Sabrina Francescangeli

# Ecopsychology and Potential Implications for Self-Esteem

The ideas that make up the field of Ecopsychology were first put into motion by the scholar Theodore Rosak in his 1992 novel ​*The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology.*​ Although the definition of ecopsychology is relatively ambiguous in its current state, there are several common features that characterize the field. According to the environmental psychology textbook written by Scott et al. (2016), Ecopsychology is a view on the relationship between humans and nonhuman nature: humans are both physically as well as psychologically dependent on nature. When humans experience disconnect from nature, as often happens now as part of modern living, it leads to psychological distress and/or mental health problems. Accordingly, one of the primary goals of the field is to restore the connection between humans and nature. By doing so, humans might thereby regain connection to the self, which would ultimately lead to a restoration of human responsibility to the planet and sustainable behavior (Scott et al., 2016). Additionally, Ecopsychology investigates modern installations such as social systems and institutions in order to address and possibly find solutions to the human-nature disconnect with a focus on social justice and sustainability (Sussman, 2014). Some critics of Ecopsychology have claimed that the field is too broad (Hibbard, 2003); however, others have argued that this broadness is a necessity. Ecopsychology is required to be slightly ambiguous due to the diversity of items it encompasses, including but not limited to measuring the effect of environmental degradation on emotion, comprehending human engagement with the natural world, and attempting to foster the reconnection between humans and nature (Lertzman, 2004).

There have been numerous ecopsychological studies in the past in relation to human well-being. Most studies involve some component of connection of nature and a resulting increase in various aspects of health. Wolsko & Lindberg (2013) conducted research examining the relationship between psychological well-being and experiencing connection with nature in undergraduate students. Using the Connectedness to Nature (CNS) scale to assess emotional connectedness to nature, it was found that high CNS scores were strongly associated with higher reported levels of positive emotions, flourishing, subjective vitality, and trait mindfulness. In general, it appeared that those who have a stronger connection to nature experience higher mental health​.​ A different study by ​Scopelliti & Giuliani (2006)​ looked at characteristics of restorative environments specifically in relation to elderly people. Results showed that, as supported by previous research, wild nature (i.e., the countryside, mountains) was perceived as more restorative than urban nature (i.e., a park). Among natural environments, the trait of solitude further increased perceived restorativeness of wild nature. Other research done in the UK looked at urban residents exposure and frequency of visit to nature in association with measures of subjective well-being. Results suggest that higher life satisfaction was correlated with more frequent visits to nature, and those who had payed a more recent visit reported high levels of happiness (​White et al., 2017).​ A literature review accumulated on the topic of restorative landscapes and mental well-being found that the overall trend in many studies across the board show that these types of landscapes have the potential to benefit psychological well-being, especially in the areas of higher levels of positive emotions, decreased stress, and attention restoration (​Abraham et al., 2010).

Some studies reference self-esteem in particular as a received benefit of connecting with nature. Feral (1998) studied children who were encouraged to interact with their environment in a two year therapeutic program. It was found that participation in the program led to positive emotional development shown through higher self-concept (a self-concept scale was used to measure self-esteem, so this implies higher self-esteem), civility, and empathy. The children also reported that they liked themselves better (Feral, 1998). Wilderness therapy has also been a popular resource for adolescents that has positive psychological health benefits, among which include improved self-esteem (Werhan & Groff, 2005). A study by Swami et al. (2016) suggests that connectedness to nature leads to an increase in self-esteem that thus leads to higher perceived positive body image in women. It is speculated that nature exposure enables a shift to a more egalitarian mindset, reducing competitive values and allowing people to be more compassionate and live in peace with themselves and others (Swami et al., 2016). These among many other similar studies showed a relation between connection with nature and self-esteem.

In searching for literature on Ecopsychology, there seemed to be a critical lack of empirical work in general. Considering the founder of Ecopsychology, Rosak, was inspired by Carl Jung, a psychoanalyst, much work thus far has been psychoanalytic and therapeutic in nature. A myriad of academic work on the subject exists in the form of reviews and perspectives on the field and what it encompassed (Hibbard, 2003; Fisher, 2012). Although there did appear to be many correlational and some experimental studies, there is much left to be desired. Many of these studies found a positive correlation between engaging with nature and psychological well-being, but with little reasoning behind why this might be the case. Specifically, self-esteem also seemed to increase with nature exposure, as shown by the multiple studies cited previously. However, the reasons behind why connection with nature has a positive effect on self-esteem is questionable and not well understood. Hence, I would like to theorize on the possible underlying mechanisms that account for these changes in self-esteem in relation to the following four Ecopsychology tenets integrated in Scott et al. (2016):

