

Ecopsychology and Terrapsychology: Overlaps and Differences

Craig Chalquist, PhD

Chalquist.com

I have involved myself actively with ecopsychology since 2000. My 2003 dissertation opened an ecopsychological avenue by calling for a “psychoanalysis of place”; the external reader was Chellis Glendinning. I have taught ecopsychology in higher ed to environmental scientists, undergrads, and graduate students, published academic papers on it, supervised dissertations and master’s theses on it, and spoken about it at conferences. I was an early member of the editorial board of the journal *Ecopsychology* and one of four instructors for the Certificate in Ecopsychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute. After co-editing *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* in 2007 with Linda Buzzell, I designed and launched the world’s first certificate in ecotherapy, an application of ecopsychology, at John F. Kennedy University. Mary Gomes, a founder of ecopsychology, wrote the Foreword to my book *Terrapsychology: Reengaging the Soul of Place*. My familiarity with the field includes being acquainted with most of its founders and many of its later researchers, scholars, and practitioners.

I mention these credentials because they contextualize my appreciation for and criticism of ecopsychology. Appreciation from distant fans of a field is mere idealization; and criticism to be valid must stand upon immersion and familiarity.

When my students come to me harboring an important dissatisfaction with their field of study, I suggest that perhaps they are being called to bring something new into being. This was the case with me and with two fellow graduate students. We began to feel reservations within five years of “ecopsychology” becoming a term for an intended synthesis of psychology with environmentalism. We were glad to find a term for the synthesis we longed for even while questioning how much the growing field left out.

Before we consider overlaps and differences between ecopsychology and *terrapsychology*, the combination of methods and ideas for reimagining and restoring how deeply and intimately our psychological life is involved with our surroundings (human or other than human), we need a glance of how ecopsychology came to be, and why, from its inception, it harbored gaps that continue to curtail important possibilities for practice and research.

Ecopsychology: A Study in Self-Contradictions

The official history is that ecopsychology began in 1992, when Theodore Roszak wrote *Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* and coined the new word for a new field. In 1995, Roszak, Mary Gomes, and Allan Kanner edited the volume *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. A year after this, pastoral counselor Howard Clinebell published his work in applied ecopsychology in the book *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth*. The year 1998 saw publication of Ralph Metzner’s *Green Psychology: Transforming Our Relationship to the Earth*.

However, psychologist Robert Greenway adds much left out of the above account. He was, he informs us, the author of a paper titled “Ecopsychology” in 1963. He wrote it as a graduate student of Abraham Maslow at Brandeis University, where a group inspired by the paper—Ulric Neisser, Richard Jones, Jerome Bruner, others—formed to blend various psychologies (humanistic, existential, psychoanalytic, Jungian, developmental, and cognitive) with solid ecological science to see what emerged. Inspired by Loren Eiseley’s book *The Mind as Nature*, Greenway brought to this a background in agriculture, biology, ecological fieldwork (on pollution in Lake Washington in Seattle), science writing for Maslow, architectural writing, and wilderness excursion experience.

The group discussions also tended ideas from philosopher William James, anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Margaret Mead, principles of Deep Ecology, those of Norbert Wiener’s cybernetics, and Gregory Bateson and early Systems Theory. “Psychoecology” was also used as a term for this creative mix to emphasize its ecological roots. Greenway went on to apply the resulting learnings in training Peace Corps volunteers, wilderness excursion experiments (some conducted at Sonoma State), and academic venues, including as founding dean at Franconia College and Director of Planning at UC Santa Cruz. Others working in the nascent field participated in conferences and other events throughout the ‘70s and ‘80s.

Greenway was invited to write about “The Wilderness Effect” for the 1995 edited volume, but he was surprised by the almost total absence of any ecological science and by Roszak’s theoretical linkage of the “ecological unconscious” with Freud’s id, the instinctive layer of mind, rather than with Jung’s more ecological model. “Nature” had become metaphorical or abstract, a watery something we needed psychological contact with in order to be healthy. The new field felt to him much more like nature studies rather than a clearing for actually relating to the natural world.

And so the field which announced itself in the early 1990s received its first redesign as well as a history to go with it while Greenway worked and attended Esalen conferences with Dolores LaChapelle and James Hillman but published little. The volume edited by Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner offered psychological nature philosophy and some critiques of industrial-material culture, but few applications and little science, ecological or otherwise. Linda Buzzell and I addressed these gaps in our 2009 volume *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind*.

The new field’s integral potential fell further in 2012, however, when Peter Kahn and Patricia Hasbach published *Ecopsychology: Science, Totems, and the Technological Species*. Although both had worked in the terrain of nature psychology, with Kahn conducting decades of important research and Hasbach delineating innovative and practical approaches to healing relations with nature, neither had published anything ecopsychological before announcing their manifesto for remaking the field. Their publisher, MIT Press, emphasized technical and scientific redesign but not deep nature work of any kind.

