

Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind

By Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist

Published by Sierra Club Books San Francisco, 2009

Review by Hayley Marshall

The coming together of ecology, environmentalism and psychology in the early 1990's resulted in the emergence of an 'ecopsychological' movement within therapeutic work. This was marked at the time by the publication of *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, Healing the Mind* (1995), a collection of essays written by some of the original pioneers of ecopsychological philosophy, and one that is now considered by many to be a seminal volume in the field.

This ecopsychological ground, along with growing general interest in green mental health, and research and insights from environmental psychology, has gradually spawned a new generation of therapeutic practitioners, interested in exploring the human-nature connection and dis-connection. I use the term 'therapeutic practitioners' advisedly, for, developing from these diverse roots, ecotherapists emerge from many varied disciplines, not just from within more traditional psychological fields. However, within this burgeoning field there are now many psychotherapists in the UK pursuing an ecopsychological route within their work, and I am one of them. For me this journey has involved several years work exploring and developing some theoretical foundations for leaving the physical frame of the therapy office behind (see Jordan & Marshall 2010). Finding the literature to support the psychotherapeutic project in the outdoors has at times proved to be challenging, as there is so little written on this specific aspect. Much of my work therefore, has been developed through clinical practice and reflective dialogue with other practitioners. This, in turn, has seen the birth of CAPO (Counsellors and Psychotherapists Outdoors); a group set up to specifically research and develop this intervention.

There is, however, a body of writing exploring a more eco- eclectic world of therapeutic thinking and practice and in **Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind (2009)**, we encounter such a collection of essays. In this volume the editors' Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist stated aim is to build upon the original work of *Ecopsychology: Restoring the earth, Healing the Mind* (1995) by providing more 'urgently needed' information about the psyche-natural environment connection, and to offer some practical suggestions as to how to apply these ideas clinically. I view the book as broadly successful in fulfilling certainly the first of these aims, in that the collection is hugely informative in relation to a vast and diverse subject area.

In their introduction, the editors define ecotherapy as 'applied ecopsychology', describing it as 'an umbrella term for nature-based methods of physical and psychological healing' (p18). For them, ecotherapy is solidly rooted in ecopsychological philosophy, which posits that our disconnection from our natural surroundings forms the basis for much of our 'dis-ease'. This philosophy also informs a strong green political agenda, and this too underpins most of the essays in this anthology. This much is clear, as Buzzell and Chalquist emphasise a widening of a more general therapeutic project beyond a focus on our intrapsychic and interpersonal worlds. The diversity in ecopsychological thinking is one of its strengths, and to me; it makes sense for 'ecotherapy' to consist of a set of inter related practices that spring from this varied base. However, at this early point in the book I believe we do meet with a terminology problem, in that the editors rather

perfunctorily name ecotherapy as a new form of psychotherapy. They seem to conflate the terms psychotherapy and ecotherapy, despite some distinctions being made later in the book. The result is a lack of clarity about what some nature-based therapies actually are, and in my experience, this certainly parallels a clinical and theoretical confusion occurring out in the field. Ecotherapeutic ideas can certainly inform psychotherapeutic thinking. However, this does not automatically make all of the practices explored in some of the ensuing essays psychotherapy, and I think it important to hold the distinction, however lightly. But more on that later.

Returning to the general banner of 'ecotherapy', the profusion of ecological ideas and healing practice explored in the book does offer an immersion in a truly rich and thought provoking world. There is something for everyone here as we encounter contributions from such diverse sources as shamanic healing practices, environmental activism, Jungian, Gestalt, systemic, and positive psychologies (sadly no TA!), deep ecology, equine and horticultural therapy, agrotherapy, somatic psychology and dream work. This is therefore, a wild and wonderful terrain, populated by the other-than-human involved with multifarious practitioners. We find essays ranging from those working therapeutically with animals; such as G. A Bradshaw (who I discover has worked with Allan Schore on how trauma is experienced by elephants (2006)), in her piece discussing Trans-species Psychology; to evolutionary psychologist Meredith Sabini exploring eco-dream work and our shared connection to the planet via collective 'big dreams'.

Highlights for me are pieces from some established, well respected writers within the field, such as author/activist Bill McKibben writing about the 'deep economy' and associated problems of hyper-individualism within western culture; and a tightly argued piece by Andy Fisher on the 'radical praxis' (radical meaning 'going to the roots') needed in linking environment, therapy, and social theory. Alongside these I felt my internal sceptic ruffled and challenged by some of the shamanic ritualistic ideas explored by Ralph Metzner, and found myself exhilarated and delighted by Robert Greenway's description of wilderness therapy, an aspect of outdoor work very dear to my heart.

