

# Psyche and Society

People can only go so far in re-connecting with Nature unless they are supported by a whole culture that encourages a deep connection with the wild world. This is what ecopsychology should aim to achieve, says **Andy Fisher**

There is a spot in the woods not far from my house that I visit regularly. While there, I observe deer tracks and coyote scats, examine the latest mushrooms to surface, and listen for the distant sounds of crows and chickadees. This ecopsychological routine is precious to me, a way to enter the mind of the land I inhabit and to join with thousands of other people in the Nature-connection movement who likewise have 'sit spots' in their home areas.

When I am at my own sit spot I am not thinking about the flows of capital encircling the planet, steadily homogenising its surface and endangering Nature sit spots everywhere – including my own, which is on property owned by a sand and gravel company. And yet when I am sitting back at my desk as a radical ecopsychological theorist, away from the sensory immediacy of fungi and bird language, it is precisely to such larger social and economic realities that I turn my thoughts.

While ecopsychology has become popular in the form of a therapy employed to reacquaint the Nature-estranged mind with the

more-than-human world, Radical Ecopsychology is my term for an approach that actively makes it part of the radical ecology movement. To be radical means to go to the roots (pleasingly, the word 'radical' shares the same origin as the word 'radish', a root vegetable). Radical ecologists accordingly hold that the ecological crisis must be addressed at the systemic or root level: cultural, social, political, economic, philosophical, historical – and psychological. Furthermore, they say that the ecological crisis calls not just for policy reforms or greener lifestyles but for a historic transformation that builds a whole different society: an ecological society.

I fashion radical ecopsychology, then, as a kind of psychological politics that makes direct links in its theory and practice to the realisation of such a society, one whose productive and consumptive activity integrates with the greater society of Nature and makes room for the regeneration of earthly life.

The big question, though, is how far radical ecopsychology must deviate from psychology as we have come to know it, with its immense cast

of psychotherapists, its enormous research and self-help industries, its diagnostic manuals and measuring tools. Indeed, I often wonder what would even remain of 'psychology' in an ecological society.

What I have concluded is that ecopsychology must stand for a radical transformation of psychology itself if it is to play a serious role in the ecological transformation of society. Psychology in its current form – even if greened – is not up to the task. I say this because there are two serious contradictions in psychology that make it incapable of taking its place in the radical ecology movement. The very first contradiction is the one that initially gave rise to ecopsychology: the conflict between psychology's general goal of human wellbeing and its anthropocentric neglect of the wellbeing of the Earth.

This raises the question of how we could ever be happy on a steadily wasted or immiserated Earth. Ecopsychology, in this initial sense, is about recalling how our minds emerge from the natural world and about underscoring the synergy between personal and planetary health. This recollective sense of ecopsychology is

Ecopsychology makes direct links in its theory and practice to the realisation of such a society, one whose productive and consumptive activity integrates with the greater society of Nature and makes room for the regeneration of earthly life.



Photograph: @ Creative Commons

the one that gets us outdoors to our favourite sit spots.

But there is a second, more encompassing contradiction that must be faced: here the issue is the repression not only of the relationship between psyche and Nature but also of that between psyche and society. By adopting the individualistic and market ideologies of our capitalist society, psychology has aligned itself with the powers of a Nature-dominating social system that not only punishes the Earth but also generates immense human suffering through the domination and exploitation of human nature.

It is not hard to relate epidemic alienation, emptiness, narcissism, rage, loneliness, depression, anxiety, addiction, and so on to the workings of a society whose central priority is the accumulation of money. A link is also easily made to the terrible misery and stunted lives of so many wage labourers and displaced peoples around the globe.

In light of these social connections, ecopsychology has no choice but to become a form of critical psychology if it is to go to the psychological roots of the ecological crisis. Without critically analysing our current society it will have no good way to connect its ideas to the creation of a different one. Whereas the recollective sense of ecopsychology leads us to the sit spot, this other critical sense invites us to understand the social forces that not only endanger it but also do violence to our own human nature.

Radical ecopsychology has to be something never quite seen before. If ecopsychology is to be a force for ecological social change, its theory will have to trace the complex interrelationships among social, ecological and psychological terrains rather than bypass the difficult reality of social relations, institutions, power, and the like. Its practice, informed by such theory, must in turn aim for



Photograph: @ Creative Commons

Ecopsychology, in this initial sense, is about recalling how our minds emerge from the natural world and about underscoring the synergy between personal and planetary health. This recollective sense of ecopsychology is the one that gets us outdoors to our favourite sit spots.

changes at the cultural and social levels rather than just the individual.

The Nature-connection movement is again illustrative here. One of its important discoveries was that an individual can only go so far in reconnecting with Nature unless he or she is supported by a whole culture that encourages that connection. This movement has therefore evolved into a project to regenerate a culture that mentors children and youth into an intimate relationship with the wild world, performs artful ceremonies that honour the natural passages, and gives special place to ecologically mature elders. I am enthusiastically in favour of all of this. I am also of the opinion that such cultural regeneration can only go so far – unless it is itself supported by a process of social transformation.

A society that continues to produce its wealth through the brute exploitation of Nature (including human nature) is unavoidably a mean,

insecure and competitive one that places countless roadblocks in the way of a more connected world. Introducing greater soulfulness and respect into the human-Nature relationship will, I think, therefore mean refusing the intrusions of the capitalist system into our everyday social relations. And this will mean working together cooperatively to maintain and produce our lives on this Earth in a radically different way – the way of an ecological society. Let radical ecopsychology be the psychology for this future way.

The Nature - connection movement has therefore evolved into a project to regenerate a culture that mentors children and youth into an intimate relationship with the wild world, performs artful ceremonies that honour the natural passages, and gives special place to ecologically mature elders.



**Andy Fisher** is the author of *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*, published by State University of New York Press.  
[www.andyfisher.ca](http://www.andyfisher.ca)

This article featured in *Resurgence & Ecologist* issue 277, May/June 2013. All rights to this article are reserved to The Resurgence Trust.