Ecopsychology

RESTORING THE EARTH
HEALING THE MIND

Edited by
Theodore Roszak
Mary E. Gomes
Allen D. Kanner

. . . .

Forewords by Lester R. Brown and James Hillman

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The Wilderness Effect and Ecopsychology

ROBERT GREENWAY

TO ROBERT GREENWAY, ecopsychology is a search for language to describe the human–nature relationship. It is a tool for better understanding the relationship, for diagnosing what is wrong with that relationship, and for suggesting paths to healing. These are issues he has been exploring for more than thirty years. As a wilderness leader, he has seen the profound transformations that take place during extended stays in the wilderness and the equally dramatic changes that occur upon the return to everyday urban life. Based in part upon these experiences, he is creating a theoretical framework and an ecopsychological language that identifies the core of the environmental crisis as arising from a culturally created and maintained *mode of knowing* that dominates Western culture and that, in essence, creates a dualistic split between knower and known (and thus between humans and nature). To reverse our tragic and growing alienation from nature, he deems it essential that we free ourselves from "addiction to dualism" through extended forays into wilderness, meditation, and other awareness-expanding experiences.

When I first brought my interests in wilderness and ecopsychology to the innovative psychology department at Sonoma State University in 1969, they were quite separate activities. I had known from my own life and from incorporating wilderness experiences into Peace Corps training programs in the 1960s that the wilderness experience, if conducted as a retreat from cultural dominance, could have a profound impact on the psyche. And from adopting ecological and systems ideas in educational contexts in the 1960s, I believed that a marriage of the two fields was essential for an understanding, if not a healing, of the human–nature relationship.

As the wilderness courses became in the 1970s a program for training wilderness leaders, and agencies and schools became interested in incorporating wilderness experiences, it became crucial to communicate what *happened* to people in the wilderness. Thus, the wilderness experience gave rise to a search for a language that could reveal the dynamics of the human–nature relationship; the growing public concern over environmental degradation became the motivation. (This reveals my central bias: both ecology and psychologies are, at base, *languages*, and thus the search for an "ecopsychology" is a search for a language as well.)

For me this search was much enhanced by the emergence of transpersonal psychology in the 1970s, in essence a psychological language about relationships. At that time, the issue of the dualistic and isolated "ego" or "self" was fully on the table, and a language of sorts emerged that applied not only to spiritual or psychedelic experiences (with which transpersonalists have from the beginning been enthralled) but to the human–nature relationship as well. This aroused my interests in Jung's theories of this relationship, focused on his concepts of archetype and synchronicity, as well as in Gregory Bateson's ecological (systemic) work on the roots of mental illness. Bateson was a doorway back into John Dewey's magnificent philosophical analysis of dualism, written sixty-five years ago. I also benefited from the psychological work informed by psychedelics (such as that of Stanislav Grof and Ralph Metzner) and by Buddhist practice (notably that of Ken Wilbur and Joanna Macy). Always underlying this quest for language has been the exquisite prose and poetry of the "nature writers" such as Gary Snyder, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Aldo Leopold, Richard Nelson, and many others, who were indeed finding a voice to express our relationship to nature. Any "new"

ecopsychological language would need to be cognizant of, and complementary to, the languages already flowing and flowering about humans and nature.

So what had been a wonderful but naive practice, the escape to wilderness, became a very self-conscious study of the dramatic changes people go through during extended (and carefully structured) stays there. "The wilderness experience" and "psychoecology" (as I have been calling ecopsychology over the years) became complementary, two sides of the same coin.

Most of the wilderness excursions were two weeks, although some were for three and even four. It was initially a full-semester course at Sonoma State; as the program developed, it eventually became part of a two-year curriculum (which included everything from intensive physical preparation to courses in psychoecology, transpersonal psychology, wilderness theory, and the like). Thus, participants in a wilderness excursion, drawn from the entire university community (including fellow professors, graduate students from other departments, local psychotherapists and psychiatrists, and various wilderness leaders from around the country) tended to form a tight-knit, cooperative community even before leaving.

