

Ecopsychology: Mind, Body, Spirit. . .and Planet

An Interview with Thomas Joseph Doherty, Psy.D.

Lori Tripoli

Thomas Joseph Doherty, Psy.D., trains counselors in the Ecopsychology Studies Program at Lewis & Clark Graduate School, in Portland, Oregon. He has a consultation practice, Sustainable Self, LLC, also in Portland. Dr. Doherty has a background in clinical and environmental psychology and 20 years of experience working with individuals, groups, and organizations. He is also Editor-in-Chief of the Ecopsychology journal (see box). Dr. Doherty has made presentations for organizations such as the Association of Oregon Recyclers, Natural Step USA, New Seasons Markets, and the Climate Master Program. His work has been featured in The Oregonian, The New York Times, Common Ground, and the Monitor on Psychology.

Lori Tripoli: What is ecopsychology?

Thomas Joseph Doherty: You can think of ecopsychology in the broadest sense as placing psychology in an ecological context—ecological in terms of a biospheric or natural environment context. It's a holistic concept that resists a narrow definition. Also, one runs into challenges as all of these sub-concepts—psychology, ecology, nature, environment—can have many meanings. The term ecopsychology was popularized by cultural historian Theodore Roszak, in *The Voice of the Earth—An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). His work was a rallying cry for linking human health with the health of the earth's natural systems. Roszak offered a critique of mainstream conceptions of mental health that did not include humans' relationship to the natural environment and also sought to add some psychological sophistication to the messages used by the environmental movement. Much of this "radical" message is now seen as commonplace.

With issues such as global climate change and environmental toxins, the connections between human health and the environment are becoming clearer. Also, addressing environmental issues has also gained acceptance in mental health fields and in subdisciplines like environmental psychology that traditionally looked at humans' relationship with built and natural spaces. As an area of study and practice, ecopsychology is evolving. Ecopsychology still presents the best chance to integrate the great traditions of therapeutic psychology with research and perspectives drawn from environmental psychologies. Ecopsychology also fills a role as a social gathering point for individuals for whom a sense of connection with nature is important to their health and well being.

LT: What does an ecopsychologist do that a run-of-the-mill therapist wouldn't?

TJD: Some ecopsychology practices would include helping people to understand their environmental identity, to balance different priorities they may have, and to integrate a developing sense of sustainability. For example, many people need help balancing their sustainability values with their need to support their families or to advance their careers. That's where I tend to work. Recently, I have also been interested in ways to help people manage apprehensions about climate change or their ecological footprint, or so-called "eco-anxiety."

Other practitioners may be doing forms of ecotherapy, generally seen as therapy outside of the office, such as through a therapeutic hike in the park. Such ecotherapists might have patients spend restorative time in nature, on a retreat, or on an indigenous-style vision quest, where [the patient] would camp in the wilderness for a few days, potentially fast, and be in solitude.



Thomas Joseph Doherty, Psy.D., of Lewis & Clark Graduate School.

LT: Do a lot of people experience environmentally related stress?

TJD: It depends on the persons and on how strongly they identify with the environment. To me, eco-anxiety is normal-range fear, apprehension, or concern about threats to human health and the health of the planet. I think concern for your environment is very normal and healthy. Excessive concern could generate more serious worry or have impacts on a person's life in certain cases that could develop into an anxiety disorder. There isn't an official "ecopsychology disorder." Environmental issues can spark feelings that can become a disorder: adjustment disorder; anxiety disorder; depression, post-traumatic stress; etc. These kinds of disorders can stem from concern about the environment or negative experiences or intense stress.

However, it's important to recognize that a personal value of sustainability or connection with nature can also be associated with healthy lifestyles, diet, exercise, exposure to restorative green settings, and a number of other positive and health-promoting factors. So, it's also the case that environmentally minded people can be more resilient. That's the positive perspective that doesn't get shared enough.

LT: What's causing stress over the environment?

