

Renewing the promise of ecopsychology

Thomas Joseph Doherty, Psy.D.

Opening Address
Psychology-Ecology-Sustainability Conference
Lewis & Clark College
June 8, 2007

Good Morning, I'm so glad to see you all here! And (although Dick Roy is a tough act to follow) I'm glad to have this chance to speak to you -- and begin to tell The Story of this conference.

Back in May of 2006 (May 22, 2006) I was attending a green business training with the Oregon Natural Step network. In my small group was Martin Tull from the Northwest Earth Institute. Martin later connected me with this fellow Dick Roy (the founder of NWEI who had recently branched off to start the Center for Earth Leadership). Dick was looking for mental health folks to work on a similar sustainability initiative he had just started with lawyers. At the first meeting of what we were calling the "Northwest Psychology Project" -- in June of 2006 (June 29, 2006), just about a year ago, the idea of having a conference arose.

Look around you. Here it is! I believe we have about 160 people registered for the conference and about 50 presenters. I know we have folks from the Northwest, and from around the US and Canada. Let's get a sense of where people are from.

At this point, Thomas facilitated a short "show of hands" exercise at this point, identifying a large group from the Portland Metro area, a similarly large group from around the US and a smaller group from outside the US, primarily Canada.

MY STORY?

How did I get there? I'm a psychologist with my own business in Portland. When I think of key experiences that contribute to my environmental identity? I begin with growing up in a rust belt city in the Northeast, a brief experience being a commercial fisherman in Alaska, working in wilderness therapy with teens, being a river guide in Grand Canyon, going door to door as a Greenpeace fundraiser.

Grand Canyon: Standing in test holes drilled deep in bottom of the canyon in preparation for additional dams that would have eventually turned the whole Grand Canyon into a reservoir -- if it were not for some inspired conservationists working before I was born. Or maybe the realization that the daily fluctuations in the Colorado River's flow, an artificial tide mediated by Glen Canyon Dam, were tied to air-conditioning use in Phoenix.

Greenpeace: Living with a community of people immersing itself in environmental issues, taking on the weight of the daily questions of what constitutes environmentally sound behavior. “Do you want paper or plastic?” “Do you want a receipt for that transaction?”

Wilderness Therapy: A winter’s day at the Waldo Lake Wilderness in Oregon, reaching my cup through a hole in the ice to drink the pure lake water. Around me in the distance are the brightly colored tents of teenagers, some camping for the first time, and separated from the electronic connections they take for granted. The air still, the only sound the soft fluf-fluf-fluf of a raven’s wings as it flies overhead.

I went to graduate school to study psychology so I could better understand what was happening in my wilderness therapy work.

I ended up focusing in health psychology, working in a behavioral medicine clinics studying the effects of anxiety and depression on heart disease. Working with older folks in New Hampshire who, very late in their life, were confronted with having to change their daily living habits in order to survive; clued me in on how challenging it is to change deeply ingrained behaviors; how easily one slips into avoidance, or blaming, or fatalism; and how much compassion is necessary when you're working with people that are trying to change.

These days, in my psychology practice, I don’t ask (of people’s lives), “Is it healthy?” Instead, we ask “Is it sustainable?” “Is it ethical?”

When I talk about personal sustainability with my clients the lenses of ecology and sustainability allow us to conceive of personal identity, health, and behavior as embedded in larger natural systems. When aspiring to a “sustainable self” we talk about living in harmony with one’s emotions, values, stage of life, talents, and sense of destiny. From this flows talk about living a balanced and ecologically sustainable life. Thus, being optimally healthy and personally sustainable also means living in harmony with our self, our body, the natural world, and with the other beings --human and more than human --with whom we share this planet.

YOUR STORY?

That’s a bit of my story, now what is your story, what has drawn you here? Many of you are motivated to help the planet in some way, maybe you have been interested in this endeavor for a long time, drawn by the promise of ecopsychology, others by research in environmental psychology or conservation psychology, or mind-body health, or green business, or perhaps curiosity: What is this green psychology all about, and how does it relate to the work I am doing--with families, with children, with individuals dealing with addiction, or coping with

the effects of traumatic events in their lives, or coaching people toward high performance?

A CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

I want to give you a survey of this exciting weekend and introduce some key terms that are specific to this conference:

The idea of an “ecopsychology” -- bridging the gulf between the psychological and the ecological and seeing personal and planetary wellbeing as a continuum-- was popularized by social historian Theodore Roszak in his 1992 work, *The voice of the earth*. You can think of ecopsychology most simply as the two-way relationship between the human psyche and the natural environment. For example-- ways that separation from nature affects our mental health as well as how human psychological factors -- such as denial or addiction -- may promote environmental degradation.

After experiencing the effectiveness of therapy in the backcountry--for the teens that I worked with and for myself--and having been immersed in the environmental movement, *The voice of the earth* validated my experience and inspired me to become a psychologist. Books like this and Ventura and Hillman’s *We had a hundred years of psychotherapy in the world's getting worse* provided an environmental context for my doctoral training.

From my current vantage point, I see some limitations in the original ecopsychology framework (e.g., Roszak’s narrowly equating psychotherapy with psychoanalysis) and I believe key areas within psychology that are helpful to the environmental movement, such as environmental psychology, were ignored. However, the questions raised by Roszak are as provocative as ever: How do we understand society’s destructive behavior toward the environment -- that from a larger perspective -- seems like madness?

I tend to use the term “ecopsychology” quite broadly – and draw from other areas within academic and research psychology that are helpful in this regard. For example:

Environmental Psychology: An area of experimental psychology that examines the relations between humans and our surroundings, whether built or natural spaces. For example, the health effects of exposure to green spaces and what makes a restorative natural environment.

And more recently, inspired by the field of conservation biology, we have **Conservation Psychology:** Social psychological research focusing on how people develop environmental identities and adopt sustainable behaviors.

CONFERENCE DETAILS

I am very happy that we have been successful in bringing together practitioners and researchers whose work illustrates broad themes within psychology and health care that can be helpful for addressing environmental issues and in the movement toward sustainability.

We have a number of practitioner -oriented workshops honoring various theoretical perspectives. There are several workshops that illustrate a classic integrative Ecopsychology or ecotherapy approach, including some folks who come from the Naropa Institute eco-psychology program.

We have Keith Russell from the University of Minnesota, a good friend, a Lewis & Clark College graduate, and one of the experts in research on wilderness therapy for teens.

We have workshops that focus on child development and benefits of green spaces for children.

From the environmental psychology tradition, we have people talking about sustainable design and green offices and buildings. We will learn how to assess our ecological footprint.

We have examples of research and practice in Conservation Psychology. We're lucky to have Peter Kahn and his colleagues from the University of Washington.

We have folks who illuminate the power of myth and metaphor in our lives and our experience of nature.

We are addressing mind-body health with discussions of neurobiology, addictions, and eating disorders, with insights from psychiatry and naturopathy and public health.

There are sessions devoted to art & literary approaches, creative movement, yoga, and dance movement therapy.

We will address a psychoanalytic perspective, insights from critical psychology, and critiques of marketing and consumerism.

There are discussions of teaching. We're lucky to have Sue Koger from Willamette University, who helped develop one of the most comprehensive lesson planning tools for teaching the psychology of environmental issues.

We will be creating opportunities for mental health practitioners to interact with local community organizers.

And we have an outstanding slate of keynotes, and a panel of ecopsychology pioneers.

AN IN DEPTH EXAMPLE: STAGES OF CHANGE

Some of what we will be doing this weekend is applying well-accepted theories and strategies from the mental health field to environmental sustainability. I'll give you one example: This morning local psychologist Jeff Noethe will be talking about how we can use a "stages of change" model to address environmental behaviors.

The stage is a change model draws from different ways of thinking about the ways that people change and the best ways for counselors meet them where they are in the change process. It's is very useful and pretty simple to understand. Let me demonstrate with you all. Research has shown that successful "self changers" -- people who change their behavior on their own -- such as quitting smoking or adopting an exercise plan -- tend to go through similar stages in their change process.

1. The first stage is known as "pre-contemplation"-- that's the time before a person is actually thinking about changing, before they recognize a problem. They may lack information or they may even be considered by others to be "in denial."
2. The second stage, "contemplation," is when people start thinking about making a change. They begin educating themselves, raising their consciousness about the issue; weighing the pros and cons of changing; and possibly building motivation for change.
3. When people actively make a commitment to change behavior they can be considered to be in a "preparation" stage where they, ideally, will make a plan that will ensure their success.
4. When they actually begin changing their behavior, whatever it may be, we'll consider them to be in an "action" stage.
5. Successfully change that behavior long enough so that it becomes normal, integrated into your life and identity, we would say you're in a "maintenance stage"; you've successfully changed.