The trip itself would be designed to encourage participants to leave behind the props of culture and enter fully into wilderness. Food would be carefully organized to be fully nutritious but "just enough." Only items essential to health and safety were allowed (no books! no cameras! not even writing paper).

As much as possible, everything prior to and during a trip would be ritualized—driving to the trailhead, dividing the food, weighing the packs, distributing community equipment, then later everyday activities such as ways of walking or cooking. Special attention would be paid to crossing the boundary into wilderness, often in the form of a river or stream. Within a few days, participants would speak of being "home," and I would know that we had crossed into wilderness psychologically as well as physically.

In the first few days on the trail there was much basic instruction as well—sanitation, walking and pack techniques, skills of fire building and shelter installation, very careful and detailed instruction in "no impact" camping.

The pace, direction, and many of the activities were decided by the group as a whole. Everything short of life-threatening situations was decided by consensus. A group might be athletic, energetic, full of ideas and plans, or quiet, contemplative, even lazy. The point was for the group to become as fully empowered and safe as possible. This reduced stress, but it also opened possibilities of relating to wilderness in unique ways—ways closed to groups of strangers, casual friends, or individuals.

Since the "wilderness course" was much talked about around the university, many of the same practices were repeated from year to year: an "alone time" lasting three or more days; all-night chanting rituals; climbs to peaks at sunrise or sunset or in silence in the moonlight; separate camps for several days for men and women, with ritualized ways of coming back together; and, more rarely, exploring the wilderness together. Occasionally a trip would be occupied with heavy weather, illness, or "something to work out in the group," although the trips were not advertised as therapy or healing but rather as opportunities to explore one's relationship with nature.

Participants often became ebullient to find that fears prior to the trip proved unfounded. Occasionally someone expressed boredom or tried to goad the group into conflict or various feats of derring-do. For the most part, though, just *being* in the wilderness, alone and together, and the simple acts of living and moving together, leaving no trace, cooking and sleeping, tuning in to fire and water and various celestial events, became the fully occupying agenda. Together we experienced the incredible drama of a genuine relationship between humans and nature unfolding.

The following was written after a trip some years ago. I hope it might convey a little of the flavor of my particular approach and the kinds of physical and psychological changes that the trips might elicit.

> There were twelve of us on a warm June day along the upper reaches of the Middle Fork of the Eel River in Northern California—one of the few completely healthy, undammed rivers left in the state.
>
> As it happened we were six men and six women, two of whom were sisters, one twenty-two and the other fourteen; their father was one of the men.
>
> We were near the end of a two-week trip; we had gone as deep into the center of the wilderness as we could, and as deep into our hearts and minds. We had adopted games and structures we knew would open us beyond our

familiar constraints. Now, in the fullness of our opening, our ability to feel and understand reached unexpected depths. We were astonished at the limitations of our precious assumptions about ourselves.

We had awakened our bodies by plunging daily in the still-frigid, snow-fed waters, awakened to the sun from the peaks at dawn, and chanted nonsense sounds alone and together. We had prayed, laughed, and cried, told our stories, shared long silences, and become children again when the sisters' father one warm evening taught us the "real way" to play kick the can.

We had gone out alone like heroes on grail quests in search of dramatic and important visions that would guide our lives and make our decisions for us. Instead, we found in tiny scale and modest simplicity perfection all around us: a column of ants dragging home the last remnants of may flies; sensuous manzanita trunks rising like red muscled limbs out of banks of chartreuse moss; small trout flashing in the pools; every brooklet a lovely series of miniature waterfalls, making chords with the pools as if tuned by a master musician intimate with our deepest emotions.

We had fasted, and with parched lips facing east all day had felt the sun moving over our heads from front to back, the north wind drying our tears as we waited and watched, released slow breath by slow breath into deepening surrender, into webs of meanings that seemed to reach into our cores and beyond.

And so, back together after such work on this particular day, our last before leaving, we scrambled downriver over rocks and through pools, splashing, noisy, pulled to something, some place, perhaps something beyond image; we weren't exactly sure.

