Toward an Ecological Paradigm in Adventure Programming

Almut Beringer

Many forms of adventure therapy, in particular wilderness therapy, rely on challenges in the outdoors to achieve objectives of client change. While nature is drawn on as a medium for therapy and healing, some adventure therapists give nature little if any mention when it comes to explaining therapeutic success. The dominant paradigm in psychology and psychotherapy provides insights as to why the contributions of nature in the curative relationship are, at times, marginalized. To more fully understand why and how adventure therapy works, the role of nature as a force in human development needs to be considered. It is proposed that ecotherapy and nature-guided therapy are viable alternative theoretical frameworks for adventure therapy. Ecotherapy and nature-guided therapy provide a critical perspective on adventure and wilderness therapy in that they recognize a social, cultural, and environmental/ecological context to human well-being and behavior. Furthermore, they explicitly acknowledge the potential healing power of natural environments and natural features. Adventure therapy and wilderness therapy may be revisioned in light of ecotherapy and nature-guided healing.

Keywords: Adventure therapy, Ecotherapy, Nature-guided healing.

Ecological paradigm

Almut Beringer, Ph.D. lectures in environmental studies in the Dept. of Outdoor Education and Environment at La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia. She can be contacted by e-mail at: a.beringer@latrobe.edu.au
Miles and Priest's *Adventure Programming* (1999), a standard textbook in adventure learning and therapy, reflects assumptions regarding the natural worlds and the context for adventure which are common and widespread in the fields of adventure learning and experiential education. At a time where planetary sustainability and sustainable development are becoming mainstream, normative principles, these assumptions (explicit in some parts of the text and implicit in the lay-out of the book), provide opportunity for re-thinking the relationship between adventure and natural environments. In short, natural settings have long provided the medium and opportunity for adventure learning and therapy. Yet theoretical frameworks and explanatory models of why and how adventure programming works rarely give sufficient credit to how simply "being in nature" can contribute to personal development, healing, and therapeutic success. The author explores some of the reasons why natural environments may have been neglected as a force in human development in adventure programming research, theory, and practice. Further, the author proposes an alternative framework: An ecological paradigm which not only recognizes the web of relationships between clients/students, therapists/instructors and adventure, but which also recognizes that all adventure learning occurs in biophysical environments.

The underlying conceptualizations in *Adventure Programming* suggest a deep divide between adventure programming and environmental issues. For instance, environmental matters are considered "extensions of" rather than fundamental issues in adventure programming (Section 10) and the natural setting is limited to "wilderness" (Section 8). This may be interpreted as an invitation to reflect on how natural environments are conceived in adventure programming circles, and to investigate the conceptual, empirical, theoretical, and practical aspects of the relationship between adventure programming and natural environments. This paper provides an analysis of several understandings of natural settings which seem prevalent in adventure programming, and traces some of the reasons why these understandings may be dominant in the field.

Where is Nature? One View of Adventure Therapy

In *Adventure as Therapy*, Gillis and Ringer define adventure therapy as being:
The deliberate, strategic combination of adventure activities with therapeutic change processes with the goal of making lasting changes in the lives of participants. Adventure provides the concrete, action-based, experiential medium for therapy. The specific activity is (ideally) chosen to achieve a particular therapeutic goal. (1999, chap. 4, p. 29)

Many adventure therapists and programmers, regardless if they are academics and/or practitioners, accept this definition without hesitation or concern, agreeing that adventure therapy is a form of psychological intervention which relies on activities with managed risk, deliberately selected by the therapist, which the client perceives as adventure. The psychological and/or physical challenge which arouses a state of heightened awareness in the client, the uncertain outcome, the group activity, the unusual settings (e.g., the wilderness or a ropes course), and the immediate feedback regarding the client’s behavior, which the challenge affords, all contribute to the intended therapeutic success.

