

# A Beautiful Mess: Embracing the Complexity of Ecopsychology

Mary Beth Mannarino

Chatham University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The convergence of three events in 2009 has led me to respond to editor Peter H. Kahn's request for opinions about the future of *Ecopsychology*. First, the journal *Ecopsychology* published its first issue with goals of providing a forum for conversations about ecopsychology and of showcasing "diverse perspectives that provide a nuanced understanding of the psychology of human-nature relationships" (Doherty, 2009, p. 55). Second, the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change (2009) published its final report, in which the authors recommended that psychology education and training curricula include topics related to climate change. Third, our university launched a doctor of psychology in counseling psychology program with an emphasis on promoting sustainable health and well-being; given our university's status as the alma mater of Rachel Carson, the focus on sustainable health and well-being called for deep exploration of the relationship between humans and more-than-human nature and what this means for human health and well-being.

As the faculty member who is primarily responsible for this curriculum focus, I have come to depend upon *Ecopsychology* to provide thought-provoking articles from multiple perspectives to help me guide our students toward thinking about how ecopsychology may be relevant for their future work as counseling psychologists. My interest in the future of this journal is also, however, rooted in other roles. I came to academia relatively late in my career, after more than 20 years of clinical work. Through my experiences working with children, adolescents, and families, I learned to conceptualize health and well-being in ways that complement or

even move beyond the mainstream medical and psychological models, drawing me toward ecopsychological concepts and issues. Finally, in recent years, I have begun to dip my toes into activist work related specifically to the issues of mountain top removal, which affects my birth home of eastern Kentucky, and fracking, which affects my adopted home of western Pennsylvania. Navigating these three roles—academic, clinician, and citizen-activist—has made me hungry to learn as much as I can about ecopsychology theory and research. I welcome this opportunity to contribute to the thinking about the future of the journal *Ecopsychology*, a home for this work.

First, it is important for the journal to continue to include work that supports the connections between the health of the natural environment and the health and well-being of humans. Doctoral students come to my course after thorough exposure to conventional psychology theory, research, and practice, and are often initially bewildered about how topics such as climate change, eco-destruction, consumerism, community well-being, and technology-human interactions can be relevant for psychology practice. Colleagues who are unfamiliar with ecopsychology issues are also confused. The articles describing the impact of the Deepwater Horizon disaster on the well-being of nearby residents (Koger, 2010), the human consequences of mountain top removal (Cordial et al., 2012), and the perceptions of environmental justice and injustice among people experiencing homelessness (Klein and Riemer, 2011) are a few examples of writings that can help students and practitioners understand how learning about ecological issues could enhance their work with clients.

Second, *Ecopsychology*, as noted in the introductory paragraph above, has intentionally been open to diverse perspectives; I hope that this continues to be the case. The recent discussions about differences between "first generation" and "second generation"

ecopsychologists (Fisher, 2013a; Kahn, 2013; Pye, 2013) highlight two primary viewpoints that exist in the field of ecopsychology. Inclusion of works that represent different ways of knowing—qualitative studies, quantitative research, theoretical writings, first-person accounts of experiences and imagination—allows an accurate reflection of the complexity of the field. Discussions about the foundations of the different ways of knowing about ecopsychology—their historical, political, and philosophical roots—and how these affect what we study and how we do it would also be helpful. To elaborate—any type of research can present only a snapshot of reality; what is presented is framed or limited by the methodology, and what is absent is as well. Having ongoing dialogues about these ideas would, I think, remind us of the need to include work that focuses on not easily measured experiences such as imagination, intuition, theory, and narrative, in addition to more easily quantified phenomena such as behaviors and attitudes. *Ecopsychology* will serve the public well if it continues to be inclusive of work reflecting many ways of knowing, as well as discussion about the implications of different ways of knowing. Such an approach allows us to see a more comprehensive picture of the issues and fosters debate, thinking outside one's box, collaboration, and respect, to the benefit of all.