The extensive range of material is loosely organised under headings embracing significant ecopsychological themes including 'The Greening of Psychotherapy', 'Community as Ecotherapy' and 'Ecospirituality and Ecotherapy'. This structure certainly makes the book eminently accessible as a resource to be dipped into rather than a tome to be read from cover to cover, with the Bibliography of Ecotherapy Research providing invaluable signposting for follow up reading.

Whilst reading this book I experienced a tension I have already encountered in my outdoor clinical work. This centres on the therapeutic potential of incorporating the wider world in psychotherapeutic work; whilst at the same time holding a struggle for theoretical and methodological understanding. Here is an important creative edge, potentially throwing up in the air the urgent question of what psychotherapy needs to look like in the future. Indeed, many of the essays in the book do explicitly issue such a challenge, referring in various ways to 'mainstream psychology's implicit severance of the personal from the ecological and the political' (p219). But this is where I feel the book falls short, as there seems to me to be no convincing, sophisticated attempt to respond to this call by any of the psychotherapeutic authors involved. I essentially missed a more detailed depth psychotherapeutic exploration of our relating with the natural world here, and how it could be important clinically. I can find no clear integrated therapeutic model incorporating nature mentioned. In many of the clinical essays 'nature' still appears to be a bolt-on to an existing paradigm, which at times feels to me like a slightly awkward marriage of communing with nature and some existing psychological theories. I personally found this frustrating, and I suspect many other depth psychotherapists may well find this volume to be a little unsatisfying in this regard.

This issue relates back to my earlier remarks about terminology, I don't think the way forward is to rush to bridge the dualistic gap by interchanging terms, or even to settle for a crude shoehorning of 'nature' into existing psychological practice or vice versa. Rather I think it important for us as practitioners to explore a *transformed* psychological perspective through listening to and dialoguing with the ideas emerging from the ecotherapeutic world. This view is very much in line with points made in the UKCP's recent climate change consultation document (2012), where we are encouraged to promote conversation and debate about our relationship with the planet. We are invited to consider how this can be worked with both in and out of the consulting room, and how we might address these ecopsychological issues in our training courses.

All this said, much of the writing in this book speaks to an important journey of the assimilation of the 'outside with the inside'. Following on from the 1995 volume mentioned above, this collection could be considered as a further wake up call to all psychotherapists to consider the world outside of the traditional consulting room, with the emphasis firmly on the necessity of this process for both the survival of our planet and that of many species, including man. The work here ably demonstrates the multitude of ways in which this may be thought about, but there is also an explicit urgent call for psychotherapy to step up to the mark, join in and ultimately transform in order to meet this challenge.

In summary, there is much here to stimulate an important inquiry into the nature of 21st century psychotherapy, and as such, I recommend the volume as essential reading for all psychotherapists, regardless of any initial interest in ecopsychology.

References

G.A Bradshaw and A.N Schore, (2006) 'How Elephants Are opening Doors: Developmental Neuroethology, Attachment, and social Context,' *Ethology* 113; pp426-36

Jordan, Martin and Marshall, Hayley (2010) 'Taking counselling and psychotherapy outside: Destruction or enrichment of the therapeutic frame?' *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling* 12: 4, 345 — 359

Roszak, T., Gomes, M.E., & Kanner, A.D. (1995). *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth Healing the Mind*. London: Sierra Club Books.

Workgroup 5 of the Diversity Equality and Social Responsibility Forum (2012). DESRC WG5 UKCP Environment and Sustainability and Climate Change Policy 100112. Retrieved 11.2.12 from <http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/climatechange>

Biography

Hayley Marshall PTSTA is an independent psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer based in Stockport and Buxton, in the Peak District. She is Consultant Psychotherapist for the Wilderness Foundation UK, and is a founder member of CAPO (www.outdoortherapy.org). She will be co facilitating a 5 day Therapeutic Skills Certificate in Outdoor/Nature-based Therapy course from 29th Aug-2nd Sept 2012 based in Battle East Sussex. More details can be found on www.hayleymarshallcounselling.co.uk. She can be contacted on hayleymarshall4@hotmail.com