

Emotional Well-Being and Sustainability: Contributing to the Evidence Base

Thomas Joseph Doherty

“The purpose of psychology is to give us a completely different idea of the things we know best”

—Paul Valery

I came upon this quote from the poet Paul Valery some years ago and use it often in my work as a psychologist. It is a reminder to be aware of my own biases. I use it with my environmental psychology and counseling students as an invitation to learning. At times, I share the quote with clients—at moments when the course of our work together goes counter to their or my assumptions or when a new vision or strategy is needed.

This quote is useful for psychology; it is also very useful for an eco-psychology. Quite often the findings of environmentally related psychology are at odds with cultural assumptions about health or identity or conservation. In particular, this is the case with notions about how difficult or satisfying sustainability-oriented lifestyles are. The widespread belief that conservation or sustainability behavior choices are somehow a form of deprivation, leading to dissatisfaction or unhappiness—or even a threat to well-being—is one of the most serious misconceptions of our time. In fact, research tells us the opposite.

For example, it is common knowledge within environmental psychology and eco-therapy that the research findings about the restorative effects of natural settings are some of the most robust in the social and health sciences. One need only look at the resources like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s Landscape and Human Health Laboratory (LHHL, <http://lhhl.illinois.edu/about.htm>) for empirical and, most importantly, accessible plain-language evidence of this. Also, the evidence for the linkage between emotional well-being and sustainable, conservation-friendly lifestyles has also been building—particularly in terms of consumer behaviors (see Kasser & Kanner, 2004). This

work is informed by the growing knowledge base about the health benefits of positive emotions (see, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and has developed in parallel with explorations of quality of life and sustainability undertaken from within environmental psychology (Moser, 2009; Uzzell & Rätzzel, 2009) and in fields like preventive medicine and public health (Leslie & Cerin, 2008).¹

As psychologist Tim Kasser notes in this issue: “These data speak against the common assumption that living in an ecologically sustainable fashion must involve sacrifices that will interfere with personal well-being and instead suggest that living in an ecologically sustainable way can promote personal well-being.” And, as Joe Hinds and Paul Sparks later note: “Although the benefits to well-being of contact with the natural environment have been proposed and articulated for many years, it is only relatively recently that these ideas and anecdotes have received empirical support in terms of quantitative findings.”

Thus, it is my pleasure to introduce the first in a series of issues of the journal *Ecopsychology* to focus on emotional well-being and sustainable behaviors. I can envision a world in which the work of centers like the LHHL is linked with like-minded efforts in places like the University of Washington’s Human Interaction With Nature and Technological Systems Lab (HINT; <http://depts.washington.edu/hints/>) and with the positive psychology work being done at places like the University of North Carolina’s Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory (PEP, <http://www.unc.edu/peplab/home.html>). My hope is that *Ecopsychology* can expand our knowledge base to include a balanced review of

the health benefits of sustainability and conservation behaviors and that this knowledge can then be developed and applied by practitioners, policymakers, and the general public.

Ecopsychology Roundtable: Identity, Well-Being, and Sustainability

We begin Issue 1.4 with a roundtable conversation with Tom Crompton, Change Strategist for the World Wildlife Fund UK, and psychologist Tim Kasser, professor at Knox College and author of books such as *The High Price of Materialism* (2002). The discussion focused on the intersection of identity, well-being, and sustainability, as explored in the duo's recent publication *Meeting Environmental Challenges: The Role of Human Identity* (2009) and Tim's research exploring how ecologically sustainable environments and behaviors satisfy basic psychological needs central for well-being (see this issue).

Crompton and Kasser's work is part of a series of informative and provocative publications from the WWF-UK that reexamine assumptions that underlie environmental campaigns and suggest new evidence-based responses (http://www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/campaigning/strategies_for_change/). Crompton and Kasser spoke about "identity campaigning" (Crompton & Kasser, 2009, p. 4) and well-being in terms of one's values and goals and also how people cope with the threats and unpleasant feelings regarding environmental challenges. The discussion surveyed topics such as loss and mourning regarding environment degradation, idealization of nature, the affects of materialism and time-pressured lives on individual and family well-being, and whether a person can develop a sustainable self-image.

