

## *An Evolving Exploration of Eco-psychology*

*A spinning blue and green oasis in the vast expanse of dark space, Earth is the only planet in our entire solar system known to be capable of supporting life. The now widely circulated 'Gaia theory' of James Lovelock has shown the Earth to be a self regulating, intelligent and alive organism where all parts affect and support each other to reach a state of homeostasis. This intricate and dynamic balance of life-sustaining features are the very basis of our survival as in every single moment all human beings are completely dependent on the resources of the Earth such as fresh water, air, sunlight and food. However at this moment in time our future existence is more fragile and threatened than ever before as human activity has ravaged, polluted and drained the planets resources and compromised Gaia's ability to effectively regenerate and replenish. A critical question to be asked at this juncture in the evolution of human history must surely be: "why do we as a society continue depleting our natural resources even though we know that it is to the detriment of our survival?"<sup>1</sup> Bringing together the disciplines of Ecology and Psychology, Eco-psychology has emerged to answer this question and provide solutions for the sicknesses of both our psyche and the planet.*

*Eco-psychology asserts that many of our personal, societal and planetary crises stem from disconnection with nature which is especially prevalent in the modern Western world. With both theory and practice Eco-psychology explores and demonstrates the ways in which humans can contribute to the healing of the Earth and how nature can contribute to the healing of humans in a mutually beneficial relationship. With an understanding that our relationship the Earth is far richer than simply as a consumer to a limitless store house, Eco-psychology also shows how a connection with nature is necessary for our full psychological, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Dr Sarah Conn, a Harvard professor and practicing psychologist states the obvious, but seemingly forgotten idea that "There is no such thing as 'individual' health separate from the systems within which the individual exists."*

*Although Eco-psychology is seen as being relatively new as a formalised discipline, many of its theories and ideas are rooted within ancient wisdom sources and indigenous cultures who continue to live in harmony with their surroundings. The actual term 'Eco-psychology' has been attributed to Theodore Roszak who in 1992 wrote 'The Voice of The Earth- An Exploration of Eco-psychology' In the short space of time since this book was launched there has been an explosion in academic literature and practice within the field to demonstrate that in order to heal both people and planet "ecology needs psychology and psychology needs ecology"<sup>2</sup> The ways in which Eco-psychology continues to fuse the expansive earth-wide subject of ecology with the*

*deeply interpersonal perspective of psychology is summarised in this article with examples of the various theories and methods used to contribute to the scope of each discipline.*

*Ecology broadens the focus of psychology to acknowledge that the problems of an individual may legitimately stem from the state of their environment. Buddhist scholar and systems theorist Joanna Macy recounts that when she spoke to a psychologist about her concerns on nuclear war, these fears were reduced to represent a personal pathology. Macy has since developed a powerful and experiential group practice which allows people to acknowledge their pain for the world without it being viewed as a private neurosis. Her work operates under the principle that our pain for the world is natural and necessary and that our biggest problem comes from our repression of our despair which “produces a partial numbing of the psyche”<sup>3</sup> Professor of Psychiatry John E. Mack resonates with her experience and urges fellow professionals to consider that “when we hear expressions of distress about pollution or other forms of environmental destruction in dreams and other forms of communication, we not hear or interpret these simply as displacements from some other, inner source” Eco-psychology explains that since we are so interconnected with the web of life we all feel the pain for the world, whether or not we are consciously aware or acknowledge it and many Eco-psychologists have argued for a new definition of sanity that would include our relationship with the natural world. Indeed psychologist Sarah Conn asserts that the earth is speaking and is heard most loudly through the most sensitive of us. Thus Eco-psychology could eventually show that feeling pain for the Earth is sign of an awakened and enlivened psyche rather than a disturbed one.*

*The natural world can also be a valuable therapeutic tool for Psychotherapy and many therapists are bringing ecological connection to aid their patients healing. This eco-therapeutic approach allows both therapist and client to draw on the expanded references and healing opportunities of the outdoor environment and recalls a time when all therapy was done within the healing context of nature. Australian Clinical Psychologist George Burns feels that Nature Guided Therapy brings new insights that enable us to “create effective positive, relational behaviours rather than just eliminate the undesired.” A relationship with the natural world can also be used as preventative and remedial health care for the general population to combat a variety of malaise that may never make it to the psychotherapy office. Michael Cohen, founder of Project Nature Connect advocates direct sensory contact with nature to alleviate our lack of fulfilment in nature ‘substitutes’. Feedback from participants in the PNC programme report that people are much healthier, happier and reduce or eradicate their dependence on medication drugs or self harming behaviour. The field of eco-therapy is vast and its range includes work such as wilderness journeys, outdoor adventures, vision quests and gardening.*

*Eco-psychology also offers a radical review of mainstream psychology which has been criticised for "its general promotion of adjustment and conformity to a 'mad' ecocidal social order"<sup>4</sup> Depth Psychologist and wilderness guide Bill Plotkin (Ph.D) echoes this radical view through his practice of 'Soulcraft', which encourages participants to fully explore their soul calling and unique gifts on the premise that finding our true purpose will allow us to live in harmony with the Earth. Plotkin feels that psychologists must have a greater appreciation of the soul in order to fully grasp the healing journey of the individual as "The essence of the soul cannot be separated from nature. This is why an adequate psychology must be an eco-depth psychology"<sup>5</sup> Taking into account our embeddedness in the ecological world, all psychology becomes Eco-psychology and in this context Eco-psychology can be seen as more than just another branch of psychological theory but the entire context in which the field of psychology must be held. Indeed the fact that psychology has been able to exist for so long without consideration of the natural world is highly indicative of the human-centred world view of modern society. In the view of Eco-psychologist Andy Fisher, one of the major aims of Eco-psychology must be to "offer models of human psychology in which the Earth is not a resource filled background to the human enterprise, but rather the living matrix out of which we are born and in relation to which our self understanding and well being lie."*