We came upon a huge pool that seemed bottomless—shadings of blue-green darkening almost to black in the depths; sheer walls of blue-gray slate rising thirty feet above either bank; huge rounded boulders above and below the pool, over which the water poured in gushing falls. We knew without speaking that we had found "the place."

We fell silent at the sight, knowing somehow that this would be the turning point, "the most sacred," the place of deepest wilderness, for this day, for this trip, for this time in our lives, and perhaps in our entire lives.

We remained silent as, one by one, we entered the pool. Later someone would comment that for the first time on the trip the water did not shock us. We swam, crawled onto the hot rocks, warming our bodies on the smooth surfaces and contours we each found. Most of us slept for a time. Later some spoke of amazingly vivid dreams.

After a time we gravitated toward a large flat space on top of one of the rocks next to the pool and formed a circle, our habit over the past weeks. And then, without quite knowing how it happened, distance disappeared and there was an openness into ourselves that was an openness to each other,

that embraced the pool, the river, and farther out into the wilderness, the "other world," the whole Earth, the universe.

We looked frankly at each other, enjoying our clear eyes, our health; smiling, weeping, we saw each other as if for the first time, as if there had never been any distance. Some quietly spoke from their hearts, simple things—sharing a memory, thanking someone for a favor.

We sang some of the songs that had been most helpful to us, drawing out our best voices and harmonies, blending in with the sound of the river.

Then a shadow passed over us, a rare golden eagle passing between us and the sun, and we saw that other shadows had lengthened along the canyon walls. With a wild cry someone jumped up and dived again into the pool. We all followed and the water once again was icy, shocking us, tightening our skin.

We walked slowly back to our camp, which now seemed a familiar home, and quietly cooked our meal. As the evening cooled, we were a little shy, and there were many deep looks into the fire.

The younger of the sisters said that night, in our last circle before leaving: "Now I'm ready to go back to the other world. I choose not to let a day like this become a common thing."

So, apart from our stories and poetry, what can be said about the wilderness experience using ecological and psychological language that does justice to the experience and accurately enhances our understanding of it? What is this now much-vaunted "wilderness effect"? Does our struggle to describe it didactically help us develop an "ecopsychology," let alone suggest paths of healing the human disjunction with nature that appears to be destroying possibilities for a human future on this planet?

As literally thousands of groups arise to lead people into various kinds of wilderness experiences, for a wide variety of goals, the resulting "wilderness effect" is increasingly accepted as a given. It is said that without intimacy with nature, humans become mad. It is also said that our culture is pathogenic with regard to natural processes. Thus, it seems healthy to attempt to retreat from "culture" and embrace "natural processes" in their fullest and most pristine forms.

The issue here is the extent to which we can leave culture behind. We leave the urban scene *physically* of course, although it is common among wilderness leaders to speak of the beginning of trips as "cleaning out" times, when the "poisons" presumed to be stored in tissues are released. But if we're "culture bound"—that is, locked into a voracious web of

reinforcements that continually penetrate and are in turn supported by our collective mental processes, then how much change, actual psychological change, can happen in the wilderness?

When entering the wilderness psychologically as well as physically, participants most often speak of feelings of expansion or reconnection. We might interpret these as expansion of "self," or as reconnection with adaptations of our evolutionary past, still layered in our deeper psyches, or simply with complete and fully natural systems (systems which include death, fear, and violence, as well as beauty and elegance, in wondrous balance).

For many the wilderness experience means release of repression—release of the inevitable controls that exist in any culture. Particpants who speak of this benefit tend to see its source not so much in the external wilderness, but in the "internal wilderness" of physiology, instincts, archetypes, and the like.

It is obvious that we are dealing with an extremely diverse experience, which each person tends to remember and to interpret differently. It is also obvious, to me at least, that I am attempting to explore an experience of such depth and complexity that the terms "ineffable" or "spiritual" are appropriate. It appears to be an experience of exquisite beauty and clear impact for most people, and one that either dissolves upon return to the urban culture or places the individual in more or less severe conflict with that culture. Thus, as will all research on "learning" or "therapy" or "transformation," generalizations are always questionable, the research always a challenge.