Psychological Need Satisfaction, Personal Well-Being, and Ecological Sustainability

In works such as *The High Price of Materialism* (2002), and the edited volume *Psychology and Consumer Culture* (2004), Tim Kasser has been an innovator in the scientific study of emotional well-being. His article "Psychological Need Satisfaction, Well-Being, and Ecological Sustainability" provides a good introduction to his research on well-being, situated in the context of ecological sustainability.

Kasser approaches the linkage between ecological sustainability and personal well-being from the perspective of how the environment a person lives in and the behaviors in which they engage satisfy basic human needs: to feel safe and secure, competent and effective, connected with others, and free and autonomous. Kasser's

findings are, simply put, that environmental degradation interferes with meeting these basic needs and sustainable environments promote satisfaction of these needs and thus increased well-being.

Kasser describes three strategies for intervention, policy change, and further research chosen for their proven potential to boost both personal well-being and ecologically sustainable outcomes. These include helping individuals to cultivate intrinsic (i.e., inherently satisfying) life goals versus extrinsic goals (i.e., those contingent upon external rewards, status, or material success). Kasser also discusses how lifestyles of voluntary simplicity are flexible to implement across regions and lifestyles and are associated with more life satisfaction and less ecological impacts and materialistic lifestyles. Finally, Kasser addresses the benefits of cultivating "time affluence" (Kasser, pp. XX, this issue) rather than more materially affluent and more time-stressed lifestyles—again, associated with more environmentally friendly behaviors, less impact, and more potential to meet basic needs associated with life satisfaction and emotional well-being.

Investigating Environmental Identity, Well-Being, and Meaning

In "Investigating Environmental Identity, Well-Being, and Meaning," UK psychologists Joe Hinds and Paul Sparks provide a summary of research on psychological benefits of natural environment encounters, the development of environmentally-related identity and self-concept, the relationship between environmental connections and emotional well-being, and the potential for nature experiences to promote a sense of meaning in life.

Hinds and Sparks then describe results of a study exploring a number of these themes with a group of undergraduate psychology students. Generally, their findings supported their hypotheses: frequent experiences of the natural environment and the degree of personal meaning found in such experiences positively predicted well-being and environmental identity in undergraduate students. Also, study participants who grew up in a rural locations reported a higher frequency of nature experiences, more personal meaning derived from such experiences, a stronger environmentally-related identity, and more positive well-being than peers from urban and suburban environments. Hinds and Sparks note that their study

Suggests that a reciprocal relationship may exist between the natural environment and the people who engage with it: experience of the natural environment may be able to simultaneously promote affective well-being on the one hand and proenvironmental orientations on the other. (p. XX)

Conservation Volunteers' Connection to Nature

Volunteering for conservation or nature education groups is a common pathway for individuals to develop and express connection with their home places. What do we know of these volunteers' experiences? "Conservation Volunteers' Connection to Nature" describes University of Minnesota researchers Margaret Guiney and Karen Oberhauser's exploration of this question through their qualitative interviews with volunteers in the Minnesota Master Naturalist program.

Guiney and Oberhauser gathered descriptive information about the volunteers, such as their ages, education, and incomes, and then used surveys and interviews to examine the volunteers' perceptions. Most volunteers, described a connection with nature, for many beginning in childhood. In addition to cognitive benefits (e.g., satisfying their desire to learn and teach others about nature), the volunteers perceived physical, psychological, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits as well, including reduced stress, opportunities for outdoor exercise, appreciation of natural beauty, and a sense of satisfaction and well-being. One person described the benefits of her volunteer naturalist work in these terms: "It's good for my stress level. I'm a teacher, so this brings my stress level down. It's physically good for me, and I know it matters to somebody . . . It's fun, fulfilling, and it's healthy."

The volunteers also tended to describe an ecological conception of their identity, including a sense of interdependence with nature, altruistic concerns about the negative effects of environmental degradation on humans and other species, and biospheric values (i.e., recognizing the intrinsic worth of nature and other species. As a volunteer noted: "I'm just another being and it just seems to me there is some interconnection for us all.")

Ecopsychology Narrative: Coming Home

The essays in *Ecopsychology* access art and storytelling, powerful ways of knowing that support the theoretical, practical, and empirical writings that we otherwise focus on in the journal. In her essay, *Coming Home*, Canadian trauma therapist Maggie Ziegler describes her experiences on a backcountry hike in the mountains of Vancouver Island. Ziegler insists that her writing is not meant to be an analysis of the wilderness effect but simply a story about how she restores herself and rekindles her sense of meaning and optimism through journeying in wild places.

