

# How Deep Can We Go?

Patricia H. Hasbach

Northwest Ecotherapy, Eugene, Oregon;  
Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon.

**O**n the opening page of our book, *Ecopsychology: Science, Totems, and the Technological Species* (2012), Peter Kahn and I write:

We've been inspired by the early visionaries of ecopsychology. They recognized that to live meaningfully and to flourish, we as individuals and as a species need deep connection with nature. They wrote about this connection with insight and passion. And they lived it, too, by which we mean they lived answers to the question: "How deep can we go?" (p. vii)

That question is still being answered—by all of us. The field of ecopsychology is dynamic and evolving. It's powerful. Its relevance penetrates deep into our inner world, the individual psyche—re-membering us to our primal, original Self; re-membering our interdependence with one another in the human community and with the greater-than-human community; re-membering us to the land, to place, to all that keeps us alive. Ecopsychology also penetrates the depths of the human-nature connection in the external world—where we are influencing the natural world to an unprecedented degree and in unimaginable ways. It asks questions that challenge us to the core of our identity as individuals and as a species as to who and what we are.

Ecopsychology has the potential to shape worldviews—isn't that the hope of all of us reading this journal? How each of us envisions that happening may differ. Some may see it most effective by working outside the mainstream systems by intelligently and thoughtfully calling out our collective behaviors and challenging us to reexamine our sociopolitical structures, our technological innovations, our scientific paradigms, and our arrogance as a species on this fragile planet. Others may envision bringing the influence of ecopsychology into systems by joining with (or infil-

trating) other disciplines—education, health care, economics, traditional psychology, land use planning, architecture and design, environmental activism, conservation groups, and so on—creating a synergy of interdisciplinary richness and depth.

The truth be told—we need both!

Maybe it's time we stop and assess the influence ecopsychology has had in the last decade. Focused attention on the human and nature (dis)connection has led to changes in policies in a variety of fields including education, health care, psychotherapy, community development, and others that touch our lives intimately on a regular basis. For instance, Richard Louv's book, *The Last Child in the Woods* (2005), brought attention to the changing relationship between children and the natural world and introduced the term "nature deficit disorder" to describe the disconnection so many children (and families) experience. His work and that of the Children & Nature Network, an organization with a global reach that was spawned by Louv's work, offer grassroots advocates a language to articulate what they are experiencing and what needs to be done differently in their schools and local communities. This led to the introduction of the No Child Left Inside Act, a bipartisan bill introduced in July 2013, and has spurred big-picture changes in education like the development of an ecological curriculum from kindergarten to university. Similarly, research related to the health benefits of nature connection has influenced the design of hospitals and other health care facilities and led to healing gardens, animal-assisted therapy, and prescriptions for time in direct contact with nature by physicians and psychotherapists, resulting in lower health care costs and less medications being prescribed. And ecopsychology has influenced the field of psychotherapy by expanding the context in which therapists work with clients to include not only intrapsychic influences, interpersonal relationships, family systems theory, cultural/social systems, but also the ecological context—making a person's relationship with the natural world a salient topic for therapy. This list represents just a smattering of ecopsychology's influence in our lives. Think about what you would add.

As Peter Kahn and I have written elsewhere, one of the challenges of a revisioned ecopsychology is to embrace our kinship with the more-than-human world—our totemic self—and integrate that Self with our scientific culture and our technological selves (Kahn & Hasbach, 2012). We need to embrace the empirical research that investigates the influence of direct contact with nature on our physical and psychological well-being, and we need to be conducting more such research. It not only provides strong evidence, but in addition—and let’s be pragmatic here—it is this type of research that gets the attention of funders, decision makers, and the public at large.

It’s also important to recognize that ecopsychology has shaped what is considered “research” in the last decade—recognizing the value of qualitative data and phenomenological experience and articulating that not all data that is important can be quantified. We still have work to do here. In a 2012 article published in *The Humanistic Psychologist*, Herbert Schroeder, a retired environmental psychologist for the US Forest Service, looked at how the experiential value of the environment can be difficult for people to articulate and quantify, and it is therefore often ignored by natural resources decision makers. He writes:

The aspects of environmental experience that are the most valuable to people are sometimes the most difficult for them to describe and explain. The experiential value of an environment may be strongly present in a person’s awareness and may be an important facet of their quality of life, but they may have trouble finding words to convey that value...Because experiential values are difficult to articulate and express, they are often neglected and disregarded in environmental decision making. Values and benefits that can be physically measured and scientifically documented take priority, yet important experiential aspects of the environment remain unspoken and unrecognized. How can decisions about natural environments take account of their immediate, experiential value, when this value is often ineffable and cannot be captured in language? (2012, pp. 137–138)

Ecopsychology has an important role to play in expanding the definition of research and in providing a means to articulate better our human-nature interaction patterns.

Since the field’s inception, the influence of technology in our individual lives has grown exponentially, particularly in the form of digital computation, which results in an overload of information and incredible global connectivity. It has also resulted

in unexpected consequences. One of those is that our technology has further distanced us from the natural world. In less than three generations, our relationship to the natural world has changed dramatically. Numerous studies cite how much less time children are spending in nature, and when they do, how their free-roaming territory has shrunk to a fraction of that of their parents. Neuroscience is looking at how our brains are being wired differently as a result of so much time in front of two-dimensional screens; and obesity rates and diagnoses of ADHD are skyrocketing as links are being studied to our sedentary, indoor lifestyles. A revisioned ecopsychology has a role to play in examining the way we live with the technology we create and perhaps helps us own that we are a technological species as well as an ecological one. If we can own that aspect of our Self, perhaps we will take more responsibility for the technologies we create and learn to set boundaries on their presence in our lives and those of our children.

I opened this essay with a quote that ended with “How deep can we go?” That question addresses what is at the heart of ecopsychology for me—wildness—in the natural world and within each of us. It is that quality that makes each moment count when we feel fully alive and engaged; when we feel deep love for our child or our lover or nonhuman Other; when we feel humility in the face of awesome natural beauty or vulnerability as a part of the food chain; when we feel a deep protectiveness for that which we love, human or otherwise; and when we feel a oneness with the Universe.

Ecopsychology has a role to play in bringing the topic of wildness to the table. In his opening editorial, Kahn (2013) writes, “ecopsychology can then take on a unique leadership role in arguing not just for the conservation of more wild nature but for the conservation and rediscovery of more wild interactions with it” (p. 165). I would add that ecopsychology can also add to our understanding of the wildness we carry within, and it provides the theoretical foundation for the practice of ecotherapy.

I will conclude by saying there are many ways to envision the growth and development of ecopsychology. I appreciate Lori Pye’s (2013) analogy: “The field of ecopsychology can be likened to the pond ecosystem in that it, too, needs diversity; it needs a variety of perspectives, ideas, approaches, philosophies, pedagogy, and practices for the field’s flourishing and maturation” (p. 177). It will take time to evolve. Let’s not waste time and energy with infighting and territorial squabbling. There are many ways to work and much work to be done. Let’s get to it!

## HASBACH

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Address correspondence to:

*Patricia H. Hasbach, Ph.D.*

*Northwest Ecotherapy*

*541 Willamette Street, Suite 208A*

*Eugene, OR 97401*

*E-mail: phasbach@northwestecotherapy.com*

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