

## **Reconnecting with Nature**

By Dr. John Scull

*I feel a little alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. . . . What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?*  
Henry David Thoreau

Inside our homes, vehicles, schools and office buildings, most of us live comfortable and well-regulated lives — protected from the challenges of the natural world. By the age of 18, most children will have spent more than 12 000 hours in a classroom — indoors. Our profound disconnection from our natural origins carries a heavy cost in impaired health and increased stress. Limiting our experiences to the orderly and safe, but poorly integrated human-built environment, creates boredom and a sense of loss.

Many of us realize this at some level and try to compensate by spending some of our leisure time and holidays in nature. Gardening, birding, canoeing — the list of satisfying outdoor activities is almost endless. These activities put us in touch with the natural world in ways radically different from our daily existence. Unfortunately, by Monday afternoon the glorious weekend spent hiking in the woods often seems as if it never happened.

The emerging discipline of ecopsychology, a word coined by Theodore Roszak in his 1992 book *The Voice of the Earth*, examines our alienation from the natural world, how it affects us and how we can reconnect. The field of ecopsychology considers every aspect of the human-nature relationship. I will focus only on clinical ecopsychology — the role nature can play in psychological (and physical) health and healing.

*The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think.* Gregory Bateson

What is it about nature that is healing? Why is it healing at some times and not others? Why do the good feelings evaporate when we return to our indoor, un-natural lives? These are some of the questions ecopsychologists try to answer by developing methods that enhance the positive effects of contact with the natural world.

One of the distinctions that ecopsychologists make is between individual and group experience. The vision quest is the quintessential individual wilderness experience. Borrowing from First Nations tradition, an individual retreats to a wilderness setting for private communion with nature. Group wilderness experience is one of the earliest forms of ecopsychology and is a powerful way to facilitate personal change. One of the pioneers of wilderness therapy, Dr. Robert Greenway, began leading “psychoecology” trips in the 1960s, first at Sonoma State University in California and then through his Olympic Ecopsychology Institute in Washington State. *The Soul Unearthed* by Cass Adams gives first-person accounts from many different kinds of wilderness therapy experiences.

A remote wilderness setting is not essential to tapping into the healing process. Ecopsychologists have learned that even a few minutes in a natural area or garden can provide transformational connecting experiences. Dr. Michael J. Cohen, an internationally recognized counsellor and scientist, maintains that some of his activities can be done with a potted plant. A therapist or teacher can help an individual prepare for a nature-connecting experience and also assist by debriefing the experience with her afterward. Workshops, walks and meditations work well with larger

groups. Every week, I lead a one-hour nature meditation in a local park in my hometown. Although there is a myriad of methods and theories to this exciting new therapy, the practice of ecopsychology does have three common features — an opening ritual preparation, mindful contact with nature and a chance to process the experience.

### **Preparation**

Preparation is necessary so that we enter the natural world with an appropriate mindset and attitude. This can be as simple as an intention to be silent and pay attention or as complex as the ritual preparations for a vision quest. Outdoorsman and writer Philip Chard suggests, for example, that whenever we go outside, we should breathe in and out deeply and then whisper or shout our thanks for the gift of air. The common feature to all rituals is that they encourage us to approach nature with reverence and gratitude. And the incessant clamour of our inner dialogue is stilled.

### **Mindfulness**

It is good to be mindful of everything we do, but ecopsychology suggests going further and becoming mindful of the nature around us while not *doing* anything. Instead of either listening to ourselves think or focusing on a purposeful activity, ecopsychology teaches that direct attention to the sensory experiences of the natural world is profoundly comforting and healing. If we are totally present in the moment, we become aware of how everything — including ourselves — is part of an interconnected, self-organizing, highly intelligent web. These realizations inspire feelings of security and enhanced self-esteem.

It's easy to be in nature and not be mindful of the experience. In most outdoor activities there is a human purpose or goal. If our mind is on a goal such as a 20-kilometre cross-country ski, we are not focused on the activity itself. If, however, we are really into the activity as we perform it, we are practising mindfulness. When we are in a mindful state, our blood pressure is lower, we are more relaxed and our immune systems are more effective. Mindful meditation has been shown to be helpful in treating or preventing more than 40 medical conditions.