Immediately following this definition, Gillis and Ringer (1999) provide two examples to illustrate this view of adventure therapy. It is their choice of examples in relation to their conceptualization of adventure therapy that creates tensions, and that raises issues regarding the place and role of the natural worlds within adventure therapy:

The specific activity is (ideally) chosen to achieve a particular therapeutic goal. For example, having two persons who have difficulties in their relationship, such as a father and son or husband and wife, paddle a canoe will require them to cooperate in order to be successful. A 14-day backpacking trip for a group of adjudicated youth provides a self-contained purposeful therapeutic community where tasks as erecting tents, reading a compass, or cooking a meal provide challenges in communication and discipline which can be utilized for therapeutic outcomes. These are just small examples of how adventure can be programmed for therapeutic ends. (p. 29)

The examples, indeed, highlight the elements that make up adventure therapy as described: the challenging activity (canoeing, backpacking), the small group transformed into a community which serves as a therapeutic tool, the therapist’s or therapists’ deliberately chosen activities (journeying, camping, navigating) which provide immediate feedback to the clients if not carried out correctly (e.g., getting cold and wet, losing one’s way, or going hungry). What is striking is the setting where these therapeutic interventions occur, and the venues which make the
adventure possible: the relationship therapy intervention is a river journey, the youth-at-risk program an extended backpacking trip. Both these interventions are outdoor experiences that rely on specific places and particular natural environments to be carried out. It seems the river journey, as well as the extended hike, are fundamental and profound components of the therapeutic intervention. They are essential aspects of the therapeutic experience without which the therapy in each case would not have been possible. Yet in Gillis and Ringer’s (1999) definition of adventure therapy, the natural component to the intervention receives no mention. The outdoors, the setting, the environments, and the natural worlds, which contextualize the adventure in which outdoor adventure therapy is embedded, remain invisible. The potential contribution of the natural setting to therapeutic success is unacknowledged and hence, also un-theorized.

Gillis and Ringer’s (1999) definition of adventure therapy fails to mention the settings or environments for adventure—any setting or environment, be it natural (e.g., wilderness), urban, artificial (e.g., an indoor climbing wall) or constructed (e.g., a ropes course). It also fails to highlight the interpersonal dimensions (group, client-therapist relationship), focusing instead on adventurous activities. Given this, it is disconcerting that the examples they provide are exclusively outdoor adventure therapy; outdoor adventure therapy that would not have been possible if there had not been a river, or a backcountry for the intervention to take place. The question arises why neither the authors, nor the reviewers of the chapter, seem to have noticed this discrepancy, in particular as Editors, Miles and Priest (1999, p. xiii) differentiate between outdoor pursuits, initiative activities and ropes or challenge courses in their examples of adventurous activities. Furthermore, one of the Editors has written on “wilderness as healing place” (Miles, 1987, p. 4).

This apparent tension between activity, human elements and setting, especially natural setting opens up questions to ask, such as why the oversight of the natural components in adventure therapy might have occurred, and whether or not the neglect of nature in the curative relationship is repeated in wider adventure therapy circles. Ibbott (1999) confirms that ignoring nature as an element of therapy and healing seems to be quite common in adventure therapy. Gillis and Ringer’s (1999) understanding is not an isolated incident, apparently reflecting a tendency in the field. In the review of accurate nomenclature in adventure or wilderness therapy, Ibbott (p. 7) states, “it is worth noting that many of the terms used fail to recognize that it is the wilderness that is the vital therapeutic component.” Before exploring why the natural setting may not be consciously considered as vital to the therapeutic process and success, a brief reflection on nature.
On Nature

References to nature and the natural environment are somewhat sensitive issues, for several reasons. First, the term “nature” has many and varied meanings and connotations, and has undergone developments and interpretation over time (Chambers, 1984; Evernden, 1992; Soper, 1995). Further, nature is notoriously difficult to define (Seddon, 1997). As such, the use of the term requires outlining or at least demarcating its interpretation. Secondly, philosophers of nature and philosophers of perception point out that if indeed there is such a thing as nature “out there”—a notion which is itself contested—all we can ever have is a subjective representation (or construction) of it. This is so because in the human process of perception, physiology and cognition are intertwined to such an extent that our sensual impressions of the world “out there” always result in interpretations (Beard, 2002; Chambers, 1984; Timms, 2001). Therefore, even if two people view the same scene, what they see may be quite different—the subjective interpretation of what is “out there” will be influenced by cultural and individual factors (see Meinig, 1979; Tuan, 1974, 1977; see also Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

The author does not wish to delve into the philosophical debate as to whether or not we can ever know if there is indeed a nature “out there” and what it may be (see, for instance, Chambers, 1984). She acknowledges, however, that such epistemological analysis would surely have several interesting implications for ontological positions within adventure therapy, and subsequent practice. Rather, in the remainder of this paper, the author resorts to the common sense interpretation of nature as the natural world, or worlds; as the green environment, or environments; as the biophysical, material environment. This can take the form of pristine environments (wilderness), semi-natural (e.g., parks), and human-altered environments (urban, artificial, constructed environments). As such, nature includes the spectrum from wilderness to cultural landscapes. For simplicity of discussion, the notion of artificially created natural environments is left out (see Beard, 2002). The point is to alert adventure therapists and programmers to natural environments, in their varied and many types.