After a few years mushing around with various approaches to wilderness classes, when things settled down a bit, I began conducting research on the process—for my own edification and to satisfy nervous deans and department heads. From the more than 1,380 persons passing through the program I have collected approximately 700 questionnaires, 700 interviews, 52 longitudinal studies, and more than 300 personal responses to trips (stories, myths, poems, and drawings).

Here are some preliminary descriptive statistics:

90 percent of respondents described an increased sense of aliveness, well-being, and energy;

90 percent stated that the experience allowed them break an addiction (defined very broadly—from nicotine to chocolate and other foods);

80 percent found the return initially very positive;

53 percent of those found that within two days the positive feelings had turned to depression;

77 percent described a major life change upon return (in personal relationships, employment, housing, or life-style);

38 percent of those changes "held true" after five years;

60 percent of the men and 20 percent of the women stated that a major goal of the trip was to conquer fear, challenge themselves, and expand limits;

57 percent of the women and 27 percent of the men stated that a major goal of the trip was to "come home" to nature;

60 percent of all respondents stated that they had adopted at least one ritual or contemplative practice learned on the trip; 17 percent of those studied longitudinally (nine out of fifty) stated that they were still doing the practice after five years;

92 percent cited "alone time" as the single most important experience of the trip; getting up before dawn and climbing a ridge or peak in order to greet the sun was cited by 73 percent of the respondents as the second most important experience of the trip. "Community" or the fellowship of the group was cited by 80 percent as the third most important experience.

Among my most vivid findings are changes in dream patterns: 76 percent of all respondents reported dramatic changes in quantity, vividness, and context of dreams after about seventy-two hours of entering into the wilderness; 82 percent of those expressed a change in content of dreams from "busy" or "urban" scenarios at the outset to dreams about the group or some aspect of the wilderness. It seems on the average to take three or four days for people's dreams to catch up with them! As I have said, not completely in jest, this pattern suggests that our culture is only four days deep.

On the whole, the differences in statements between men and women are so pervasive, matching my own in-field observations, that I have come to assume that men and women have remarkably different experiences of wilderness. It seems that the transition into wilderness is easier for women and the transition back into the urban world easier for men. This at least seems to be true given the rather "soft" approach I use,

as opposed to more aggressive approaches geared toward "conquering fear" or "gaining power." But the degree to which these findings may reveal intrinsic physiological, cultural, or political differences is no more clear than in the myriads of other gender studies.

What might all this mean? Certainly, if "cultures" do in fact intertwine in some systemic manner with human mental processes, so do the processes of nature as found in the wilderness—whether the same processes or different ones we can only guess. But in general, we think we are seeing the wide divergence between Western culture and pristine wilderness writ vividly on the psyches of those experiencing extended stays "away from cultural reinforcement" and "vulnerable" to the natural dynamics of wilderness. We would infer from this that small, tribe-like communities, sitting around fires at night, intimacy with celestial events, and the like are indeed familiar to us, are experiences not that far "below" our cultural programming.

To talk about this with a psychological language conversant not only with our deepest "peak" or "spiritual" experiences but also with the field of ecology and the study of relationships and systems, does of course (alas) require, if not a new language, at least a redefining of existing ones.

For example, "Mind" is used by scientists of all kinds these days as a label for "psyche" or "mental processes." The clear bias is that Mind is at least a property of a separate individual, if not very specifically tied to the brain or individual neuropsychology. And yet Bateson, John Dewey before him, and Buddhist philosophy long, long before either, have defined Mind as the sum of all natural processes and the information that emanates from them. Mind is an immanent property of the universe. (The intuition, often expressed in poetry, that as we shine our little lights into the mystery of the cosmos we are exploring a vast intelligence, reflects this more systemic and Buddhist viewpoint.) Mind seen in this way is not limited to the human brain. It is more fundamental than consciousness, and encompasses all consciousness.