*As the scientific study of mind and behaviour, Psychology also has a great deal to contribute to ecology. Bringing a deeper sophistication to the usual scare, shame and blame tactics of environmental campaigning, psychology can introduce more affirmative methods which empower potential and active adherents to become involved in preservation or restoration of the environment based on their desire to live in accordance with what they love and value in life. Eminent biologist E.O. Wilson has suggested, with the Biophilia hypothesis <sup>6</sup>, that humans are genetically predisposed to love nature and Eco-psychology works on rekindling this love as the basis for environmental action and behaviour. A great example of applied Eco-psychology recently occurred in a London borough where recycling bins were painted to resemble Friesian cows and then placed underneath a bill-board which depicted a countryside scene with children feeding the 'cows' and the slogan "FEED THE COWS." The bins were then situated in the midst of a busy urban area on a pavement which was sprayed green to resemble grass! The success of the fun message over the preaching tone was demonstrated with a 61% increase in recycling in the painted bins over the plain ones and a spokesperson for one of the groups involved in the project explained that "We hope our Feed the Cows concept will inspire more people, especially children, to change the way they think about recycling. We want the experience of dropping off waste to be fun, not rubbish."<sup>7</sup> Certainly a key contribution of Eco-psychology is to transform*

*environmentalists from doomsday prophets to healers who bring a celebratory attitude of the joys and creativity of the healing journey in amongst the very harsh realities.*

*A conference held in 1990 entitled “Psychology as if the Whole Earth Mattered” came to the conclusion that “If the self is expanded to include the natural world, behaviour leading to destruction of this world will be experienced as self destruction.” Norwegian Philosopher Arne Naess who developed the field of Deep Ecology felt that it is vital for humans to develop their ‘ecological self’ which would shifting environmental care from being a ‘moral’ to a beautiful act’ and demonstrating that Earth care and Self care are one and the same. When we view the Earth not just as a valuable resource but as an actual part of us we realise that to keep destroying it is tantamount to chewing off our own arm whilst trying to feed ourselves! Thich Naht Hahn, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Monk holds similar views and expresses that “The feeling of respect for all species will help us recognize the noblest nature in ourselves.” Thus Eco-psychology encourages us to shift our paradigm from the anthropocentric perspective, where humans sit at the top of a hierarchical pyramid with all other life forms under our dominion, to the eco-centric view of equally sharing the earth with all other aspects of the natural world and view ourselves as “inter-being” with the entire planet.*

*Eco-psychology is highly relevant for today’s world where we face a planetary demise of immeasurable proportions. There are an incredible multitude of practical measures that must be taken to heal our Earth such as environmental education, community building, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, zero-carbon transportation, and so on. Eco-psychology creates the foundational underpinning for these transformations by beginning and nurturing the transformation of our minds. In her explanation of the process of shifting from the “Industrial-growth society” to the “Life-sustaining society” Joanna Macy shows that the foundation upon which all other actions will be built and sustained is in the realm of our values and ways of thinking. This view is echoed by Thom Hartmann in his book ‘The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight’ which concludes that in order to halt the damage and create a sustainable culture we need to remodel the old cultural stories upon which all actions are based. Nature conservationist, Iain Scott also insists that the only way the earth will be restored and regenerated is if humans develop a consciousness of ‘non-selfishness’. Hungarian philosopher of science, Dr Ervin Laszlo explains in his earth-healing manifesto ‘You Can Change The World’ that in order to effectively create positive change we need to examine and evaluate our ethics and use them as our primary navigation tool for our lives. Eco-psychology encourages and fosters these new and expansive ways of thinking which are crucial in creating change which is crucially necessary because as Einstein advised “we cannot solve our problems with the same thinking that created them”*

*Ultimately Eco-psychology offers a hopeful vision of a restored Earth and a future where humans enjoy a sustainable, healthy relationship with their environment and themselves. This harmonious co-existence has the potential to enrich our lives, bring a greater level of satisfaction and self realisation for the good of all beings.*

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*Terri Henry is the founder of 'Onelove Livity.' She is passionate about the health of people and planet and sharing ways which can uplift both. Terri creates and facilitates 'Sacred Nature' workshops, using applied eco-psychology alongside ancient traditions to restore our relationship with the Earth, enhance our own inner nature and awaken our aliveness, vitality and inspiration! For more information please email [onelove@onelovelivty.com](mailto:onelove@onelovelivty.com) or view her website [www.onelovelivty.com](http://www.onelovelivty.com)*

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<sup>1</sup> Dominique Larocque - ECOPSYCHOLOGY 101-Therapy For a Stressed Out Society  
<http://www.ecopsychology.org/journal/ezone/archive2/ecotherapy101.html>

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Roszak – *Ecopsychology - Restoring the Earth Healing the Mind*

<sup>3</sup> For further information on Joanna Macy and “The Work That Reconnects” view [www.joannamacy.net](http://www.joannamacy.net)

<sup>4</sup> Andy Fisher - Radical Ecopsychology in *Alternatives Journal* 22:3 July/August 1996

<sup>5</sup> Soulcraft – Bill Plotkin. Check this book out it's amazing!!

<sup>6</sup> For more on Biophilia hypothesis check out [www.wilderdom.com/evolution/BiophiliaHypothesis.html](http://www.wilderdom.com/evolution/BiophiliaHypothesis.html)

<sup>7</sup> Check their cool project at [www.feedthecows.org](http://www.feedthecows.org)