

# The Shared Imperative of *Becoming* Ecopsychology

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**A** *logos* that harmonizes mysterious interiorities of soul with the beautiful but harsh intricacies of physical nature has had countless iterations, each congruent with the cultural and psychological context of a given time in history. In short, ecopsychology has and will constantly reinvent itself. In a time when the realities of human-caused ecological disintegration are exploding in newspaper headlines across the world and shaking humanity awake, we need to revision and reinvent ecopsychology on an annual, monthly, and even moment-by-moment basis. How do we do that? My suggestion: We *become* ecopsychology.

To find solid ground in the practice of “becoming ecopsychology,” I find it helpful to remember a recent name of our field’s current iteration, *psychoecology*. Though the prefix *psycho-* is problematic for obvious reasons, semantically *psychoecology* can be directive, instructive, inviting. If one views *ecology* as the central core (rather than a truncated prefix) and *psyche* as a dimension within, pathway into, or expression of the larger living systems of earth, then a question emerges: Whose psyche? One possibility: the *psyche of ecology*, the very *soul of nature* itself.

## Fostering an Ecological “We”

When I used to introduce myself as a psychoecologist, people often joked, “Oh, does that mean you counsel wild animals?” Not exactly, but close. When fostering congruency with ecology, we counsel what is psychologically wild, inclusive, and connected to the larger living systems of earth—especially in urban environments. Which begs the question: Is the human psyche really human? Yes and no. Becoming ecopsychology requires working within a nondual framework of reality, where the human psyche is not only inseparable from nature but also an intricate expression of wild nature. The unbounded human psyche broadens to become the soul of a “we” that includes all

living beings on earth, including human. Ecopsychologists support the momentum of this development, forging pathways toward what Arne Naess identifies as the “ecological self.” This is the evolutionary undercurrent of catastrophic environmental crises. It is a standing invitation. It is the call of our future.

*Becoming ecopsychology* requires a gradual shift, where the ecological “me” become a felt-sense of an ecological “we.” There is a prophecy in Buddhism that the next enlightened Buddha will be a community, not an individual. Ecopsychology may have a role to play in this prophecy because we focus on developing a “we” consciousness in individuals and collectives. In some ways, working with groups to align with the soul of nature is easier than working on a one-on-one basis. Relationships kick individuals to higher levels of development because more complex orders of belonging have a *telos* greater than the sum of their parts. The diversity and vibrant relatedness within groups support intricate, and very likely more accurate, attunement to the *logos* of a collective ecological soul.

Though “becoming ecopsychology” requires expanding into a more-than-human world, our work in this arena remains human-oriented, in part because we are human beings and not frogs or turnips. But a more pressing reason is that the human psyche (a guiding impetus for individual and collective behavior) has become a boundlessly destructive force of nature and needs to be tempered and brought into alignment with its living habitat. As the psychological wing of environmentalism, we align human souls to the larger *soul-of-nature*. This alignment is beneficial, future-oriented, and creative.

## Bridging to the Future

The semantic root of nature is *natal*, which refers to birth. Nature is endlessly birthing and rebirthing. The soul-of-ecology might be experienced as the evolutionary impulse of life embedded in the constant movement of existence. It is inherently future oriented. As pressures to change in response to environmental turbulence intensify and become more strident, I predict the future-oriented aspect of our work will be increasingly relevant and interdisciplinary.

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Becoming ecopsychology, the psyche-of-ecology, means we listen deeply and heed the call of the future in any and all situations.

How do we make this lofty aspiration practical and professionally viable? I'm not suggesting that we blithely talk about the "soul of ecology" in environments where the "S word" is taboo. But we should be able to create culturally appropriate ways to express what Joanna Macy succinctly calls "coming back to life." Patience is required, but also a spirit of playfulness. Nascent stages of becoming the soul-of-nature are spaces where one can experiment with shifting identities. For example, instead of talking "about" the human-nature relationship, one speaks "from" or even "as" this larger sense of "we."

If our job is to foster the ecological self aligned with the soul-of-nature, we must become what we teach. We must become ecopsychology. Gradually, the *logos* of nature's soul runs through and guides our lives 24 hours a day. Weekends, too. Then, in every interaction we bridge to a shared destiny, embodying Gregory Bateson's "pattern that connects." Our very presence in *any* situation and within any professional context becomes a pull into a shared future. Future-oriented ecopsychologists are not just earth oriented; we *are* Thomas Berry's "dream of the earth," with one foot firmly in the present and the other stepping collaboratively and courageously into a beckoning future.

### The Relevancy of Being Nimble

Peter Kahn requested that we share our latest updates of ecopsychology. This endeavor highlights the inherent future-orientation of our work. That we constantly reinvent or update our vocation is not a weakness but a core aspect of ecopsychology. Shape-shifting is a hallmark of our field. Therefore the diversity of articles written in response to Peter's request is not a sign of being muddled but a robust expression of what ecopsychology is and has always been: a diverse but related set of nimble responses designed to serve the ecological

integrity of unique individuals and specific cultures. Again, ecopsychology is entirely context oriented. There is no one "right" answer to Kahn's request. Nor is there one "real" ecopsychology. Just as diversity is a sign of ecological health, so too is diversity within our field. Ecopsychology, as Rumi describes, "lifts a mirror up" to where each of us are bravely working.

What might this mean for us as a loose-knit community of practitioners? I believe practices that support our *becoming ecopsychology* could foster even greater professional agility, promote collegial understanding of each other's perspectives, and fuel our own evolutionary development as ecopsychologists. Why? Because *becoming ecopsychology* encourages being future-oriented as an embodied way of life. Aligned with the soul-of-nature, we are able to commit in a relaxed fashion to cultivating the protean nature of ecopsychology rather than freeze-framing it out of a need for security. We are willing to live with not-knowing. Frustrating as it might be at times, we willingly undertake the need to revision and reinvent our vocation, knowing cultural contexts and the needs of our living world continue to evolve. Ecopsychology lives and thrives, as it always has, at the growing edges of consciousness—not where life has been, but where it is going.

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