At this point, Thomas led the audience in stage of change exercise, asking for a show of hands when audience participants heard a description of a stage that represented them.

So, let's try it out with all of you. Here's a question: where are you on the stages continuum regarding applying techniques from psychology or the mental health field to foster environmental awareness or sustainable behaviors?

- How many people either have never thought about it or do not believe that it is a thing that can be done (precontemplation)?
- How many are thinking about it (contemplation)?
- How many of you have already determined that you want to use techniques from psychology or the mental health fields to foster environmental awareness and sustainable behaviors and here to learn how to do it?
- How many are doing this now (taking action)?
- How many have been using techniques from psychology and the mental health fields to foster environmental awareness and sustainability so much so that it is become a part of who you are (maintenance)?

BARRIERS/OPPORTUNITIES

I want to identify some of the opportunities we have to transcend barriers that work against concerted action within the mental health field. Some are subtle and mostly invisible to the outside world: We have a diversity of academic degrees, specialties, and professional guilds lobbying for themselves, (and being divided and conquered by the insurance industry).

We have different philosophies of science and practice. These often fall into the classical fault lines of western thought:

- Romantics focusing on depth, the unconscious, myth, and boldly striving for union with the natural world.
- Modernists equally bold in their empiricism, their willingness to compete, to test and measure what they do.
- Postmodernists who illuminate historical context and themes of power and justice, and cast a critical eye on our hidden assumptions.

We have different theoretical orientations, ways that we think about human thought and behavior -- ecopsychology being one such orientation.

We have different clients, patients, or areas of research.

CONFERENCE POINTERS

I encourage you to scan the glossary we provided of working definitions of other terms within psychology and the environmental movement. This is not meant to be the final word but a tool to encourage dialogue.

Ecopsychology pioneer Joanna Macy identified several common fears that prevent people from talking about their environmental concerns: fear of appearing morbid, unpatriotic, too emotional, or insufficiently informed (lacking

the facts and figures to effectively debate their concerns or identify solutions). That last is easy to do with all these bright minds around; let's try to be careful not to fall into that.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The Patagonia clothing company talks about being a 100 year company... What is a 100 year ecopsychology?

What does Ecopsychology look like for the 21st century?

In my vision of ecopsychology, "Version 2.1" if you will, I see a loosening of the need to see ecopsychology as a countercultural movement, as a movement of outsiders (setting up an "us-and-them" position toward "mainstream" psychiatry, for example, toward the developers of the DSM).

I don't speak as an ecopsychologist, I speak as a psychologist!

In the post "Y2K," post "911," post "Inconvenient Truth," world, there is greater awareness of the environment and genuine curiosity about how to live more sustainably. Paul Hawken reminds us in his recent book that the convergence of the environmental and social justice movements is the largest social movement in history, and the fastest growing movement, comprising over 1 million organizations in every country in the world.

These days, some former foes--such as big business people-- may be allies. One of the most inspiring publications I read regularly is the *Sustainable Industries Journal* that is published here in Portland.

Advocacy cuts across party lines -- Rod Dreher writes about "crunchy cons" a thriving counterculture within the contemporary conservative movement. Thomas Friedman writes in the New York Times how "geo-greens" -- those who advocate renewable energy technologies due to the security problems with oil, and see petroleum use as inextricably linked to authoritarian regimes and supporters of terrorism, proclaim, "Green is in the red white and blue."

RENEWING THE PROMISE OF ECOPSYCHOLOGY

I would encourage us to stop speaking to the choir and be a force in healthcare. The research is there, it is solid:

- The stress-relieving and attention restoring qualities of green spaces
- how exposure to green spaces may be an inexpensive, healthy and effective treatment for ADHD
- Ways people form environmental identities
- Causes and preventions of burnout
- benefits of outdoor exercise and healthy diet

- wilderness as a powerful setting for adolescent therapy with outcomes that basically blow traditional residential treatment outcomes out of the water

HOW DO WE BECOME A FORCE?