Nature and the Environment in Adventure Programming

A comprehensive literature review on the question of how nature is conceptualized and represented in adventure learning and programming is beyond the scope of this paper. It will have to suffice to draw on selected examples from within adventure learning and therapy to balance Gillis and Ringer’s (1999) interpretation. The strand of wilderness therapy, in particular, has long acknowledged the power of natural set-
tings in the therapeutic endeavor, as the following three quotes indicate:

Many programs today use wilderness therapeutic goals of one sort or another. Undoubtedly, both the experiences planned and facilitated by the program leaders and the [wilderness] environment itself [italics added] contribute to the healing effect of wilderness experience. (Miles, 1987, p. 4)

[Wilderness therapy involves the use of traditional therapy techniques, especially those for group therapy, in out-of-door settings, [italics added] utilizing outdoor adventure pursuits and other activities to enhance growth. (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994, p. 13)

The natural world of wilderness, [italics added] adventure and the outdoors [italics added] has a significant therapeutic role to play in the personal, social and spiritual development of human beings. (Ibbott, 1999, p. 7)

McKenzie (2000), too, includes the setting as one of the explanatory factors in her literature review on why adventure education works. However, the therapeutic-curative potential of natural environments, in particular wilderness environments, is not attributed to the inherent qualities of such environments and their psychological effects (Chenery, 2000; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Miles, 1987; Taylor, 1999) but is largely attributed to the state of dissonance created by participants being in an unfamiliar environment, which provides immediate feedback. Only in conclusion to her discussion (and with just one sentence) does McKenzie (p. 20) mention that, "[f]inally, the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of the wilderness environment are considered by some to facilitate personal restoration...and transformation..." The lack of research on the role of the physical environment in achieving therapeutic or educational outcomes (McKenzie, p. 20) is probably one reason why the effect of the natural setting is considered primarily in anthropocentric terms (i.e., wilderness is different from so-called normal, human-mediated environments). Yet the lack of such research is also a reflection of worldviews within adventure education and programming which exclude the natural worlds.

Noticeable in this review is that McKenzie (2000) discusses the physical setting first, out of a total of six factors as to why adventure education works (the remaining five being activities, processing, the group, instructors, and the participant). Whether or not this is deliberate is hard to tell; the effect on the reader is to give the physical environment promi-
nence over those human aspects of adventure education that often receive more, if not sole, attention in attempting to understand and explain adventure programming and therapy.

Another attempt at understanding the potential effects of adventure learning, its power and dynamics, is, once again, more careless regarding the treatment of nature. In a widely-cited meta-analysis of 96 studies in outdoor education and adventure programming, Hattie, Marsh, Neill, and Richards (1997) categorized outcomes. Given the traditional focus on personal and social development in adventure programming, not surprisingly, the authors of this research list 39 categories, out of a total of 40, concerning these personal and interpersonal domains. Only the last category makes reference to the biophysical environment in the form of “environmental awareness.”

While the ranking of outcomes may be disconcerting, but not surprising, it is interesting to note the authors’ findings as they succeed in stepping out of their preconceived notions of what an adventure program might achieve. They write: “In adventure programs, the highest ranking of importance for participants is the enjoyment of nature” (Hattie et al., 1997, p. 76). Taking this finding into account, the authors conclude: “it may be that a model based on enhancing environmental concerns and relationship with nature could be valuable in explaining the substantial changes that can result from adventure programs” (Hattie et al., p. 76). Here, Hattie et al., allude to the healing powers of the natural worlds which have long been known, and which are now being documented empirically (see Frumkin, 2001). Therapeutic success in the outdoors might, in part, be due to human-environment dynamics which can only be understood and explained via a theoretical framework that encompasses intrapersonal, human-human, and human-nature relationships, and which awaits further empirical study and analysis (see DeLay, 1996; Taylor, 1999).