The new book called to replace the “first generation” theorizing of the original countercultural hippies with empirical research for demonstrating ourselves a species both naturally and technologically rooted. It called, in other words, for the kind of scientific objectification that theorist practitioners like Greenway and Andy Fisher had most objected to.

To some of us who had been in the field for a while, the new project looked a lot like turning ecopsychology into environmental psychology, an empirically-based field focused on how the environment shapes human behavior. This field asked questions like: Do larger stadium constructions enhance or diminish fans' enjoyment at sports events? We could not imagine ecopsychology asking such questions, although it might wonder where the materials that made the stadium were dug from and who had been underpaid to transport them.

For this the editors enlisted Greenway, who turned them down, and Fisher, who stuck to his anti-capitalist "radical ecopsychology" program. Only two of the contributors, Fisher and Laura Sewell, had ever published in the field of ecopsychology. The others were experts in health science, environmental studies, and geoscience, a marketing and consumer science researcher, an information technology specialist, two biologists, a developmental psychologist, and a psychotherapist: namely, Hasbach, who called for ecotherapy to be regulated like any other treatment.

The new self-named "second-generation" theorists called for paring down the field to five core orientations: the ecological unconscious (still Freudian, evidently), the phenomenology of the sensory (a nod to Sewell's work), interdependency between human and nonhuman, the transpersonal dimension, and its transcendental spiritual emphasis. This dumped several of ecopsychology's less mainstream areas of critical focus, including ecofeminism, environmental justice, indigenous science, and critical analysis of technological consumerism (including mass advertising), mass extinction, rapacious industrialization, and mainstream social science. The new goal was to be popular to the public, and critiques of culture are seldom popular.

Mainstream psychology tends to be popular, and it is sold to be. The pleasant image of laboratory certainty conceals many shadows: advertising directed at children, toxic mass market products, privacy-invading mental testing of prospective employees, CIA black site programming, torture regimes invented by the sellers of Positive Psychology, and a grim history of eugenics entwined with I.Q. testing and the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Nevertheless, "It's not just that large and rapacious corporations foist products on an unwilling populace," Kahn and Hasbach's Afterword tells us. "It's also that these changes are happening because of us. We love technology; we create it, and we are drawn to it." Of course we are drawn to it. Corporations spend billions making sure we are, and they enlist plenty of psychological muscle to turn artificial wants into illusory needs regardless of increasingly dire ecological consequences.

Going the generational fantasy one better, Andy Fisher promotes a "third wave" surpassing both the therapeutic emphasis of the first and the techno-materialistic credo of the second. The third looks at issues of colonialism, missing histories, and other aspects of social justice.

As for the locking down of ecotherapy into psychotherapeutic credentialing, this political tool of the American Psychological Association has drastically constrained professional and internship opportunities available to trainee psychotherapists. Linda Buzzell's distinction between "natural ecotherapy" where everyone enjoys free non-expert access to the healing powers of the natural world and "clinical ecotherapy" as part of a professional practice would be collapsed into the latter. Although home gardeners attending my "Gardening and Mental Health"

presentations in the public garden maintained by Master Gardeners in Walnut Creek quickly realized how connected they felt to what grew in their own backyards and how much they wanted to protect what greenery was left, this kind of transformation could no longer be known as ecotherapy.

It's important to recognize the theorist-practitioners who continue to move the field forward: exemplary ecopsychologists like Linda Buzzell, Mary-Jayne Rust, Andy Fisher, Jeanine Canty, Mary Good, Mutima Imani, Constance Washburn, Renee Soule, Hu Ting Ting, Vaughan Wilkins, Ariana Candell, Jan Edl Stein, Carl Anthony, David Talamo, Tina Field, Paloma Pavel, and Phoenix Smith. Even so, within ecopsychology as a discipline, the truly intersubjective relationship called for by Greenway, the critical acumen of Chellis Glendinning, and the "thinking like a mountain" taught by John Seed, Joanna Macy, Jan Stein, and many others, have shrunk to minority voices, and the evocative titles of the ecopsychological research of the past have given way to journal articles summarizing studies on how nature exposure can create improvements like those of Positive Psychology.

Academically and scientifically, ecopsychology has subsided into the opposite of what its founders intended: not humans refinding our place in an animate world of diverse species, but objects studying other objects: a grim reenactment of how human "progress" now dominates the natural world.

From Ecopsychology to Terrapsychology

From the very start of my graduate research, places where I lived or visited—San Diego, Orange County, Fresno, San Francisco, New York City, Hartford, Phoenix, Hong Kong—showed up in my dreams in personified form. From this imaginal space they told me true things about themselves which I could verify on the ground: congestion on a particular freeway, pollution runoff in a creek, overcrowding in the local housing. Other researchers reported similar encounters. We realized that the ecological integrity of a neighborhood, a house, a river, a mountain, a city, an ocean, perhaps even Earth as a whole, could make itself felt in dreams, moods, somatic states, symptoms of various kinds, and unwitting reenactments of local historical events. Place acted a kind of unconscious, especially when unacknowledged as a psychical presence.

