

Ecopsychology's Niche: Why the Transpersonal Matters to Ecopsychology

John V. Davis

Naropa University and School of Lost Borders, Boulder, Colorado.

I appreciate the Editor's broad invitation to ecopsychologists to comment on the current state of this field and to suggest future directions. While there are a number of valid responses in this discussion, I feel the field's greatest need is to continue to clarify and articulate its core principles and then hold close to them. Ecopsychology shares a close affinity, some concepts and narratives, research findings, and a deep concern for the fate of the world with several other fields. However, if we do not continue to articulate and embody ecopsychology's particular view, this field will be sidelined. One of ecopsychology's most important tasks is to find and fill its particular niche. Environmental psychology, conservation psychology, deep ecology, and many other related fields already do a good job of filling certain niches. We as ecopsychologists do not need to duplicate their contributions, important as they are. At the same time, there are certain tasks, questions, and understandings that ecopsychology is uniquely able to address. I believe greater clarity about ecopsychology's foundations will reveal this niche. I have a particular interest in one of these foundations.

Transpersonal Ecopsychology

The original calls for ecopsychology recognized a seamless or transpersonal interconnection between human nature and "the rest of" nature and articulated a radical revisioning of culture based on this interconnection. Roszak, Greenway, Fisher, and others, including most recently Kahn (2013), have highlighted the importance of this interconnection to ecopsychology (see Davis & Canty, 2013, for a review). To me, this transpersonal interconnection is indispensable for ecopsychology. While there are many ways to conceptualize it, I

have referred to *nonduality* and *transpersonal ecopsychology* in my teaching and writing. Here is one way I have tried to articulate this using the framework of identity:

Nonduality refers to the locus, structure, and nature of self-identity, encompassing those states of being and consciousness in which the sense of separate individuality...has been metabolized or dissolved into the flow of experience. Self-identity becomes integrated into a qualitatively higher (or deeper) perspective in which individual identity and the contents of experience are differentiated but not split or separated. The world does not melt away, perception gains greater clarity and richness, and actions flow more harmoniously. At the same time, the self is no longer experienced as separate or ultimately autonomous. Instead, an expanded, more open, and more inclusive view of the world becomes foreground. (Davis, 2011, p. 93)

It is important to reiterate that a felt sense of nonduality, transpersonal identity, reverence or sacredness in regard to nature, and nature mysticism do not require religious frameworks. This is a virtue of ecopsychology's psychological and phenomenological approach. Indeed, the roots of transpersonal psychology lie in formulations by William James, Carl Jung, and Abraham Maslow, which take such an approach to mysticism and spirituality. This is one of the ways in which transpersonal psychology can partner with ecopsychology.

This nondual or transpersonal view need not exclude empirical research, either. In fact, a rich body of empirical literature using a variety of methodologies demonstrates that nature experiences are particularly powerful for accessing the transpersonal. Research demonstrates evidence for nature encounters as one of the most common triggers for peak experiences and awe, spiritual experiences on wilderness trips, and a close relationship between nature experiences, spirituality, and mental health. While there is less research on

the relationship between a transpersonal view and environmental attitudes and behaviors, a few studies suggest that nature connectedness and relatedness to nature have not only positive impacts on psychological health but also a positive influence on environmental attitudes and behaviors. To be sure, most of these studies are preliminary and need replication and extension, but they suggest some of the possibilities of rich and powerful research questions that directly reflect a transpersonal view of ecopsychology.

Implications

I propose that ecopsychology recognize a fundamental nonduality in which both nature and psyche flow as expressions of the same source, while acknowledging that there are many ways of conceiving of that source. This is not simply a reciprocity between humans and nature nor merely a broadening of the self to include the natural world, though it includes both. Rather, it is an identification with the ground of being, spirit, or mystery that gives rise to all manifestations, human and natural. Expressing what I feel is at the heart of a nondual or transpersonal view of human-nature relationships, the late Zen teacher, John Daido Looi Roshi, who regularly took his students into wild nature, wrote in a workshop description, "There is no relationship between humans and nature." Indeed, it's a koan, and it is as radical as anything I've encountered.

This view has profound implications in at least three areas of interest to ecopsychologists: ecotherapy, environmental action, and environmentally responsible lifestyles. Specifically, this view leads to at least three sets of questions. (1) How does direct and immediate contact with nature promote optimal mental health, well-being, and a sense of the transpersonal? In what ways can nature experiences promote exceptional human development and maturity and not just transient peak experiences? How can these benefits be made more widely available? (2) What can a transpersonal ecopsychology contribute to environmental attitudes and actions? How does a transpersonal view of human-nature relationships help heal and prevent the traumas of environmental violence and devastation and the losses inherent in environmental generational amnesia? If we understand humans and nature as parts of a more inclusive whole, environmental action can be seen as a kind of self-regulation in which the world is acting on its own behalf. How can we then use psychological models of self-regulation and dysregulation to understand environmentally damaging behaviors and promote healthy self-regulation? (3) What are the implications of a transpersonal ecopsychology for creating an ecologically sane world in all the ways we understand "ecological"? How can a transpersonal view empower

environmental justice, as well as social, economic, and political justice and liberation? How do we continue to awaken to, in, and as our world, and what difference does this awakening make? While many fields are responding to each of these questions and while there are certainly other questions that are important to ecopsychology, taken together, these point to a niche that ecopsychology is best able to fill.

Conclusion

I have argued that a nondual or transpersonal view is essential to ecopsychology and listed three implications of such a view, which, taken together, help identify ecopsychology's unique contributions. I do not suggest this as the only foundation for ecopsychology. However, it has helped shape this field and, as ecopsychology evolves into its second generation, I feel this view is still crucial. A robust, precise understanding of the transpersonal and radical foundations of ecopsychology and concrete, creative progress in expressing this understanding in our theories, research, and practices will help ecopsychology find, claim, and fill a critical niche in the modern world more effectively, efficiently, and elegantly.

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Address correspondence to:

John Davis
 Transpersonal Psychology Department and Ecopsychology Program
 Naropa University
 2130 Arapahoe Ave.
 Boulder, CO 80302

E-mail: jdavis@naropa.edu

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