

Why Ecopsychology Needs Natural History

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Abstract

As human-nature relationships become ever more tenuous, the promise of ecopsychology is more important than ever. But ecopsychology has tended to focus its attentive power on the human side of this relationship, on psychology, and has thus also tended to generalize when engaging the beyond-human, “eco” half of the equation. Often, nature stands in as an abstraction rather than a complex web of significant relationships. Natural history, as a practice of intentionally focused attention to specifics of the nonhuman world, offers a method for learning to see a richly animated world—and the patterns that connect us all. In the practice of doing natural history, signals originating from ecological realities alter sensory habits and perceptual expectations—and shape new ways of seeing. We become more perceptive, more ecologically informed, and more wholesome as our shifting sensibilities influence consciousness and actions. While the myriad nonhuman others gain proper names and identities and a literal presence in our minds, we become iteratively more receptive to the world beyond our human constructions. Here, we speculate that our modern human malaise becomes less salient as nonhuman wonders enter and reshape our minds. Key Words: Ecopsychology—Natural history—Attention—Vision.

Over the quarter century of its flickering existence, ecopsychology has offered a treasure trove of useful inquiry into the interface between what is true in the biophysical world and what is mirrored and operative in our human psyches. Ecopsychological thinkers have faithfully scoured a range of literatures and perspectives in order to describe who we moderns are, essentially for the purpose of revealing the state of our psychologies

with respect to the natural world. We’ve found a collective psyche suffering from high degrees of alienation and depression (Glendinning, 1994), escalating anxiety (Albrecht, 2012; Stephens-Davidowitz, 2016), and amplified narcissism (Fisher, 2012; Gray, 2014). Relationships of all sorts are mediated and circumscribed by electronic screens lacking in three-dimensional depth and by highly personalized and commodified digital feeds (Pariser, 2011). As a result, some believe that our experience of depth is impoverished (Abram, 2010; Sewall, 2012) and that we have little remaining imagination (Jensen, 2011) or ability to sustain a focus of attention (Carr, 2010).

Although the analysis of collective depression, anxiety, and narcissism in relation to modern experience has been telling and useful, it bodes poorly for expanding a truly relational field or for sincere and sustained curiosity about nonhuman others. Ecopsychology claims to be a field of inquiry concerned with the human-nature relationship and with reciprocal relations, yet we rarely name nonhumans with an honorable degree of specificity. Rather, we often refer to vague notions of “Nature.” When speaking about plants and animals, our language is frequently limited to the realm of superordinate categories, referring to trees and birds, for example, or evergreens and ducks—not to spruces or mergansers, much less to Red-breasted Mergansers (Altran & Medin, 2008). Even those of us who expound on the virtue of wonderment often miss the full-throated wonder of relations, like the wild croaks and thrown-back heads of Hooded Mergansers in mating or the large leks of Wood Frogs sending sonorous vibrations throughout a neighborhood while vying for fruitful amplexus.

We rarely speak even this specifically, costing us closeness with the other—the ones we commonly call “it.” Native American ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2017) is clear about this: “We would never refer to another human as ‘it.’ Such grammar would be disrespectful and rude. ‘It’ robs a person of their humanity and reduces them to the lowly status of an object.”

Without looking long enough to know the name of whom we speak (or to whom we speak), we should not be surprised to find that we see,

understand, and feel less. We should not be surprised that we marvel less—and that we are often dispirited. We might also imagine—and perhaps should recognize—this condition as a form of sensory and sensual impoverishment. At the very least, it leaves us superficially engaged with the more-than-human other and less than fully enlivened.

This may sound too critical, but consider: How can we possibly claim to be sincerely interested in planetary life and committed to healthy human-nature relationships if we do not know the name and kinship of our ecological neighbors? How can we begin to appreciate lives beyond ours without specifically referring to what we see or to whom we speak?

Natural history—“a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy” (Fleischner, 2005)—is a pathway for digging ourselves out of a relentless hall of mirrors. It provides an accessible method for re-engagement with a richly patterned, textured, and animated world, and for becoming more ecologically informed human animals. Natural history is also the oldest, continuous human tradition; as hunter-gatherers, the necessity of identifying species, tracks, patterns of animal behavior, edible plants, and ecological niches shaped our perceptual and cognitive capacities (Shepard, 1978/1998). Our evolution—what makes us distinctly human—in response to the specifics of the surrounding environment both required and honed remarkable perceptual skill (Isbell, 2009)—including our capacity to quickly orient, focus, and sustain attention.