Ziegler's writing illustrates the therapeutic effects of backcountry trekking: the synergistic interplay of mindful attention—a requirement for alpine hiking—with solitude, immersion in an intact and beautiful ecosystem, and a sense of competence based on preparation and experience. Along the way, Ziegler finds ways to open to and make peace with the painful memories she carries from her therapeutic work. As she notes, "The high mountains offer containment when you have lost your own capacity to love, and they hold you until you find the way home."

Book Review: *Nature and the Human Soul* by Bill Plotkin

In her review, Lori Pye discusses Bill Plotkin's *Nature and the Human Soul* (2008). Plotkin's work is a comprehensive life stage approach to human development from a transpersonal and ecopsychological perspective, or what Plotkin would call an "eco-depth psychology" (p. 32). While *Nature and the Human Soul* will be most appreciated by those who share Plotkin's transpersonal and countercultural philosophy and his selective reading of the psychology literature, the work is notable for its well-articulated vision of an interdependent, ecological self. In the language of academic environmental psychology, Plotkin describes the formation of a lifespan biospheric environmental identity—in all its embodied and transpersonal ramifications.

For Plotkin, soul is a thing's "ultimate place in the world" (p. 30), the unique set of relationships it shares within the web of life. Plotkin notes that his definition of soul implies that humans are born to occupy a particular place in nature—a role in the earth community, not just human society—in his terms, a "psycho-ecological niche" (p. 31). How one can find this authentic niche within a primarily ego-centric western industrialized society, and how one can then nurture others along this path as an elder, is the focus of the work.

Lori Pye, an eco-depth psychologist herself, notes that *Nature and the Human Soul* "holds an appeal for anyone seeking ideas for how to reimage the difficult journey of becoming a more conscious individual, how one might contribute to making a better world, and how to live sustainably on the planet." Pye provides commentary on Plotkin's uses of stage and structure, the importance of transcendence in Plotkin's model, and the essential role of a sense of innocence in Plotkin's developmental scheme.

Book Review: *Life's Philosophy* by Arne Naess

The impact of the work of Arne Naess on ecological thought and on environmentally grounded psychology is difficult to over-

estimate. This review of *Life's Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in the Deeper World* (2002), by Thomas Pynn of Kennesaw State University, provides a short introduction to the work of this Norwegian eco-philosopher, and founder of deep ecology, from a philosophical perspective.

In *Life's Philosophy*, Naess reflects on themes and ideas he considers most important for a meaningful life, including self-examination and valuing of emotions. As Pynn notes, for Arne Naess "human inquiry and optimal human life include both reason and feelings." Naess's philosophy has never strayed far from nature and the mountains of his youth. For Naess, life is seen as an open landscape. Writing at the age of 90 years, Naess (2002) describes his ideas about the self and imagines a dynamic and fluid selfhood "more like a flow than anything solid" (p. 23).

New and Upcoming: Special Issue on the Psychology of Women and the Natural Environment

I am pleased to announce that the *Ecopsychology* journal is now listed in the American Psychological Association's PsycINFO database, beginning with our third issue. I look forward to having our initial and future issues included in that important resource. Please look forward to continuing articles on our series on sustainability and well-being as well as new papers addressing topics such as conservation psychology and wilderness therapy.

In honor of the 40th Earth Day, *Ecopsychology* has issued a call for articles addressing the psychology of women and the natural environment. The journal seeks articles from a variety of disciplines and perspectives that broadly address the interface of women's mental health and empowerment and environmental issues. Topics may include examples of ecofeminist theory and practice; research on the relationship between gender and affiliation with nature or propensity toward environmental conservation behaviors; and critical analyses of the use of feminine and matriarchal metaphors and archetypes for the earth's systems and natural phenomenon.

As always, I am thankful for the natural resources and human efforts that make this 21st century online journal possible. Keep up your hope and your good work.

Note

'The beneficial effects of one's neighborhood setting go beyond simple stress management or aesthetic pleasure and create a context of well-being and personal control crucial for individual and family well-being (for intriguing research on the pathways between neighborhood context and child abuse in disadvantaged families, see Guterma, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz, 2009).

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Address correspondence to:
Dr. Thomas Joseph Doherty
Sustainable Self, LLC

Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling
PO Box 3174
Portland, OR 97208

E-mail: journal@selfsustain.com

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