

Video: Psychology and Nature

Thomas J. Doherty

Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education & Counseling
Sustainable Self, LLC

Portland, Oregon

Why are some people more concerned about the natural environment than others?

Does a simulated view of nature have the same restorative benefits as a real view?

Do natural disasters like storms and droughts affect mental health and wellbeing?

These are all questions about Psychology and Nature – and are all studied by psychologists.

Now, when I say Nature, I mean nature as the “outdoors” or natural processes-- from your backyard to the biosphere. I also mean a spectrum ¹ from *domestic nature* such as plants in your home, to *nearby nature* such as parks and gardens, to *managed nature* (such as tree farms and agricultural areas), to *wild nature* – native plants and animals, wilderness areas that are remote, challenging, or purposely left undeveloped ²; and even wild processes in your own body ³. And, I also mean nature and the natural environment as concepts – as social or cultural constructions ⁴ -- that often mean different things to different people ⁵

When I say Psychology I mean the study of mind, emotions, and behavior -- The science of mental life ⁶ -- and, in a deeper sense, *psyche-logos* -- the language of the psyche. ⁷

Questions about psychology and nature--like the ones I posed--can be approached from various areas of psychology you may be familiar with.

For example, we can use Social Psychology ⁸ to help determine why some people are more concerned about the natural environment than others. An obligation to care about nature or to take pro-environmental actions stems from an interaction of someone’s basic values, their experiences, their beliefs about the world, and their sense of empowerment. ⁹

We can use Neuropsychology¹⁰ to track the influence of green spaces on the human brain and nervous system. Simulated views of nature do have psychological and physiological benefits--but not as much as real views.¹¹ Again and again, research studies show that contact with real nature is more stress reducing and better at sharpening our attention.¹²

Natural disasters don't just affect physical property. Clinical Psychology reveals that these events have strong negative impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of people, families and communities¹³ -- including increased rates of anxiety and suicide.¹⁴

Some psychologists specialize in these “psychology and nature” questions: For 50 years, researchers in the field of *Environmental Psychology*¹⁵ have studied people's relationship with *built environments*—such as buildings and neighborhoods—and *natural environments*—including parks and wilderness areas¹⁶. They have determined:

- What makes some neighborhoods or landscapes more satisfying and easy to navigate than others, and¹⁷...
- Ways to categorize the feelings of awe you experience in a place like Grand Canyon or in a gothic cathedral¹⁸.

*Conservation Psychology*¹⁹ is an interdisciplinary area in which psychologists partner with other experts--such as conservation biologists or sustainability professionals -- to address human factors related to the conservation of wildlife and resources like

- How emotional connections made with captive animals in zoos can lead to efforts to protect them in the wild²⁰...
- Or, why some energy conservation programs work²¹ and others backfire.²³

Some psychologists take a more holistic approach. *Ecopsychology*²³ focuses on our interdependence and interbeing²⁴ with the rest of the natural world and how this influences people's identity,²⁵ their sense of being connected to something larger than themselves²⁶, and the pain may they feel about issues such as species extinction²⁷. For example:

- How do you avoid becoming depressed or just tuned out about issues like toxins in the environment?²⁸.
- Or, can going outside and working with animals make mental health therapy more effective?²⁹

Doing “environmental psychology” may also mean taking a hard look at the field of psychology itself and how the Western conception of “mind” as separate from “nature” may actually distance people from the natural world and contribute to the development of environmental problems.³⁰

Psychology and Nature II: My Background

Working with people about psychology and nature, and doing research on these topics, is my professional focus as a psychologist. And it’s taken me down many paths, from explaining how to integrate outdoor adventures into counseling³¹, to exploring the psychology of ocean surfing³², to documenting the mental health impacts of global climate change.³³

How did I get here? Well, research would show that a childhood spent in the outdoors with adults and mentors who support that child’s connection with nature would predict whether someone would be a naturalist or have pro-environmental attitudes³⁴ or possibly be an environmental psychologist...

But it’s complicated. I didn’t have any of these things growing up. I came from an urban, working class background that illustrated classic American utilitarian values about nature and other species.³⁵ My family and I had a sense of moral protection of animals we knew like our pets, or symbolic animals like horses and bald eagles, but otherwise -- a healthy aversion to dangerous aspects of the natural world.³⁶

But then I’ve also benefitted from the American Dream and been able to get an education, and to travel, and learn a lot -- and that has led me to have more aesthetic, scientific and ecological values about nature³⁷, and to feel more confident journeying in the wilderness.³⁸

In fact, my first job as a counselor was on wilderness therapy³⁹ treks that spent weeks on the trail. I have taken people on rafting trips in the Grand Canyon and seen how powerful that experience was⁴⁰. I also spent time working with Greenpeace⁴¹ and I know how it is to carry the weight of global environmental issues in my daily life.⁴²

Later, when I began to study clinical and health psychology⁴³, and worked in hospitals, and helped people recover from illness, I began to better understand the healing power of nature I had witnessed⁴⁴, and the complex dilemmas of environmentalists,⁴⁵ and how all of this could be understood using psychology.

Psychology and Nature III: Discovering Your Environmental Identity

What might this mean for you? How can you discover your own story of psychology and nature? If you drew a time line representing your life, and began to

chart important experiences you've had that have been related to nature, the natural world, other species, or just being outdoors – what examples would you select?

Perhaps you had a place that was really important to you, or a special relationship with an animal or a pet. Perhaps you learned something about the environment in school, or you had a mentor that taught you about camping or being in the outdoors, or you had special experiences with your family or friends ⁴⁶. Or maybe you had negative or scary experiences in the out-of-doors or received messages that taught you that being in nature was dirty or unsafe.

Everyone has a unique timeline.

