



Innovators in Sustainability

Ecopsychology: Mind, Body, Spirit ... and Planet
An Interview with Thomas Joseph Doherty, Ph.D.

As much as many of us blame our mothers for our madness, it turns out that mom's exhortations to go out and play were just what we needed. Some psychologists are finding that an improved connection between the self and the natural environment can actually be good for both the person and for the planet. Sustainability: The Journal of Record managing editor Lori Tripoli interviewed Portland, OR-based psychologist Thomas Joseph Doherty about the emerging field of ecopsychology, how even city kids can come to appreciate the great outdoors, and whether worshipping Mother Nature is replacing organized religion.

How did someone who spent some of his formative years in chilly Buffalo, NY, end up encouraging people to spend more time outside?

I came out of college back East and started working in an outdoor program for teens. I spent the early part of my career working in wilderness therapy. Through my work with young people, I saw the therapeutic effects of being in nature. By working outdoors, I also became educated about the environment. I was a professional river rafting guide in the Grand Canyon, where I learned about ecosystems, water politics, and environmental movements. I also worked for Greenpeace for a time. Inspired by some of my mentors, I became a psychologist. Then I heard about this idea of ecopsychology.

What exactly is ecopsychology?

I think of it as areas within psychology or mental health disciplines that have a connection with the environment or sustainability. The term ecopsychology is attributed to Theodore Roszak, author of *The Voice of the Earth—An Exploration of Ecopsychology* (Simon & Schuster, 1992). His work was basically a rallying cry for linking our own health with the health of the planet, or the global psyche.

There isn't an official "ecopsychology disorder." Environmental issues can spark feelings that can become

a disorder: adjustment disorder, anxiety disorder, depression, post-traumatic stress, etc. These kinds of disorders can stem from concern about the environment or negative experiences or intense stress.

Are a lot of people anxious about their relationship with the environment?

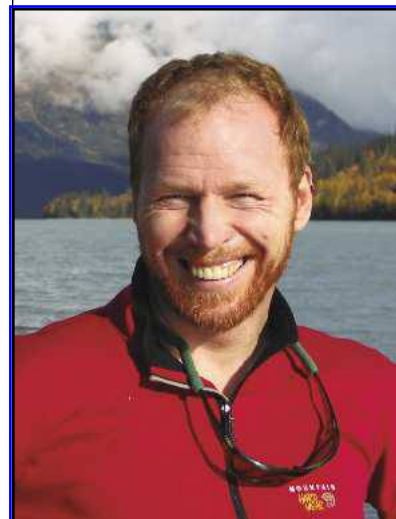
It depends on the person and on how strongly they identify with the environment. To me, eco-anxiety is normal-range fear, apprehension, or concern about threats to human health and the health of the planet. I think concern for your environment is very normal and healthy. This concern could generate more serious worry or have impacts on a person's life in certain cases that could develop into an anxiety disorder. I haven't seen a lot of that.

What's causing stress over the environment?

There are vulnerabilities or proneness toward debilitating anxiety when there's a severe disconnect between a person's values and the lifestyle that person is living. Anxiety can occur when someone has just had a strong consciousness-raising experience but is not receiving validation from family or friends. Former outdoor professionals who have had a lifestyle change that lessens their connection with nature can be more vulnerable to eco-anxiety, as can news junkies who are exposed to all kinds of negative, troubling information without balancing that with relaxation and a healthy lifestyle.

Should people with eco-anxiety pursue a career in the field of sustainability? Would working in the field quell that anxiety?

Service in the field of sustainability can provide a healthy channel for your concerns about the state of the planet and an opportunity to see yourself as being 'part of the solution.' This is a good time for a reminder about personal sustainability. Throwing yourself into action, however well-intentioned, without self-nurturing habits, a supportive network of friends and colleagues, and a 'long view' of your goals isn't sustainable and can be a recipe for burn-out.



Thomas Joseph Doherty

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What does an ecopsychologist do that a run-of-the-mill therapist wouldn't?