Consciousness would therefore be a property of Mind that allows for self-reflective experience. Consciousness arises *out* of Mind and thus can exist in various relationships to it. In urban-industrial Western culture, consciousness is often experienced as separate from Mind. Certainly the self-reflective consciousness that has emerged in humans has brought us incredible insights about ourselves and our universe and incredible tools

meant to enhance our various capabilities. But just as certainly, this ability to make distinctions and "self-reflect" now appears as a beautiful capacity run amok, proceeding from distinction to disjunction, from reflection to alienation, and from alienation to the kind of full-blown split between subjects and objects (or between the poles of any disjunction) termed "dualism." Dualism summarizes our cultural "mode of knowing" or "information processing" and is perhaps the source of our pervasive sense of being disconnected. This in turn produces our obsession with needs and wants—the massive addictions that characterize our period in history.

"Ego" is another of those hoary psychological terms that begs for clarification if it is to be used in a psychological context. It of course refers to "executive" functions in the Freudian scheme, the summary of mental processes that manage relations between the more natural ("instinctive") id, and the more cultural, repressive, moralistic superego. But consider "Ego" as the collection of cognitive abilities that, simply, serve our various need-fulfilling activities. Making distinctions would be just one of many of these activities (categorizing, sequencing, and linking would be others). "Ego," therefore, would be the "home" of that capacity which, when overstimulated or used to excess would split us from natural processes. Or rather—and this is important—would *lead us to believe* that we're split from natural processes. Certainly our cultural experience, urbanized as it is, would reinforce this conviction.

Every culture tends to reinforce different patterns of egoic processing. Our culture seems to have inflated "distinction making" until it dominates not only Ego but our entire consciousness as well. Thus we could say that our consciousness is split from Mind and that the conscious *experience* of this phenomenon is one of separation, though in fact we continue to be immersed in nature! The experience of separation is an essential context for domination; domination is the root of exploitation. And thus we destroy our habitat, the very basis of our survival as a species.

Thus, with regard to the wilderness experience, using these terms to exemplify a psychoecological language (many additional terms are of course necessary), we can say about the psychological changes taking place in the wilderness that there is a shift from culturally reinforced, dualism-producing reality processing to a more nondualistic mode. In

essence, consciousness remains, but the dominance of consciousness by the need-crazed egoic process (especially the making of distinctions) diminishes, leaving a simpler, "nonegoic" awareness in its wake. And as has been shown through studies of both the psychedelic and meditation experiences (both, in my opinion, closely parallel to the wilderness experience), such non–goal-oriented awareness seems to have the capacity to open consciousness to Mind—that is, to the more natural flows of information from nature. In this sense, we could say that when humans can open their consciousness to natural processes, they find "nature reinforcing itself" (and of course, when open to cultural processes, we experience "culture reinforcing itself").

From this perspective, the prevalence of depression or other severe problems upon a sudden return from the wilderness to the urban world can be explained as the contrast between widely divergent forms of egoic processing (and the accompanying different modes of consciousness). People often are quite explicit about how their minds feel "open" and "airy" in the wilderness, as contrasted with "turgid," "tight," and "crowded" in urban culture. People also talk very clearly about "entering into the Wilderness Mind" or "the Mind of the River," and this seems indeed to be a very comfortable and beautiful experience.

This kind of verbal exploration of the wilderness experience (here summarized only very partially) has been very useful in investigating such issues as just how psychologically different people enter into the wilderness. Obviously, many (if not most) wilderness excursions—those that attempt to reproduce cultural comforts if not basic cultural dynamics—cross the wilderness boundary physically but not psychologically, even though every wilderness trip will of course have some effect. I have found it useful to posit a gradient between the polarity of culture and wilderness—a gradient of the "wilderness effect"—ranging from "none" (no effect) to a complete blowout of one's usual programs for processing reality. Somewhere along this gradient is a transition point, where one's mode of information processing switches from culture-dominated (which in the case of our culture would be dualism-producing) to nature-dominated (which presumably would be something closer to what would be called a "systemic communion"). Thus, this change point along the gradient is the *psychological* wilderness boundary, and it is my perception that not many cross it. Many "empowerment" types of wilderness programs, for example, are not experiencing wilderness on its own terms but are using wilderness to develop skills dictated as "useful" or "empowering" by our culture. There is nothing wrong with empowerment or adjustment per se, but if the culture to which we are adjusting is destructive of nature, then we have a problem. This may be yet another example of exploiting wilderness to serve the voracious needs of a culture increasingly attempting to distance itself from nature.