The experiences on this timeline help to make up your "environmental identity" ⁴⁷ -- how you think of your personal identity in relation to nature and the rest of the natural world. Your environmental identity is much like your gender identity or ethnic identity or sexual identity or cultural identity – it needs to be recognized and given language to so it can be expressed.

Now, if we looked more deeply at one of the events or experiences on your timeline, we could explore your state of mind– Were you focused or distracted? ⁴⁸ Was your body tense or relaxed? ⁴⁹ Did you experience a sense of connection or “flow” ⁵⁰? Did you feel a part of something larger than yourself --or did you feel small and inconsequential? ⁵¹

Your sense of being in that moment was your “Ecological Self” ⁵² -- the feeling of how it was to be you at that moment – as part of a place, as part of an ecosystem, as part of the planet Earth.

But wait – there’s even more!

Now that you’ve raised your consciousness regarding psychology and nature, you can also expand it.

For example, let's look back at one of your experiences of Ecological Self. We know from “Psychology 101” that our context affects our experience. It’s the same with our experience of nature.

Moments of "Ecological Self" have a biological and neurological component. They reflect our unique thought processes and our past mental conditioning. They have meaning in the context of our family and social relationships. And they take place in an actual physical “place” – a building that was designed by someone or a landscape that may be preserved or protected by law. ⁵³

So, these experiences take place in societies and cultures, and they are influenced by our political and economic systems. They are encompassed by a larger

biosphere and planet--and ultimately by a transcendent universe.

These are big ideas about meaning and reality that psychology helps us to understand. And this prepares us to make big decisions about our politics, economics⁵⁴ and spirituality.⁵⁵

Now, what about people of different cultures and backgrounds?⁵⁶

Look again at your time line. Do you think that your experience would have been different if your skin color was different⁵⁷, or your gender, or your physical ability, or your sexual orientation?⁵⁸ Or, if you grew up in a different social class, or a different place in the world? Or, if the laws protecting the environment were different?

Now you can get a sense of the great multicultural diversity⁵⁹ at play in people's experiences of nature-- what I call "environmental diversity."⁶⁰

No matter where you live, environmental problems have the most impact on those of least wealth and privilege.⁶¹ So, environmental psychology—whether of threats or benefits—also concerns questions of fairness and Environmental Justice.⁶²

Psychology and Nature IV: Study And Careers

How do you fit in? If you're interested in studying environmental psychology - or pursuing a career as an "ecopsychologist" or a "conservation psychologist" -- I encourage you to get involved.

There are over 25 Masters programs and 15 doctoral programs in the US Canada and Mexico that have programs in environmentally focused psychology and many more that offer classes.⁶³

Perhaps you want to contribute to society by taking what is known within psychology and applying it to an environmental topic or issue. Or, perhaps you want to change society and re-invent psychology given all that we know about ecology and humans' place in the natural world.

Some students are drawn to scientific study. Others are drawn to the arts⁶⁴ or philosophy, or to explore their outdoor experiences. Others seek to be healers or inventors. Others are committed to protect and preserve wild places and other species. Some do all the above!

Remember to work together.

And keep in mind you'll be a Pathfinder because many of these areas are still relatively new or unknown in academia and among the general public.

I hope this gave you a flavor of how interesting thinking about psychology and nature can be and the many different pathways you can take. I'll see you down the trail!

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<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRfHZ9wXKs6dptZx0YVwH0B-H0T4VOK57>

Resources

There are many excellent books, websites and resources to follow up on in your psychology and nature explorations. A number of recent and classic works are cited in the video transcript (see references below).

- To get started, the *Psychology of Environmental Problems* (3rd, Ed.) by Winter and Koger (2010) should be easy to find, and approaches the issue from the perspective of traditional subdivisions of psychology (i.e., social, behavioral, neuropsychology, etc.). Note this text also has a new, integrative 4th edition, *Psychology for Sustainability* (Scott, Amel, Koger & Manning, 2015).
- To situate yourself deeper in the social and cultural history of environmental issues, I recommend the interdisciplinary *Environment* anthology (Adelson, Engell, Ranalli & Van Anglen, 2008) or Oelschlaeger's classic (1991) *The Idea of Wilderness*.
- An understanding of systems is essential. For an introduction, you may start with Walker and Salt's (2006) *Resilience Thinking*.
- To build on works cited, authoritative texts on environmental behavior and the global commons include Gardner & Stern's (2002) *Environmental Problems and Human Behavior* (2nd Ed.) and Ostrom et al.'s (2002) *The Drama of the Commons*: <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/10287/the-drama-of-the-commons>.
- Two accessible (and free) e-books are Mackenzie-Mohr's (1999) *Fostering*

Sustainable Behavior: <http://www.cbsm.com/pages/guide/preface/> and Harre's (2012) *Psychology for a Better World*: <http://www.psych.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/our-staff/academic-staff/niki-harre/psychologyforabetterworld.html>.

- My favorite ecopsychology text remains Weber-Nicholsen's (2001) *The Love of Nature at the End of the World* which, along with Thomashow's (1995) *Ecological identity*, provides a good, self-reflective introduction to this work.
- Of recent findings in psychology, I think Kahan and colleagues' description of the process of cultural cognition is most timely. This phenomenon has been amply illustrated by the ongoing studies of the Yale and George Mason University projects on climate change communication. This work has informed my thinking on environmental diversity, and the underlying processes that contribute to environmental injustice.
- Finally, you cannot learn about psychology and nature by merely reading books. It is important to go outdoors, as far as you are comfortable, and learn from places and other species, in a way that is meaningful for you. If you are only reading, or talking with other humans, you are both missing the point and also missing out on opportunities to promote your own health and psychological development.

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