1. At the core of the human mind is the ecological unconscious, repression of which causes madness in industrial society; to heal, people must become aware of their fundamental, primal connection to their ecological home (Glendinning, 1994; Shepard, 1998).
2. Repression of the ecological unconscious means disconnection from the ecological self. When people mistakenly perceive themselves as separate from, and independent of, their ecological context, they abuse the environment with which they feel no identification, connection, or empathy. They try to fulfill spiritual and intrinsic needs with extrinsic material goods (Kanner & Gomes, 1995; Kasser, 2009).
3. Through ecologically based transcendent experience, people can reconnect with the ecological unconscious and reclaim their ecological selves. Techniques to do so include mindful contact with nature, wilderness trips, reflective rituals, and ecotherapy (Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995).
4. Recovery of the ecological self leads to sustainable behavior. When people act from the ecological self, they do not have to try to make environmentally responsible choices. Instead, choices are naturally less intrusive and less toxic because people care about those whose wellbeing their behavior affects (Bragg, 1996; Naess, 1985; Thomashow, 1995).

In order to understand the connection between how these tenets could be relevant to self-esteem, I will first delve into comparing two contrasting human mindsets. Anthropological studies in the past revealed and discussed differences among groups of hunter-gatherers, referred to as “immediate-return” and “delayed-return” societies. The immediate-return references the fundamental mindset of most hunter-gatherer societies pre-agricultural revolution, whereas the delayed-return references the mindset of modern humans. Different traits characterize these two mindsets. Mainly, in a delayed-return mindset, people tend to be future-oriented and value unequal, hierarchical, competitive, and culturally complex societies. In contrast, an immediate-return mindset consists of high levels of present-mindedness, cooperation, sharing, egalitarianism, and autonomy (Martin & Shirk, 2012). It has been noted frequently that our current brain biology is the same as that of before the agricultural revolution and has not evolved since; yet lifestyles have changed drastically since then (Scott et al., 2016). This alludes directly to how our biology has retained immediate-return traits while we now live in a delayed-return world. This appears not only as a result of humans living in industrialized complex communities rather than small bands of hunter-gatherers, but also as a result of humans living separately from nature.

In relation to the first tenet, I believe that the ecological unconscious is equivalent to our basic immediate-return nature. Along with our current biology telling us that we are meant to be living in small egalitarian bands that live in the present moment, we additionally had a deep love and respect for the forest. These immediate-return societies lived so closely with nature that the forest was thought of as a parent-figure that would share resources with them (Martin & Shirk, 2012). In the modern industrialized world however, the human-nature disconnect is prevalent and most people no longer live in harmony with the environment or feel that they have a relationship with nature. Because we now live in a world that is so advanced, we have adopted delayed-return lifestyles in order to help match this change. Due to this, we often do not live in accordance with our immediate-return nature, and, correspondingly, we have many more psychological illnesses associated with modern living. In order to improve psychological well-being overall, I believe that a return to our immediate-return nature is necessary.

Incorporating these original biological human traits into our everyday life has the potential to naturally restore our connection with nature as well as with the self. The immediate-return mindset may serve as a way to reconnect to the ecological self by bridging the connection between humans and nature. Currently, since people see themselves as separate from nature, as is a key trait in modernized societies according to the dominant social paradigm (Scott et al., 2016), they do not associate their actions with possible environmental repercussions. This leads to overexploitation of the environment, as seen by the apparent anthropogenic sources of environmental degradation in today’s world. In relation with the second tenet, if we reconnect to the ecological unconscious (i.e., our immediate-return nature), then we will also naturally reconnect to our ecological self. Our sense of self, as we are related to the environment, will be restored in the immediate-return due to transitioning back to present-mindedness and reconnecting with our ecological context. People will stop living in their heads, thinking and making up plans and schedules for the future, and recenter themselves in the reality of the present world around them. This includes becoming more aware of the environment we live in, both human-built and natural. Once people manage to reconnect with nature, it follows that they would be more conscious of their actions and behave more sustainably.

I think this also relates to self-esteem in that a person may feel better about themselves simply by reconnecting with nature. As it has been found in the studies cited previously, connecting with nature is associated with higher mental well-being, including self-esteem. One of the leading self-esteem theories in psychology was posed by Mark Leary, coined Sociometer theory. Leary claims that being accepted or included in a social group results in higher self-esteem while being rejected or excluded from a social group results in lower self-esteem (Leary, 2005). However, I think this theory has a very narrow scope. It appears to only focus on self-esteem contingent on other humans, whereas self-esteem likely has a variety of underlying mechanisms. The studies showing connection with nature associated with positive benefits for self-esteem displays a broader view. If instead we look at self-esteem in the terms of being included or excluded from our ​*ecological context*​, then this starts to make more sense. Reconnecting ourselves with nature would then appear to improve our self-esteem since we are then “included” and present again in our natural environment, where we were meant to live. I think that this is related to the immediate-return mindset. In contrast, when we are living in the delayed-return world and trying to match our lifestyles to it, we then feel excluded and separated from our ecological context and our sense of self.