Terrapsychology began as the study of the presence of place moving within us. Through years of work both inside and outside higher ed, it evolved gradually into a psychology for discovering how the things of the world get into the mind and heart ("interanimism") and for living in a world not just of objects, but of living presences to converse with. It grew into a field of imaginative studies, ideas, and practices for restorying and reenchanted our relations with the world, with each other, and with ourselves.

Ecopsychology said nothing about this interanimistic dynamic. The field confined itself to the relationship between mind and nature, leaving the built environment out of account except when criticizing its impact on human health. This is odd given how many of us now live in cities. Having devolved into the study of nature cures (as Andy Fisher pointed out years ago),

ecopsychology as a field of study has remained mostly silent about finding magic in how we connect in our depths with the sacred depths of the world.

Those of us working with terrapsychology and its research methodology, [Terrapsychological Inquiry](#), have no need of a generational fantasy for instituting the dominance of one kind of method over another. Free of this pattern inherited from religious power politics, we are happy to go off in different directions while supporting and admiring each other's creative efforts. Some of us feel called to social justice endeavors; others, to exploring the relationship between folklore (including myth) and locale. Terrapsychology includes fanciful work with everyday objects, development of seasonal rituals, ecotherapeutic practices (no license required) like those compiled by Linda Buzzell and me, and exploration of ancestral motifs and metaphors linking our families to their travels and places of origin. More recent work explores how plant medicines serve as visionary emissaries or bridges to the intelligence of nature.

Although we welcome scientific research, we feel clear that a method established to erase subjectivity could hardly be expected to validate its role in how we relate deeply to the world, let alone to one another. Also, the assumption of a separation between self and world, mind and nature, in need of empirical validation implies a duality terrapsychology rejects. We begin with a different assumption: that we are *already* a part of nature, world, element, object, region, Earth. The task is to understand the relationship.

Until now, most terrapsychological research has been qualitative—the kind that amplifies experience instead of trying to disqualify it—rather than quantitative. One image for combining methodologies might be how I and ecologist Stephan Harding co-taught one afternoon out on Dartmoor, with him scientifically describing the local ecology to students of Schumacher College while I conducted exercises to amplify the sense of granite, soil, and raven speaking within us, including in our dreams.

We also appreciate how indigenous researchers insist on the importance of *where* research is carried out as well as who benefits from it.

Ecopsychology as practiced officially by “second generation” researchers puts a premium on facts. No one disputes the importance of facts, but terrapsychology places more emphasis on *story*: the tales we tell ourselves about our place in the world, for example. The fact has not been born that can dent a strongly held story, however irrational or reactionary: only a fresher, more vital, and more resonant story can do that.

Humans are some ways be a technological species, as Kahn and Hasbach and MIT argue, but we are a storytelling species first. Even how we use tools or interpret data is mediated through the medium of stories about what the tools and data mean to us. To date, ecopsychology lacks the dimension of aspirational storytelling despite the obvious truth that depressing statistics about climate change or habitat loss will never motivate collective change. Terrapsychology addresses this through *enchantivism*, the craft of telling stories (verbal or performative or artistic) larger and more spacious than the ruptures they rise out of. We cannot know where to go next unless we can imagine it. The loss of the capacity to dream up better futures is a symptom of trauma, not a way to move forward.

Nor do those of us involved in terrapsychological projects believe that going mainstream makes things happen. Just look at the history of the Civil Rights Movement, or the Women's Movement, or even new styles of philosophy, literature, or art. They began at the edges of culture, and they remain vital only while stationed there as cells or outposts of edgy transmutation.

Terrapsychology practitioners ply a wide variety of venues and niches, but without the fantasy that popularity helps societies evolve. If anything, it does just the reverse, as we see when ecotherapy research findings are dumbed down to justify exploiting plants, animals, and landscapes for purely human healing. Encouraging humans to receive healing without giving anything back does not engender ecological partnership; rather, it implicitly enables the kind of mass consumerism and species selfishness Howard Clinebell warned us about. And if a societal majority suffers from what Maslow referred to as "the pathology of normalcy," what good would come of appealing to it?

To summarize:

Ecopsychology examines the health and pathology of our relations with the natural world. Its key operating assumption is that humans cannot be fully healthy or whole if our environments are sick or declining. Terrapsychology agrees. But as a body of knowledge, practice, and vision for tracing how the things of the world, whether natural or built, show up in human consciousness, and how what we consider "our" moods, conflicts, somatic states, or dreams lead us symbolically back to outer events, terrapsychology goes much farther than ecopsychology as well as beyond depth psychology, another key influence for our field. Additionally, Terrapsychological Inquiry offers an Earth-honoring qualitative research methodology used in many academic studies (master's and doctoral) and adapted to projects outside the academy.

A question worth bearing in mind for ecopsychology, depth psychology, and terrapsychology: Where are their aspirations taking them?