertheless, ethically unavoidable.

Ecopsychology is the task of all professionals who have the insight that through some type of *Green Psychology* we can address most of these daunting problems when each individual psyche is cajoled, convinced, revered into, and embraced into a human family that walks alongside wolves if wolves and humans are to survive. All professionals who agree that we are first and foremost psychobiological beings who learned to walk in savannahs in the company of other beasts, and in so doing acquired our humanity then, must find ways to close the antagonistic gap between an ecological model of an Earth we “simply” emerged onto and the increasing and accelerating mayhem of a manufactured chunk of rock and false psyche.

In addition to “green therapy,” evolutionary science and psychology become for some of us the investigative tools through which the “ecopsychologist” can test what aspects of the psyche and ensuing behaviors are ancient and ongoing adaptive mechanisms (domain-specific); how these fail to express themselves under adverse, non-sustainable cultural situations; and ultimately, how society impedes the natural expression of these ancient adaptations.

Positive/Proactive Ecopsychology

Many individuals and groups, in various regions of our globe (even in urban centers), continue to live sustainably and foster in cognition and action what could be called a *naïve ecopsychology*. That is, many individuals and groups, in various regions of our globe, are affectively and intellectually moved by, and live as if, in the phrasing of Deep Ecology, “nature matters.” These people are children, elders, men and women who would not be surprised to hear about our “ecopsychology.” However, some of these individuals and groups, increasingly, are politically or socially disenfranchised, accosted by forces that seek to eliminate or control access to natural spaces and ancient traditional grounds, and pollute and spoil the very source of their ecopsychological intimations whether these intimations are tied to sustainable commerce, art, recreation, or continuing spiritual practices.

An important activist and proactive role that the ecopsychologist can play is to insure that this affiliation continues for years to come for them and for us. The ecopsychologist should be politically involved to make sure that “spirit” continues.

By “spirit” or “spiritual” this ecopsychologist understands an ancient and intimate connection between little mind and great MIND without making undue or premature assumptions about MIND or assuming that my personal interpretation of MIND is the “gold standard.” At its heart, this “spirituality” is a biosemiotic reconnection with ancient, sustainable roots: cognitive, physical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and affective where the “I” seems compulsive toward the “me-WE,” ... “ALL,” where Nature is at the creative and sustaining center of all these affiliations.

An ecopsychology is obtained and sustained by doings.

1. Integrate psychomotor routines, a sense of self-sufficiency and belongingness in the “wild,” and the awareness of complete dependency on the natural environs, all in the service of **kenning**, or “cognitive flow.” The latter is the total absorption of the Self (sometimes even forgetting the Self) while doing tasks that are highly relevant to survival and contain aesthetic elements, while embarking on a true dialogue with Nature (biosemiosis). Meaning and value are at the heart of all nature-interpretative exchanges.
2. **Kenning** relates to *contiguity* or proximity (metonym) and *connectivity* between a sustainable natural-scape and a mind-body system able to perceive, appreciate, and operate within the limits of these natural parameters (within and without).
3. Ecopsychological doings, no matter how diverse, ideally, should be able to produce the insight of **natural provenance**, or the reality that natural spaces precede human activities and that these activities evolved from a partnership with natural environs--a gut wrenching *kenning* rather than an abstract realization.
4. Even though several ecopsychological practices make use of contemplation techniques in order to maximize the probability of this insight and related states, human activities while in nature are closer to Karma Yoga (right, mindful doings and work) than to passive absorption of an abstract “truth.” If one becomes the task, the task better be *good*.
5. Intensive meditative techniques (including deep hypnosis) can be used to augment—catalysis--the previous doings and to expedite *kenning*, e.g., a vision quest.
6. *Ecopsychological doings* can be made explicit to consciousness by constant discovery, reflection, and evaluation (in journal writing or during fireside sharing) of fragile or even unconscious reactions to “wilderness.” That is, psychomotor routines that fail, innumerable moments of anxiety, or any number of *reaction signals* that make us less MIND-ful of our presence and activities in nature, can be used to deepen our *biosemiotic* connection (*contiguity* and *connectivity*). These *dis-affectations* could be the beginning of the journey toward insight—a crucible of the mind-body seeking *relatedness*. What the conscious mind can see, the conscious mind can address and heal.

A non-inclusive list of ideal learning outcomes for ecopsychological practice, in conjunction with insight, is the rejection of the synthetic for the real-natural, a growing and enduring psychological necessity to remain in “wilderness,” an intense sense of stewardship or deeper affiliations with the grandeur of natural processes, a sustained dependency on these

processes to continue fostering understanding, and the development of all skills that produce a calm and collected mind. That is, "...a hunter-forager "spirituality" of stealth, frugality, gratitude, resourcefulness, strength, seasonally meaningful rituals, fidelity, courage, patience, perseverance, that are alchemically transformed into genuine pride, other values and virtues and then into the very concept of morality. If morality emerges from these basic attitudes, then the individual must be moral, naturally moral."

(Conesa-Sevilla, 2006)

When we genuinely understand natural "otherness" we transcend.

When we transcend we return.

Returning is recognition.

Recognition is the negation of *dis-affection*.

Dis-affection is what prevented understanding of "otherness" in the first place.

Dis-affection also produced the seed for the beginning of understanding.

From: Otherness, J. Conesa-Sevilla (Remedial Ecopsychology)