1) REWRITING THE ETHICS CODE

We need to clarify our ethical base. The mental health disciplines -- psychology social work, psychiatry, marriage and family counseling -- have some of the best, clearest ethics codes of any fields. They clearly provide direction. How do these ethics codes interrelate with environmental ethics?

Even the most peace-loving, gentle souled, nonviolent, "tell me how you're feeling" therapist will not hesitate to exercise her duty to warn if she suspects an incident of abuse. Why is she so clear? Because the ethics code is clear.

12 years ago, Theodore Roszak spoke about how the ecopsychology movement

"...might generate a new legally actionable, environmentally-based criterion of mental health that could take on a prodigious legal and policy making implications. "To suggest, he wrote, "with the full weight of professional psychological authority that people are bonded emotionally to the earth reads a powerful new meaning into our understanding of "sanity," a meaning that might even achieve the same legal and policy making force that now attaches to physical hazards like toxic waste."

I don't see any reason why, with just the people that are in this room (perhaps allied with the Lawyers for Sustainable Future), we can help rewrite local laws here in Oregon to be more ecologically sane.

2) DESCRIBING OUR METHODS OF ASSESSMENT AND DIAGNOSIS

The early writings on ecopsychology bemoaned the fact that there wasn't any diagnoses listed in the DSM -- the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders -- that explicitly mention the environment except perhaps seasonal affective disorder -- seasonal depression.

Well that's not true. We're not entirely true. Those statements indicate a misunderstanding of what the DSM is, a descriptive tool to categorize and provides names for symptoms of mental distress or illness.

For clues to understanding the impacts of environmental anxiety or despair on individuals' lives, it is helpful to review the DSM symptoms for Adjustment Disorder, a "psychological response to an identifiable stressor or stressors that results in the development of clinically significant emotional or behavioral symptoms" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 679). Symptoms of

adjustment disorders may include hopelessness, sadness, crying, anxiety, worry, headaches or stomachaches, withdrawal, and inhibition. The DSM-IV further notes that "stressors may affect single individuals, an entire family, or a larger group or community (e.g., as in a natural disaster)" (p. 679).

Someone experiencing significant impairments linked to anxiety or despair about the environment may be considered to have an adjustment disorder. Presumably, the stress of global climate change will not be going away soon, and the potential for an environment-related adjustment disorder -- or other more serious disorders (i.e. anxiety or depression) -- may be chronic. Diagnosis in this case presents interesting philosophical questions (e.g., distinguishing between pathological and nonpathological reactions to environmental issues, differentiating between despair about the environment and "normal" bereavement, and determining what is "expected" regarding coping with these perceived threats).

The main point I'm making is that we can use the DSM just as it is, right now, to address environmental impacts -- the same way we can talk about traumatic stress related to the World Trade Center bombing or to hurricane Katrina.

What I'm not talking about is making knee-jerk, uninformed mass diagnoses of people that we have never met. (Not an ethical practice, but how many of us are guilty of it?) I'm talking about starting with the people that we are working with now.

That's why it's important not to think of ourselves as outsiders compared to the people that write the DSM. We need to think of ourselves as insiders and help rewrite the DSM to make more ecological sense.

3. DEVELOPING TREATMENT GUIDELINES AND BEST PRACTICES

We exist in climate in which people want to see proof about how healthcare treatments work. If ecopsychology is to be taken seriously, we must be able to agree on some core competencies, on standards of quality and effectiveness.

As I noted, we have the research. We can develop treatment guidelines and best practices. We can track the outcomes. We can use this information to influence our professional organizations, create credentials, engage in government at the local and state levels (at least), and train a new generation.

WORDS OF SUPPORT

I'll stop. I think you get my point. I realize that many of you are still in contemplation stage about this and it is not my desire to overwhelm you.

Now, I'll let you in on a little secret. Well, this isn't a secret if you are a mental health counselor. People on the front lines are working hard, really hard. Drawn to service, motivated by ethics, often overcoming their own adversity, counselors don't have a lot of free time. To paraphrase a quote by Albert Camus: Nobody, (except maybe therapists), realizes that some people expend tremendous energy merely to be normal. In a culture like ours, doing the contortions that it takes to be normal can be a lot of work.

A funny thing about counselors and therapists: Their best work is private, only known to them and their clients. The more powerful the people that they counsel, the more established their practice, the less they are known. So we have an invisible army, an invisible army of peace.