As I've said, when consciousness opens fully to wilderness and immerses itself in natural processes, the return is almost always a painful experience. In returning to the culture, we plunge ourselves back into the forces that split consciousness from nature, or Mind, in the first place. In the painful "reentry" experience, we *feel* our newly open and connected beings congeal into hardened, separate, well-defended selves. Although unpleasant, this process is perhaps a unique opportunity to experience mindfully the cultural forces that normally operate outside our awareness.

A key issue becomes how to maintain, or integrate, wilderness-learned modes of knowing when living again within our culture. In the early years of the wilderness program, I attempted to "up the ante" by adding more "ego-dissolving processes" without adequate follow-up. Often the initial euphoria upon returning to the comforts of civilization would give way within hours, or a few days at most, to disruptive, dysfunctional behavior.

Interestingly, with yoga and meditation added to both the preparation and post-trip periods, as well as to the trips themselves, such dysfunctions almost completely ceased. Group support was essential, and I suspect this was part of the "protection." Practices such as meditation, when seriously undertaken, are explicitly designed to facilitate the arousal of nonegoic awareness. To be able to open to the same awareness that occurred in the wilderness through an ongoing practice could extend the transformations of consciousness into everyday life within the culture. I think this an important key to minimizing reentry problems.

I also suggest coming back as slowly as possible. A few days at a "halfway house" between wilderness and full cultural experience has been extremely helpful. I counsel wilderness participants to leave the wilderness without regret, without holding on, to find healing in the transition,

and also to plan for continuing transitions between wilderness and culture on a regular basis. It is also helpful to establish political and cultural relationships with the wilderness visited. Since all wildernesses are at risk—all are being damaged in one way or another—there are plenty of opportunities for such relationships.

Of course, continuing with the wilderness group itself supports an ongoing healed relationship with nature. This can be a basis for future trips and continuing meditation practices—something like a twelve-step group for those "in recovery from civilization."

Humans have the idea, now centuries old, that we are above natural processes rather than immersed in them. We have thought, and continue to teach our children to think, that we can control nature, at least most of the time, and we have felt validated in this belief by the modest success of some of our inventions.

This is still a popular idea, but perhaps we're beginning to awaken to all the ways we cannot control nature and to all the damage we cause when we try. To some—an increasing number, I hope—there is a growing attitude that we have no choice but to find our appropriate role amid the infinite webs of natural processes.

Somewhere in there—assuming we're not a mutation that has failed—there's a contribution we can make to the whole, something unique, something comparable to the eagle's eyesight, the dolphin's hearing, the salmon's perfect motion when turning to dig the spawning bed in clean gravel.

Perhaps the wilderness experience can help us get there, help us to reconnect, help us open to the wisdom inherent in the infinite information systems of natural networks.

Or perhaps when we come to realize the rapidly degrading quality of all wilderness areas from overuse, the escalating threats to wilderness from resource-dependent industries, or the fact that in much of the world "wilderness" is seen in terms of desperate survival rather than recreation, we can come to see "the wilderness experience" as a vision or a model of modes of healing that don't require wilderness. Perhaps the clearest evidence of our recovery will be that we do not demand that wilderness heal us. We will have learned to let it be.

For a wilderness that must heal us is surely a commodity, just as when we can only look at wilderness as a source of endless wealth.

Let that which serves the culture—at this point in our history at least—be done in the culture. And if we do use wilderness, let us use it in ways that further its rehabilitation as well as our own. Let us use it for those healing processes that cannot take place anywhere else.