### **Processing**

Robert Greenway says there is more to it than just going out in nature and exclaiming “Wow!” His group wilderness experiences are followed by hours of sharing, rituals and discussion. Debriefing can take the form of a sharing circle after a group activity, a written journal or poem, a painting, a song, more rituals, an extended discussion or continued psychotherapy. The important thing is to reflect on our experience in nature and record the experience in our conscious, verbal minds so that our daily lives can be transformed by the experience.

Participation in ecopsychological therapy, workshops or courses seems to have a number of positive effects. These experiences lead to more lasting psychological benefits than ordinary outdoor recreation or by just going outdoors and reflecting on our lives. In common with other mindfulness and relaxation therapies, ecopsychology can prevent or alleviate stress-related illnesses. A skilled therapist can help people find solutions to their personal problems through guided experiences in the natural world.

Besides the benefits to mental and physical health, the practice of ecopsychology can have spiritual benefits. Mindfulness is central to Buddhist philosophy, nature-connecting is inherent in Taoism and retreats are common to almost all religious traditions. Christ began His ministry with 40 days alone in the wilderness.

Ecopsychology can also inform and inspire environmental activism, from recycling to landscape restoration to political activity. In the practice of ecopsychology we come to feel, on a very basic non-verbal level, that we are part of the earth as a living community, supported by the universal intelligence and love that supports all life. With this realization comes a commitment to be responsible citizens of the biological community and to return to nature the love and care we have experienced ourselves.

## Websites

- <http://www.ecopsychology.org> is a good place to start. The e-journal *Gatherings* reflects some of the current thinking in ecopsychology and the Links page will connect you to most other relevant websites.
- Nature-connecting activities and on-line courses in ecopsychology can be found at Project NatureConnect at <http://www.ecopsych.com>.

## How to find an ecopsychologist

There are no current standards for certifying ecopsychologists so be prudent. If you are carrying out activities in the wilderness, make sure the ecopsychologist has taken the steps necessary to ensure your physical safety. If you are doing individual or group psychotherapy, make sure the ecopsychologist is qualified and certified by a provincial body in psychology, social work or another profession with ethical standards and complaint procedures. If you have any doubts or feelings of not being safe, listen to your feelings.

### Try This Activity

1. With one or more companions, go to a natural or semi-natural area — a park, riverside, forest, field or whatever is available.
2. Read these instructions together and discuss them so there is shared understanding.
3. Go out individually and silently into the natural area, agreeing to meet again in about 20 minutes.
4. As you walk along, sense your natural attractions. When you are attracted to a plant or tree, ask for permission to visit it. If you feel permission is denied, move on.
5. If you feel you have permission, sit with the plant and explore it with all your senses.
6. Breathe with the plant, exchanging gases. Imagine how the plant is providing you with oxygen and you are providing the plant with carbon dioxide. Both of you need each other.
7. When your time is up, express your gratitude to the plant and the natural area.
8. When you gather together again, take turns describing what happened and how it felt. There is no need to interpret, explain or compare experiences. Just share them without judgment.
9. Thank each other for doing this activity together.
10. When you are finished, ask yourself how you feel. If it is a good feeling and one you would like to repeat, explore ecopsychology more deeply through an on-line course, book, workshop, therapist or group.

## Books

- \* *The Healing Earth: Nature's medicine for the troubled soul*. Philip Chard, 1994. Minnetonka, MN: NorthWord Press.
- \* *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. David Abram, 1996. New York: Vintage Books.
- Re-Visioning the Earth: A guide to opening the healing channels between mind and nature*. Paul Devereux, 1996. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- \* *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Thich Nhat Hanh, 1975. Boston: Beacon Press.
- \* *Being Peace*. Thich Nhat Hanh, 1996. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1994. New York: Hyperion.

*The Soul Unearthed: Celebrating wildness and personal renewal through nature.* Cass Adams (ed.), 1996. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

*Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, healing the mind.* Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes and Allen D. Kanner (eds.), 1995. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

\*Highly recommended

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