Some ecopsychology practices would include helping people to understand their environmental identity, to balance different priorities they may have, and to integrate a developing sense of sustainability. For example, many people need help balancing their sustainability values with their need to support their families or to advance their careers. That's where I tend to work. Recently, I have also been interested in ways to help people manage apprehensions about climate change or their ecological footprint, or so called 'eco-anxiety.'

Other practitioners may be doing forms of ecotherapy, generally seen as therapy outside of the office, such as through a therapeutic hike in the park. Such ecotherapists might have patients spend restorative time in nature, on a retreat, or on an indigenous-style vision quest, where you would camp in the wilderness for a few days, potentially fast, and be in solitude.

Do urban jungle-dwelling city slickers really embrace "into the wild"-type experiences?

What's interesting today is that even people who are urban dwellers are thinking about sustainability. New York City itself has a smaller ecological footprint than most places because of the density of the buildings and because people walk a lot—even if they don't necessarily see trees when they do. I

wouldn't see a Woody Allen-type character going out to a nature retreat, but I potentially see someone like that valuing protection of species and protection of green spaces.

How does a therapist become an ecopsychologist?

There isn't any sort of credential for ecopsychologists. There's no certification, so practitioners tend to be self-identified.

Are ecopsychology courses even being offered in graduate school?

There are a few. I developed one, which I teach at the Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling here in Portland. For the most part, ecopsychology has been addressed by programs outside the mainstream, like Naropa University in Boulder, CO; Antioch University Seattle; the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, CA; and Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, CA. These courses are still making inroads into mainstream psychology and counseling programs. Like other interdisciplinary enterprises, ecopsychology doesn't neatly fit into the academic system in the same way that it's difficult to see where sustainability programs should be housed. Because of the counter-cultural nature of its early theories and writings, ecopsychology did not initially find a place in academia. This was exacerbated by the split between practitioners and academics that tends to exist in psychology anyway.



Also, the ecology component shouldn't be forgotten. Academic ecologists who are studying animal species and conservation biology don't see themselves doing anything in terms of mental health practice or therapy, so they are wary of this new subject. It's a tough sell sometimes.

The academic climate is changing, though. I gave a paper at the American Psychological Association last summer, and I'm giving one this summer, so this is being talked about at mainstream conferences. A climate change task force is forming at the APA.

What might be covered in an ecopsychology curriculum?

As an adjunct professor at Lewis & Clark, I teach courses on ecopsychology and wilderness therapy. The plan is to develop a sequence of courses with an introduction to ecopsychology, an ecotherapy course, some coursework on advocacy, and some courses on organizational behavior change looking at how environmental issues can be framed in psychologically effective ways. For instance, how do you create effective recycling programs? How do you change behavior on large scale?

Lewis & Clark prides itself on its environmental credibility. This kind of coursework fits in very well there, and students are quite hungry for it. I think you're seeing a similar occurrence in businesses and organizations that are more socially responsible and seeing the triple bottom line.

Do companies hire psychologists to help them change behavior within the corporation itself?

They should. More are doing so.

What would Sigmund Freud think of ecopsychology if he were alive today?

Freud's work, in particular his recognition of an 'oceanic feeling' of oneness with the world discussed in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), is often evoked in ecopsychology. If Freud could see our societal responses to climate change, I think he would find his theories on psychological defense mechanisms like denial or repression to be well-supported.

Is the environment replacing religion?

A lot of interesting things are happening in terms of green spirituality. The environment is being seen by a number of religious faiths as being part of their programs. Many people who don't necessarily have an attachment to an organized religion see themselves as being spiritual, and they find their spiritual connection in nature, whether watching sunrises and sunsets or sitting on a mountaintop. They get in touch with the cosmos and the larger order of things. There's definitely a spiritual component to the outdoors for many people.

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For More Information

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New Journal on Ecopsychology for 2009

Thomas Doherty is assuming the editorship of a new peer-reviewed journal on the theory and practice of ecopsychology. The journal, to be published by Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. (www.liebertpub.com), will debut early next year. To receive further information, please e-mail ecopsychology@liebertpub.com.