

Reports of the Death of Experience and of Ecopsychology are Greatly Exaggerated

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The term "ecopsychology" is used in various ways by thinkers who are seeking to understand aspects of human psychology – mind, emotions, motivations, self-image, behavior -- in the context of humans' relationship with the natural world--both our actual interplay with nature and how we symbolize this in our cultures. Would be ecopsychologists also mine the therapeutic and moral implications: What are the psychological impacts of environmental issues; how do nature contacts improve people's mental health; how can we make the mental health benefits of healthy natural contacts more equitable? As with any psychology or therapy enterprise, there are many ways to envision ecopsychology based on one's favored theory, their culture, and their values. Environmental advocacy as well comes in many different shades of green, based on one's background, their priorities, and their methods (e.g., science or policy-based, grassroots, morally and spiritually motivated, etc.).

I feel for the author of "The Destruction of Experience: How Ecopsychology Has Failed" who sounds as if he is truly suffering over the state of their world as he sees it. As a parent, I can identify with his profound feelings of attachment and protectiveness for his nephew. I also appreciate his recognition of some well-known ecopsychology thinkers, such as those represented in the 1995 Sierra Club *Ecopsychology* anthology. Books like this sit on my shelf as I write, and have been a central influence on my adult life and profession.

But I fear that the author has drawn too narrow circle around one snapshot of ecopsychology thinking, indeed mainly one book, and one variation on psychologically informed environmentalism, to make such broad and sweeping conclusions as he does. The idea of an "ecopsychology" is a perennial. Certainly, native peoples, if they chose to take up western concept "psychology" to describe their cultures, could claim to embody ecopsychology. And, earlier generations of environmental wisdom seekers, poets like William Wordsworth or Emily Dickinson, proto-environmentalists like Henry David Thoreau, or modern environmentalists like Rachel Carson, would likely identify with ecopsychology.

The writers in the 1995 Sierra Club *Ecopsychology* anthology popularized this idea as a powerful rationale for environmental politics. But, it's important to remember that the 1995 effort is not the whole of whole of ecopsychology, but rather an environmental education initiative using ecopsychology as its premise. No environmental education initiative is perfect; they work as they can. In hindsight, that group of thinkers was destined to appeal to a certain group of like-

minded individuals. It would be over reaching to expect otherwise. Not everyone has chosen to emulate Dickinson, Thoreau or Carson, but we wouldn't think of their works as failures.

One of the problems that has plagued ecopsychology initiatives is narrow bandwidth thinking, a self-perpetuating echo chamber of well-intentioned and like-minded people recycling the same environmental polemical essays and editorials, such as those featured in the 1995 Sierra Club anthology, without efforts to acknowledge the longer term cultural context of these ideas, or efforts to bring their pronouncements into a detailed present day context, one that reflects both the good and the bad of the environmental situation and strengths and weakness of environmental change efforts.

At the risk of simplification, there are two broad ways that people deal with the emotional impacts of environmental issues. They either focus on creating a compelling vision and building motivation and positive feelings about that vision to manifest it, a "broaden and build" approach to use language of positive psychology. Or, they move deeply into the feelings of concern and despair that accompany environmental issues to seek authentic expression and empowerment, a "despair and empowerment" approach, as popularized by advocates such as Joanna Macy. Both strategies are useful and reflect reality. I find people tend to gravitate toward one or the other. Either approach taken to an extreme becomes problematic. Superficially positive approaches minimize the harsh realities of environmental degradation and environmental injustices. Completely negative approaches disregard the evidence of positive changes in global society regarding understanding and stewardship of natural world. Where I live, thousands of people go to work every day to protect nature, other species, human health, and equity. I know they do in San Diego as well. Both emotional extremes also shortchange future generations, creating unrealistic utopias, or unrealistic dystopias.

Taking on an ecopsychology path is not easy. Our responsibility for diversity and multicultural awareness requires that we realize not everyone, even other ecopsychologists, thinks the way we do. And, we need to be able to step away from our own ways of thinking to understand this important point, and to come together as a shared movement. The author alludes to dark days in their past, struggles with depression and suicide. These are serious issues, as anyone who has experienced them can attest. This also points to another important point about ecopsychology: one's personal ecopsychology is always colored by their own background, their temperament and their coping style. One of gifts of ecopsychology is to ensure that concern about environmental problems is not "just in someone's head." They are not simply technical, political or logistical problems. They go to the very heart of our being and identity, our morality and existence. A twin responsibility is to remember that we can have both "environmental issues" and "personal issues." One of the complexities of doing eco-therapy work, either with one's self or with others, is knowing the difference between the emotional lens that someone brings to an environmental situation, and the situation itself. The perception of living in a hell might as much be determined by an individual's psychology as the state of the world.

Another responsibility when doing ecopsychology work is thinking about where our message is going and how it will affect people. I heard about this essay when someone "tagged" it for me,

an example of how like-minded people forward ideas within the “echo-chamber” of social media. I tend to minimize social media in my life but did follow up on the provocative title. I support the author’s right to self-expression. But, I recommend that the best of nature we can give our children is our joy, our hope (hope defined as our highest vision of the possible), our creativity, and our poise and good humor when conditions get rough. We can also give them the gift of honoring the personal and planetary aspects of their existence, and the wisdom to know the difference.