TJD: There are vulnerabilities or proneness toward despair or anxiety when there's a disconnect between a person's values and lifestyle. Problems can occur when someone has experienced a strong change toward ecological values or perhaps a loss, such as a loss of a treasured green space or natural object, but is not receiving validation from family or friends. Former outdoor professionals who have had a lifestyle change that lessens their connection with nature can be more vulnerable, as can news junkies who are exposed to all kinds of negative, troubling information without balancing that with time in re-

A New Journal on Ecopsychology

Thomas Joseph Doherty, Psy.D., is the Editor-in-Chief of a new peer-reviewed online journal on the theory and practice of ecopsychology, published by Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. (www.liebertpub.com/eco). *Ecopsychology* explores the relationship between environmental issues and mental health and well-being. This quarterly journal examines the psychological, spiritual, and therapeutic aspects of human-nature relationships, concern about environmental issues, and responsibility for protecting natural places and other species.

storative green settings. With my clients, I caution them that it's a paradox to care about the environment without taking care of their own personal health: They are not separate from nature. They are part of the ecosystem.

LT: How does a therapist become an ecopsychologist?

TJD: As I noted above, the study and practice of ecopsychology is evolving. In many ways, ecopsychology is a perspective rather than a discreet field. Thus, there isn't any credential for ecopsychologists and practitioners, so they tend to be self-identified. I myself identify as a licensed psychologist who has a fo-

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cus on sustainability and human nature relationships. There is an increasing interest in the application of nature-based therapy and I see this area developing—possibly rapidly.

LT: Are ecopsychology courses even being offered in graduate school?

TJD: There have been a few Masters-level programs in which students can focus on ecopsychology. Because of the countercultural nature of its early theories and writings, ecopsychology did not initially find a place in academia. Thus, ecopsychology has been addressed by programs outside the mainstream, like Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado; Antioch University Seattle; the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, California; and Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, California. These courses are still making inroads into mainstream psychology and counseling programs. We have developed a series of ecopsychology related courses at Lewis & Clark College.

The academic climate is changing. I have given papers at the American Psychological Association and was invited to contribute to the organization's recent task force on climate change speaking from the perspective of a clinician. I think that psychologists who have traditionally focused on

Websites for More Information on Ecopsychology

Thomas Joseph Doherty, Psy.D.
Sustainable Self, LLC
<http://selfsustain.com>

Association for Humanistic Psychology
www.ahpweb.org

Conservation Psychology
www.conservationpsychology.org

Antioch University Seattle
www.antiochsea.edu

California Institute of Integral Studies
www.ciis.edu

**Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education
and Counseling**
<http://graduate.lclark.edu>

Naropa University
www.naropa.edu

Sonoma State University
www.sonoma.edu



Dr. Doherty connects with the natural environment.

environmental and conservation research are realizing that a clinical and mental health perspective can add value to their work, when focusing on discrete issues like the stresses faced by conservation workers or impacts of extreme weather events or more diffuse issues like concerns prompted by media images of environmental degradation or climate change impacts.

LT: What might be covered in an ecopsychology curriculum?

TJD: We are working on a certificate program in ecopsychology at the Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Counseling. In addition to standard courses such as counseling skills, psychodiagnosis, diversity, and research methods, the program also includes courses in environmental psychology, ecotherapy, and wilderness therapy. As far as I know, this will be the only program in which students can simultaneously study ecopsychology and also be prepared for mental health licensure.

I also hope to add courses on organizational behavior change looking at how environmental issues can be framed in psychologically effective ways. For instance, how do you create effective recycling programs? How do you change behavior on large scale? Lewis & Clark prides itself on its environmental credibility. This kind of coursework fits in very well there, and students are quite hungry for it. I think people are seeing a similar occurrence in businesses and organizations that are more socially responsible and seeing the triple bottom line.

LT: Do companies hire ecopsychologists to help them change behavior within the corporations themselves?

TJD: They should. More are doing so. Recently, I was invited to join a collaborative of green marketing professionals to help with organizational leadership and behavior change from the perspective of holistic health and sustainability.

LT: What would Sigmund Freud think of ecopsychology if he were alive today?

TJD: Freud's work, in particular his recognition of an "oceanic feeling" of oneness with the world discussed in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930 in German) is often evoked in ecopsychology. If Freud could see our societal responses to climate change, I think he would find his theories on psychological defense mechanisms like denial or repression to be well-supported.

LT: Is the environment replacing religion?

TJD: A lot of interesting things are happening in terms of green spirituality. The environment is being seen by a number of religious faiths as being part of their programs. Many people who don't necessarily have an attachment to an organized religion see themselves as being spiritual, and they find their spiritual connection in nature, whether watching sunrises and sunsets or sitting on a mountaintop. They get in touch with the cosmos and the larger order of things. There's definitely a spiritual component to the outdoors for many people. ■

Note: This interview was modified from *Sustainability: The Journal of Record* (www.liebertpub.com/sus).

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