Similarly, I encourage the journal to make deliberate efforts to move further beyond the boundaries of the discipline of psychology. Fisher (2013b) even proposes the question of whether or not “ecopsychology” is part of psychology. By its very nature, the field of ecopsychology touches many aspects of human experience—physical, intellectual, emotional, cultural, material, political, and spiritual, among others. Ecopsychological concerns are expressed in scientific work, in literature, poetry, religious writings, and film, and in community actions and government policy. In contrast to the often-siloed academic and scholarly world (Orr, 2004), *Ecopsychology* could provide a forum for cross-fertilization across disciplines, as well as opportunities for readers to be inspired by something unexpected, outside one's usual way of seeing the world.

I also challenge the journal to go deeper and wider in its consideration of larger questions related to the field of ecopsychology—specifically how political, religious, economic, and other worldviews and practices might be connected to current environmental crises and related human distress. Fisher (2013b), for example, does a good job of naming and describing the relationship between the Western economic model of capitalism and the state of planetary and human well-being. To move into this territory, to dig deeply into thinking about how a foundation of our culture and society might be in some ways deleterious to our well-being, invites discomfort and tension, both between

people of differing views and within oneself. I certainly discovered this in the class that I taught during the season of the 2012 presidential election. But doing so is, I believe, essential to making progress toward expanding our awareness so that we can take steps to heal ourselves and our earthly home.

Finally, the interviews and first-person essays published in *Ecopsychology* have been so important for my own personal and professional growth. Like many others, I learn from stories and narratives of others' personal experiences. I wrestle with my different roles of academic, clinician, and citizen-activist, and I work hard to maintain integrity across all of them. I work with students who represent diverse political, religious/spiritual, and social perspectives, and I hope to arouse in them curiosity, empathy, understanding, and a desire to be part of the solution. I am aware that I bring my own perspectives to the mix as well. How do I do this, how do we do it together, in a way that gets us closer to the truth (if that is possible)? I have felt that each of my roles has required a slightly different response from me, a differently nuanced presentation of who I am, and that is sometimes disturbing to me. In an activist role, I can be transparent with regard to my political ideas and beliefs. Doing this in an academic and clinical settings is trickier. I would love to hear more from others who take their concerns about ecopsychology into different arenas.

I titled my essay “A Beautiful Mess” with all these thoughts and experiences in mind. I am so grateful to have arrived at a point in my life where I am participating in conversations about such important concerns—how to protect and promote the health and well-being of humans and of the more-than-human natural world. This is a beautiful place to be—a place where the interconnectedness, the oneness, of these tasks is so clear. And it is messy as well—rife with unanswered questions, dilemmas, tensions, confusion, both hope and despair. I encourage the editors of and contributors to *Ecopsychology* to recognize and embrace this complexity and to nurture work that both reflects and serves to further clarify the beautiful mess.

## REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface Between Psychology and Global Climate Change. (2009). *Psychology and global climate change: Addressing a multi-faceted phenomenon and set of challenges*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Cordial, P., Riding-Malon, R., and Lips, H. (2012). The effects of mountaintop removal coal mining on mental health, well-being, and community health in Central Appalachia. *Ecopsychology, 4*, 201–208.
- Doherty, T. (2009). Editorial: Leading ecopsychology. *Ecopsychology, 1*, 53–56.
- Fisher, A. (2013a). Ecopsychology at the crossroads: Contesting the nature of a field. *Ecopsychology, 5*, 167–176.

- Fisher, A. (2013b). *Radical ecopsychology: Psychology in the service of life* (2nd ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kahn, P. H., Jr. (2013). The next phase for *Ecopsychology*: Ideas and directions. *Ecopsychology*, 5, 163–166.
- Klein, K., & Riemer, M. (2011). Experiences of environmental justice and injustice in communities of people experiencing homelessness. *Ecopsychology*, 3, 195–204.
- Koger, S. (2010). Coping with the Deepwater Horizon disaster: An *Ecopsychology* interview with Deborah Du Nann Winter. *Ecopsychology*, 2, 205–209.
- Orr, D. (2004). *Earth in mind: On education, environment, and the human prospect*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Pye, L. (2013). Diversity at the crossroads: A commentary on "Ecopsychology at the crossroads: Contesting the nature of a field." *Ecopsychology*, 5, 177–178.

Address correspondence to:  
Mary Beth Mannarino, PhD  
Chatham University, Graduate Psychology  
Woodland Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15218

E-mail: [mmannarino@chatham.edu](mailto:mmannarino@chatham.edu)

Received: October 14, 2013  
Accepted: January 23, 2014