The third tenet notes several ways that one could reconnect with nature and thus reclaim the ecological self. However, I believe this could be achieved just as well with use of the immediate-return mindset. I predict that merely priming the immediate-return mindset would be enough to first increase self-concept clarity (which would act as a proxy for reclaiming the ecological self) and subsequently raise self-esteem. Experiments to do this might possibly include both simulating a connection to nature in addition to priming the immediate or delayed-return mindset in order to get a stronger effect. One might do this by having 4 conditions: connection to nature with and without an immediate-return prime and delayed-return prime with and without connection to industrialized society. In the two control conditions (no prime), the participant would be subject to sitting for 10 minutes told to look at either a natural scenes or a cityscapes. In the other conditions, the participant would be primed with one of the mindsets through a traits matching task before looking at the scenes. Then, we would measure self-concept clarity and self-esteem through a series of scales. My hypothesis would be supported if those who were both primed for the immediate-return mindset and looked at a natural scenes reported the highest levels of self-concept clarity and self-esteem. In other words, this would mean that a person’s ecological unconscious (i.e., immediate-return nature) would no longer be suppressed, and in turn result in finding one’s ecological self (as represented by higher self-concept clarity).

With the considerable lack of empirical studies in Ecopsychology, testable hypotheses and scientific experiments would contribute greatly to the field. It would also aid the field in gaining much of the scientific legitimacy it has been lacking (Fisher, 2012). So, this study would be of use in helping to operationalize some of the more theoretical concepts within ecopsychology, such as the ecological unconscious and the ecological self. If this theory is correct, it holds the implication that both self-esteem and sustainable behavior could result solely by priming the immediate-return mindset. Thus, the results from this study could ultimately both help improve human psychological well-being as well as lead to higher environmental consciousness and conservation efforts.

# References

Abraham, A., Sommerhalder, K., & Abel, T. (2010). Landscape and well-being: a scoping study on the health-promoting impact of outdoor environments. ​*International journal of public health*​, ​*55*​(1), 59-69.

Feral, C. H. (1998). The connectedness model and optimal development: Is ecopsychology the answer to emotional well-being?. ​*The Humanistic Psychologist*​, ​*26*​(1-3), 243-274.

Fisher, A. (2012). What is ecopsychology? A radical view. ​*Ecopsychology: Science, totems, and the technological species*​, 79-114.

Hibbard, W. (2003). Ecopsychology: A review. *Trumpeter*​ ​, *19*​ ​(2).

Leary, M. R. (2005). Sociometer theory and the pursuit of relational value: Getting to the root of self-esteem. ​*European Review of Social Psychology, 16,*​ 75-111.

Lertzman, R. (2004). Ecopsychological Theory and Critical Intervention. ​*Organization & Environment*​, ​*17*​(3), 396–401.

Martin, L.L., & Shirk, S. (2012). Immediate-Return Societies: What Can They Tell Us About the Self and Social Relationships in Our Society?

Scopelliti, M., & Giuliani, M. V. (2006). Restorative environments in later life: An approach to well-being from the perspective of environmental psychology. *Journal of Housing for the*​  *Elderly*​, ​*19*​(3-4), 203-226.

Scott, B. A., Amel, E. L., Koger, S. M., & Manning, C. M. (2016). ​*Psychology for Sustainability*​. New York: Routledge.

Sussman, R. (2014). Deeper than our differences: The five common factors of ecopsychology. *Ecopsychology*​, ​*6*​(1), 48–49.

Swami, V., Von Nordheim, L., & Barron, D. (2016). Self-esteem mediates the relationship between connectedness to nature and body appreciation in women, but not men. ​*Body Image*​, 41.

Werhan, P. O., & Groff, D. G. (2005). Research update: The wilderness therapy trail. Parks & Recreation, 40 (11), 24.

White, M. P., Pahl, S., Wheeler, B. W., Depledge, M. H., & Fleming, L. E. (2017). Natural environments and subjective wellbeing: Different types of exposure are associated with different aspects of wellbeing. ​*Health & place*​, ​*45*​, 77-84.

Wolsko, C., & Lindberg, K. (2013). Experiencing connection with nature: The matrix of psychological well-being, mindfulness, and outdoor recreation. *Ecopsychology*​, ​*5*​(2), 80-91.