As a practice, natural history demands our attention in this “old way” (Hasbach, 2012)—and this is critical for overcoming self-interest, shifting our view, and easing our anxiety. First, to know something about the other, we must look at specific birds and insects, trees, flowers, and fish more than once in order to identify species and behaviors. Whatever the focus of our attention may be, the act of attending repeatedly is precisely what is required for perceptual learning, for shifting neural networks and seeing the world differently (Li and Gilbert, 2014). By doing natural history, our eyes thus become honed to a natural scheme—and this might be precisely how we re-find wonder and ease our alienation and anxiety.

This is only partly speculation. What we know for certain is that our neuroplastic shift with every attentive look and that particular neural networks—representing particular facets of the world around us—are strengthened with use or repetition (Kilgard and Merzenich, 1998). With nearly equal certainty we can presume that the escalating loss of biodiversity—what many call the Sixth Extinction (e.g., Kolbert, 2014)—is driving us mad, or at least fueling collective shame and anxiety (Doherty and Clayton, 2011). We also

know that anxiety disables us, particularly with respect to decision-making (Bergland, 2016). In an era rife with environmental decisions to be made, our anxious incapacity could be ecologically, socially, and psychologically catastrophic.

Ecopsychology must be bold at this time—and as a community with shared values and a common voice, we must know who and what we are talking about.

Natural history is the practice of paying attention to whatever is of the earth and beyond our human-centric lives. By expanding the narrow scope of our “screen dazzled eyes” (Abram, 2010) to focus on that which is outside and natural, we restore our ability to orient and sustain our attention (Kaplan, 1995). With a little practice, we become more alert to flickers of movement in leafy trees, to subtle shifts of light, or to the unique pattern of petal and stamen. With attention to nuance, and to natural patterns across scales and domains, we are literally in-formed (that is, literal in neuroplastic terms) by diverse life-forms and animal antics; by myriad forms of adaptation; by the signs and signals produced by whole beings, populations, ecosystems, and landscapes. For the psyche—the soul-making part of us in search of meaning—what is “on display” (Hillman, 1975) when looking with a natural-history eye at raptors and migration patterns, or flocks, pollinators and phenology, swarms, pods, and natural landscapes, are specific, extraordinary, and astonishing forms of organic wholeness and interdependence.

If we deny countless beings the dignity of identity and wholeness, nature will remain abstract to us—meaning not real enough to make a difference. In conjunction, our own willful existence, our own natural thrust toward a larger, participatory wholeness, toward interdependent well-being, will remain impoverished. With the dimmed and distracted lenses common to current culture and habit—with our relentless focus on human artifacts, we easily miss the patterns that define and distinguish whole, self-willed, self-organizing beings, and the telling patterns that connect us all (Bateson, 1979).

Rather, if we wish to be full participants in wholesome relationships with the neighborhood of natural beings, and the larger realm of planetary life, ecopsychologists would be wise to be more specific—not with respect to empirical methods or analysis but with respect to the nonhuman other. Doing natural history does this for us, as simply as sorting out the scrub jays from the blue jays, the warblers from the wrens. Our capacity to pick up signals, make distinctions, and know who is in the neighborhood improves with every attentive look. With both diversity and commonality on display, our eyes become more finely tuned, our neuroplastic senses recovering their evolved capacity to see patterns and likeness, distinctions, relationships, and adaptive invention.

It is believed that our brains receive eleven million bits of incoming information every second (Herman, 2016), all of it shaping our brains and our next way of noticing. In the few seconds of an attentive sensory infusion of another, signals stream into our eyes, and neural fibers hum with wonder or recognition. If the subject of our attention is of-a-life, depicting some sort of unique, organic wholeness, we, our self-organizing neural-net selves, organically shift toward becoming more ecologically aware and inclined. In that case, our internal brain change makes our human emotional problems—our depressions and anxieties—a smaller percentage of who we are. In these moments, we renew ourselves, becoming more integrated with a world beyond ourselves. By definition, we become less alienated.

The challenges we now face need an ecopsychology that is robust and sincere. This fractured world demands that we dig deeply into our fields of inquiry for nuggets of useful information about the human mode and psyche—and be as alert and responsive as we human animals were meant and gifted to be. The good news is that we were born to be attentive to the animated and vibrant worlds outside ourselves—to be true natural historians.

We must simply linger longer, look closer, and peer further. Binoculars and a hand lens help.

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