These alternative explanatory models, which include and explicitly make reference to natural environments and their potential contributions to the therapeutic endeavor, are to date, still marginal and underrepresented in the adventure programming literature (see, e.g., Nichols, 2000; cf. Amesberger, n.d.; Barrett & Greenaway, 1995). How can the relative absence of nature in understanding the power and success of outdoor adventure learning and programming be explained and/or justified, given research on the restorative and therapeutic effects of natural environments, in general, and the differential effects of certain environments, in particular (see Frumkin, 2001; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Ulrich, 1981, 1983, 1984; Ulrich, Simons, & Losito, 1991)? The reasons for the anthropocentric bias in adventure learning and programming are rooted in disciplinary perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and
research assumptions and paradigms within psychology. These paradigms within psychology have profoundly affected adventure learning and programming. The next section explores some of these paradigms.

**Disciplinary Paradigms in Psychology**

The therapeutic use of the outdoors has a long and cross-cultural history. Adventure programming has grown out of the social sciences rather than the environmental sciences. Many adventure therapy practitioners are trained in psychology, psychotherapy and/or social work rather than having a background in the environmental studies disciplines. Consequently, formative influences in adventure therapy have come from disciplinary paradigms in psychology, rather than perspectives which honor non-human life and which study human-nature relationships.

Psychology concerns itself with intra and interpersonal phenomena; as such, the natural worlds have traditionally been considered to be beyond the scope of concern and study in this discipline (Kidner, 1994). Nature is the research object and task for the natural sciences. Whether or not it is cognitive, behavioral experimental, or clinical psychology, environmental aspects have been regarded as complicating rather than illuminating human phenomena and the study of human beings. Rather than potentially improving understanding and prediction of human behavior and its underlying thought, feeling and spiritual processes, analyzing situational and contextual elements to human activity have been seen to confound or "pollute" psychological investigations. As Kidner writes, reflecting on why psychology has commented so little on environmentally destructive human behaviors and pro-environment behavior changes:

> The psychological image of the person, and, to a considerable extent, the experience of personhood, are today based on a reduced form of the self—one largely shorn of intuition, spirituality, and relatedness to natural context. Overwhelmingly, psychology has adopted, with little critical reflection, the same anthropocentric, individualistic ideology that, I have argued, has resulted in the current environmental crisis. (p. 372)

Such an intellectual climate of "subjectivist reductionism" (Kidner, p. 363) has made possible Skinnerian behaviorism and studying rats in artificial clinical laboratory settings with the view of understanding human behavior in "real life." How much is adventure learning and programming being influenced by such views?

A notable exception to the absence of relationships in psychology, and the reduction of human beings to atomistic, individual units
(Kidner, 1994) is social psychology. To some extent, social psychology acknowledges that human beings are, at all times, defined by, and contextualized in, relationships, and that the "atomistic individuation" celebrated in mainstream psychology is just one view of self and personhood, and, when considered cross-culturally, an uncommon one (Kidner, 1994). Thus, the relational self, a conceptualization of self and personhood not as isolated individual, but as a being networked in and held by relations, becomes a real alternative. Yet, again, due to disciplinary worldviews which are blind to the natural worlds, the relational self in psychology is characterized and defined by human-human relationships alone (Kidner, 1994; Gilsdorf, 2000). In contrast, the "ecological self" (Mathews, 1991) is a notion that cherishes both human-human and human-nature relationships. In mainstream psychology, including environmental psychology, human-nature relationships are not considered foundational and existential. An ontology and epistemology which includes nature is, to date, still a marginal proposal at best. Nature is neither seen as a context nor as a force for human life, activity, and development (see Kidner, 1994; Fisher, 2002).

Psychological theories of human development built on research in the aforementioned paradigm are highly questionable from the perspective of ecopsychology and human-nature relationships. Given that we can not escape nature, the biophysical environment of life on Earth, and given the lack of a "naturalistic" or nature-based ontology and epistemology in psychology, one can argue that all theories of human development are probably in need of revision. Several psychologists have recognized this, and are addressing some of these shortcomings (Fisher, 2002; Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995; Winter, 1996; see also Hillman, 1975). Why nature is often not thought of as part of the curative relationship in adventure therapy now becomes clear: Many adventure therapists will have been influenced by the individualistic, reductionist paradigms prevalent in psychology during their psychology, social work, and/or psychotherapy training and professional development.

