

Toward Reciprocity in Healing: Introduction to the Special Issue

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One of us once wrote, “As we heal ourselves, we heal the world. And vice versa.” That belief fueled the conception of a gathering among the red rocks of Sedona, Arizona, on *Reciprocal Healing: Nature, Health, and Wild Vitality*. Organized by the Natural History Institute, the gathering was designed as a confluence of three primary streams: psychology, medicine, and natural history. From the inspiring opening talk by Robin Wall Kimmerer to the rousing concluding remarks by Kathleen Dean Moore,* psychologists, physicians, naturalists, healers, artists, and activists of all kinds gathered to share a growing awareness of the numerous ways in which nature heals humans—and how we might give back to a generous earth.

The notion of *reciprocity* was the primary confluence theme. The word reciprocal comes from the Latin, *reciprocus*, meaning to move backward and forward. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “of the nature of a return made for something; given, felt, shown, etc. in return,” or simply “mutual.” We chose to focus the gathering, and this issue, on *reciprocal healing* because nature is so commonly approached as a *resource* for human healing, without giving in return, without concern for the health of natural ecological relationships or the more-than-human others. This asymmetrical approach—to think that only *human* healing matters—is part of a larger systemic or cultural problem, a utilitarian worldview in which nature is always at our service. But how can we expect the wonders of nature to serve our healing if the natural world itself is overused, depleted, and degraded?

Quite obviously, sustainable planetary systems of all sorts must include a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and the natural order.

Reciprocity is easy enough to understand as a concept, but it is challenging to manifest. We are habitually human-focused, continuously concerned with ourselves, and too commonly unaware of ourselves as a profoundly impactful part of nature. As a consequence, we end up forgetting the other half of the equation, the back-and-forth-ing required for *all* of us to be healthy.

And just what *is* healing? The words *whole* and *heal* derive from the same Old English and Proto-German roots. For at least seven hundred years our language has recognized that wholeness and healing sprout from the same source (Fleischner, 2017). The task of healing is to strive to make the individual, the collective self and the wider, more-than-human world whole again.

Confluence participants were encouraged to submit articles to this special issue of *Ecopsychology*, but the invitation for submissions went out more broadly to anyone inspired by the confluence themes. In the interval between the confluence and publication of this special issue, the world was turned upside down by the novel coronavirus. This pandemic and the isolation, reflection, and quarantines it has spawned made the fundamental human need to connect with the natural world even more self-evident, becoming the subject of numerous mainstream news stories and highlighting the value of Nature for human health. However, in the midst of widespread panic, it has created a context in which recognition of the healing value of nature was markedly one-sided, lacking in any impulse toward reciprocity.

As you'll witness in the ten contributions that follow, authors have named the healing wonders of nature and also worked to tease out how we might “give back.” They offer a diversity of voices and perspectives—as story tellers, clinicians, research scientists, artists, educators, and weary activists—but they have all begun with taking notice, with giving attention to that which is beyond our human selves.

*Both available at naturalhistoryinstitute.org/reciprocal-healing

Lisa Maria Madera opens this issue with a personal and contemplative reflection on the red rock landscape where the confluence took place, on the surprising arrival of rain in that dry desert, and on the healing of despair followed by a palpable desire to give thanks and rejoice in a community of human and more-than-human others.

Harry W. Greene also reflects on the confluence by burrowing into his observation that love of the world manifested in very different—sometimes conflicting—ways among participants. He further explores the significance of these differences for environmental ethics, seeking an approach that is pragmatic, participatory, and reverential. Greene's article thus opens the door for possible forms of reciprocal healing relations.

Artist Edie A. Dillon takes us beyond the confluence with stories that demonstrate reciprocity—her young son putting stranded jellyfish back into the sea, for example. They are stories showing myriad ways we might care for the nonhuman other, highlighted by coastal tribes of Western North America adapting traditional potlatch gatherings to modern conditions in order to ensure reciprocal relations between people and with nature.

The gift of health and well-being, so generously given by the natural world to humans, is well documented in the next article. Anna O'Malley draws on her experience as a community health physician to argue for inclusive and natural systems of care, and to support a call for necessary changes in our health care system.

In the following article, Usha Varanasi cautions against an overly utilitarian view of nature and healing. She connects her bicultural training as a physical scientist and her many years in the realm of environmental policy with matters of human health, highlighting the importance of shifting individual and societal attention to preventive measures to maintain both human and ecological health. Varanasi ultimately calls for a respectful, reverential approach to the entire living world.

Gary P. Nabhan and colleagues explicitly connect ecological and human health by weaving together insights from ecological restoration, rewilding, and our understanding of microbiomes. In particular, these authors explore how restoring microbiotic soil crusts and aromatic plant guilds in urban heat islands can reduce the costly psychological and physical impacts of disease.

T. Elliott Floyd and colleagues also emphasize psychological benefits—in this case, offered by introducing natural elements into the practice of clinical hypnosis. The article demonstrates respect for nature's healing powers and begins to contemplate the possibility that clinical settings utilizing natural elements foster environmental ethics.

In an exploration of how environmental ethics might be fostered, Rachel Yerbury and colleagues ask how differing forms of experience, or encounters, with marine wildlife influence anthropocentric versus eco-centric beliefs and actions. Although the patterns of experience and response are not always clear, they do indicate the importance of direct, unmediated experience for generating ecological, interdependent—and by extension—reciprocal modes of thinking and acting.

Sara L. Warber and colleagues address the question: How do we change our collective behavior toward modes more supportive of reciprocal healing? They present details of a methodology that can cohere, inspire, and cull the benefits of transdisciplinary working groups, providing examples from a case study of their own project that examines women's stories and experiences of human and planetary healing, with the goal of reimagining human lifeways.

Finally, Louise Weber offers clear and practical examples of reciprocal healing, including her own willingness to change her mode of teaching. Through a series of experiential exercises, Weber teaches students of ecology and medicine to take notice of the natural world around them and to recognize the ways in which nature may heal each of us. Weber suggests that this deepened knowing of nature is the first step on a developmental path toward giving back—exemplified by older volunteers doing prairie grass restoration.

The commonality between these diverse writers is their sincere, observant inclusion of the natural world. Reciprocal healing has to begin there—with recognition of, and gratitude for, Others. To that end, we believe that natural history offers a clear, unadorned pathway to mutual engagement. We use the term to mean an inclusive and active practice—"a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy" (Fleischner, 2011, p. 5). Natural history in this context is a verb, not a noun—a *practice*, something we *do* (Fleischner, 2017)—and if we are *doing* natural history, we are paying attention to earthly beings and natural ways.

Paying attention to scenes and events beyond our individual needs or desires, and beyond our daily experience, changes what and how we see (Sewall, 2012). Our wonderfully adaptive brains shift in every attentive moment, and we begin to see more than our habitual expectations and projections; we see more of our surroundings; and we learn to see who is with us here, on this planet and in our neighborhoods. In this way, we become truly well-informed and are wondrously rewarded by beauty in numerous guises. That's a gift—and as in the potlatch tradition, the gift must always move (Hyde, 1983). We find ourselves doing prairie restoration, building soil, or learning the

names of songbirds and celebrating a sky full of birdsong—or joining a “mighty roar” (Robin Wall Kimmerer, personal communication at the confluence) of impassioned voices. We then find ourselves being passionate, with even more desire to give—and that, of course, is healing for all.

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