One of the radical things I do with my clients is to give them permission to *not* do anything: to stop, to be with the world just as it is. Centering and acceptance.

So here's another secret: Maybe you are doing enough; maybe you don't have to do anything more. How can I say that? Because social justice is embedded in environmental justice.

LOCAL ACTIVITIES AND NEXT STEPS

Now maybe there is room for you to do more. Maybe you have a contribution or a gift. Maybe you will discover one this weekend. Maybe you will move from contemplation to commitment. Maybe you will move from preparation to action. Maybe you are already doing enough and need to realize you are in a maintenance stage. You can justifiably be satisfied with what you have accomplished.

On the other hand, maybe you are way ahead of me and are already living in a new world I can't comprehend. There's a note I found I had written in the margins of my copy of *The voice of the earth*, on page 18 just after the preface. (Do you remember that idealistic time -- maybe you are still in it -- when you have the grappled with authors when you were reading, when you had a conversation with them through the notes you wrote in the margins?)

My note said: "I'm with you. I'm just catapulting ahead because I'm younger."

We do have things going on locally that you can become involved with:

1. A fledgling Psychology for a Sustainable Future group, but with the backing of experienced organizers like Dick Roy, with a sketch for peer supervision, a consulting group, CE classes, and legal advocacy.
2. We have the "Green Minds" discussion group that has been meeting to talk about psychology and sustainability once a month for about four

- months now. (We need help getting a bigger room at EcoTrust since we have outgrown the coffee shop!)
3. through the help of Tod Sloan, will have some classes next fall in the counseling program at Lewis and Clark on Ecopsychology psychology of sustainability, ecotherapy, and wilderness therapy.
 4. I have heard some talk of trying to publish the proceedings from this conference.

These ideas are mostly on paper now but this conference was on paper 10 months ago. Sunday we will spend time taking the next steps to take ideas like these and ones you all will contribute into reality.

FINAL ADVICE: STAY CENTERED

I will give you some final advice.

First of all, stay centered. Remember the questions and goals that brought you here today. Spend a moment and make a plan for this weekend: What am I curious about, where do I think I can benefit or contribute? It is important to stay centered because you'll find, if you start facilitating people talking about the environment and psychology, John Muir's famous quote from *My First Summer in the Sierra* holds true: "*When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.*"

I notice this often in our Green Minds talks. You think you're talking about, say, the benefits of green spaces for children, but pretty soon someone is entertaining philosophical questions about "What is nature," another is engaged in a political rant, and still another is sharing a deep sense of loss or confusion.

Second of all, be open, and open-minded: You may be a mythologist who needs to switch gears in order to understand someone who's engaged in hard nosed, number-crunching research. You may be interested in the psychological benefits of built spaces and architecture and be sitting next to someone whose most important mission is to preserve children's sense of wonder. Don't fall into the "us & them." Remember, the earth contains all of us. Be open to inspiration, to the flashes that come and please share them with me or with the person next to you.

Be open to other voices, the other beings who may be metaphorically or literally listening. As they say, be open to the voice of the earth.

Have great day!

About Thomas Joseph Doherty

Thomas is a licensed psychologist in Portland, Oregon with a general practice of psychotherapy and specialties in wilderness therapy and applying environmental and sustainability concepts to personal health. Thomas is currently developing coursework in ecopsychology and the psychology of sustainability for Lewis and Clark College. He has also been active in research and education in the wilderness therapy field and brings over 15 years of experience of providing therapy, education, and personal growth in settings ranging from primitive skills expeditions to inpatient hospital units. Thomas has been a wilderness therapy expedition leader, clinical supervisor, and consulting psychologist at the Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Expeditions Program. He has been a small group leader and assistant director for the Vision Quest wagon train program for adjudicated youth. Thomas worked as a professional outdoor leader, including a stint as a river guide in Grand Canyon, and in the environmental movement, for Greenpeace. Thomas received his doctoral degree in clinical psychology from Antioch New England Graduate School in 2002. His doctoral research explored the psychological aspects of medical illnesses, particularly heart disease.

Contact information

Thomas Joseph Doherty, Psy.D.
Sustainable Self, LLC
PO Box 3174
Portland OR, 97212 USA
503-288-1213
thomas@selfsustain.com
www.selfsustain.com