Given that nature is beyond the scope of the discipline, the condition and health of natural environments has not been an issue for most psychologists, social workers, and/or psychotherapists, as well. Consequently, concern over the state of local, regional, and/or the global environments is largely absent or marginalized as "extensions" in adventure programming research, theory, and practice. Responsibility for the physical settings on which adventure learning and programming relies, and establishing a "give-and-take" contractual relationship with natural environments, is something not widely debated in the field (see Amesberger, n.d.). This does not deny that some adventure programs and adventure practitioners who are sensitive to environmental issues
include environmental components in their programs and/or lead pro-
environment lifestyles.

In the individualistic paradigm championed by mainstream psy-
chology, it is difficult to see that individual pathologies and social prob-
lems might not only be rooted in individual histories, but also in social rela-
tionships and concern over the state of the world. Barrows (1998), for
instance, highlights how mental health issues and behavioral challenges
in youth are linked to, and can be traced back to, concerns over the wel-
fare of the planet. At least in some adolescents, substance abuse and/or
delinquent behavior is not only an individual or family problem, but is
mixed with pessimism for the future and despair for the world (see
Barrows, 1998).

Psychotherapy, on the whole, has been fairly complacent in heal-
ing the world, and in recognizing the link between individual and soci-
etal, or world, pathology. Hence, the integral connection between indi-
vidual healing to world healing has rarely been made. Hillman and
Ventura (1992) for instance, question why despite over a hundred years
of psychotherapy, the world seems to be getting worse. In a review of
Hillman and Ventura's book, Fideler remarks:

Psychotherapy, with Freud and Jung, started off in part dealing with the
sickness of civilization, but today everything is reduced to the individual.
The individual is supposed to cope, get in touch with his [sic] feelings,
and...become assimilated to a system that is itself pathological and dys-
functional. The effect of psychotherapy's underlying assumptions is to help
the individual cope by focusing his [sic] energies inward and, in effect,
anesthetizing the passions and discontent which could otherwise be direct-
ed at the problems of the world [italics added]. (Fideler, 1993, p. 72-73)

Hillman and Ventura's (1992) and Fideler's (1993) critique that
psychotherapy might be focusing too much on the individual and
her/his healing, to the detriment of conceiving healing in a larger sys-
temic context, is something for adventure programmers to contemplate
(see also Goldberg, 2000). Just as psychotherapy has moved toward heal-
ing adolescent behaviors in a family context, so might it move next to
contextualizing individual issues in larger social and environmental
concerns. Outdoor adventure therapy, in particular, might be well placed
to set directions, practicing as it does, in the larger ecological context,
the outdoors.

In sum, the disciplinary paradigm of psychology has relegated the
study of nature to the natural sciences; has negated the context and force
of human-nature relationships in human development and behavior; has, if at all, considered nature as the backdrop for human endeavors; and has not considered the environmental crisis as an issue of concern for research and theory. Thus, adventure therapists may overlook nature as a context/setting and force in therapy, and may limit the curative relationship to the client-therapist-challenge activities triad. How explanatory models might be expanded to address the ecological context of therapy, and whether or not templates exist to do so, is the question for the final section of this article.

**Ecotherapy**

The question of how unconscious disciplinary assumptions and tacit understandings might be brought into conscious awareness and made transparent, to then be reflected upon, changed and/or transcended is in itself an intriguing question for psychology. How might adventure programmers, in particular, and psychologists, in general, become aware of the fact that they may be caught in certain disciplinary paradigms that do not necessarily serve the best, or their intended purpose of healing and growth? Transformative experiences, in which personal reality does not match with accepted theory, resulting in internal cognitive-emotional dissonance, are one avenue. Another avenue is interdisciplinary exchange. Deborah Winter, a psychologist, illustrates the power of both avenues in the introduction to her book, *Ecological Psychology* (1996). Confronted with a polluted river, Winter awoke to how the physical world interpenetrates human civilization; on weekend walks with her partner, a geologist, she discovers the world of rocks and dirt as significant to human life and development.

Psychologists know that internal dissonance can be dealt with in at least two ways: one, by transforming one's belief, values, ideologies, worldviews and/or lifestyles; or two, by suppressing and denying the dissonance, to the best of one's capability. Adventure programming as a field, seems yet to have seriously considered the notion, paraphrasing Winter (1996, p. xv), that there is no easy separation between the human and natural worlds, and between the organic and inorganic worlds. Whether or not the issue of human-nature relationships in adventure programming will be accepted as a dissonance, to be resolved or denied, remains to be seen. Responses to Hattie et al.'s (1997) conclusion, such as Nichols' (2000) research agenda for adventure education, which does not mention the setting or human-nature relationships as focus for empirical work, leave room for doubt as to whether or not adventure programming is open to transformation.

Interdisciplinary discourse, and analysis between adventure programming and environmental studies, can help highlight particular dis-
ciplinary perceptions, and can alert practitioners to the fact that discri-
plinary perspectives are always partial and selective (see Chambers,
1984; Gilsdorf, 2000). This might help adventure educators and pro-
grammers see, like Winter (1996), that nature is not a mere backdrop for
more fascinating beings engaged in challenging activities, but that nature
has value in and of itself. Recognizing inherent value may then be fol-
lowed by accepting responsibility to respect and protect environments
(see the environmental education literature for more detail on this
point). This would then lead facilitators to think, not only about which
activities may be appropriate for which clientele and for which thera-
peutic endeavor, but also to further question which activity or activities
are appropriate, and in which environment(s). Which types of adventure
stimulate participants’ enjoyment of nature? Those challenge activities
which can detract from the environment/setting, and those which focus
attention on participants’ surroundings are issues which can become
central to adventure programming. Practitioners may reject this as com-
plicating adventure programming practice. However, such questions are
an important step toward respecting and drawing on the healing poten-
tial of natural settings. While somewhat intangible, Hattie et al.’s (1997)
findings suggest that these aspects of adventure education can not be
underestimated in achieving positive outcomes.

Nature-guided therapy (Berger, 2003; Burns, 1998), and ecothera-
py (Clinebell, 1996) are alternative therapeutic modalities which can
serve clients, practitioners, and researchers in adventure learning and
programming. Both healing modalities explicitly recognize that human
contact with natural worlds can have very positive psychological and/or
physical effects (for more details see Frumkin, 2001; Ulrich 1981, 1983,
1984; Ulrich et al., 1991). When the natural worlds are included in the-
oretical frameworks to help conceptualize and explain why adventure
education and programming works, alternative research agendas and,
ultimately, theories will emerge which reflect a corrected understanding
of the potential power of adventure programming.

Conclusion

All human activities, including education, therapy and healing,
occur embedded in relationships; in social, as well as human-nature
relationships. At times, these relationships are neglected, disregarded, or
refuted, leading to pathology visible in personal, societal and/or envi-
ronmental crises. Whether or not nature is a wilderness, a semi-natural
park, a cultural landscape (such as the Australian Alps or Scottish
Highlands), or an urban setting like the inner-city, it affects our outer and
inner life profoundly (Frumkin, 2001; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Tuan,
Given this, and given that the individualistic, atomistic conceptualization of the self is one probable cause of the environmental crisis (e.g., Kidner, 1994), the relational or ecological self—the self embedded in, and defined by, human and nature relationships—is a more viable conceptualization for our time (see also Mathews, 1991). Adventure learning and programming is well positioned to champion such an ecological redefinition of self and personhood, working, as it does, not only with intimate therapist-client/instructor-student relationships, but also with group relations in the outdoors.

An ecological adventure education, and an ecological adventure psychology, bring forth fascinating and challenging research questions regarding the interplay of intra and interpersonal with human-nature dynamics in human development, growth, and healing. Eco-adventure programming would bring forth new forms of educational and therapeutic practice; forms of practice which would not only be therapeutic for the client, but which, at the same time, would be therapeutic to the discipline as well as for the world and the Earth. Ultimately, all adventure programming—be it a river trip, an indoor climbing wall, or a ropes course—is eco-adventure programming in that it cannot be divorced from its biophysical setting. Adventure programming committed to healing individuals and the planet would welcome the ecological systems perspective outlined in this article.

Author Note

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