

Out of the consulting room and into the woods? Experiences of nature-connectedness and self-healing

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Abstract

Nature-connectedness is a core concept in ecopsychology. It could be a proxy concept for hypothetical ‘biophilia’. Focussing on people’s experiences of nature-connectedness, and how far people have found them to be emotionally helpful, may help social and health-care professionals in their work with clients. This study aimed to explore this idea by asking people to describe their personal experiences. Members of a scientific panel on “green care” (n = 17) and a group of postgraduate counselling trainees (n = 26) described experiences of connectedness and disconnectedness to nature, and gave examples of how they had found nature to be a positive force for personal healing. Participants described the positive emotional effects of being in contact with nature, contrasted by the feelings of isolation, sadness and other negative consequences of being disconnected from nature. Contact with natural settings appears to generate a range of positive feelings to the extent that therapy and support professionals should consider routinely asking clients about their connectedness to nature and explore with them how their relationship with nature could be enhanced. However, we can all use nature-contact for “self-healing” at times of emotional or physical dis-ease.

Introduction

In this paper I explore the notion that many of us readily feel a connectedness to nature and that this is good for us. A key implication for social care and health professionals is that they could use a person’s positive nature-relationship as a starting point for their intervention and ongoing support – or, to put it another way, leaving the consulting room for a walk in the woods. If we don’t have a professional helper, of course, we should consider doing this ourselves.

A throb in the heart-beat of the ecopsychology movement is the concept of biophilia, “the innate tendency to focus on life and life-like processes” (Wilson, 1984: 1). Kellert and Wilson’s (1993) book on biophilia refers to its existence as an “hypothesis”, since it cannot be directly observed, only inferred from examples of people preferring natural environments. Nor can it be easily shown that nature-contact has healing properties. Indeed a recent multidisciplinary project to conceptualise “green care” (Sempik, Hine & Wilcox, 2010) shows how wide-ranging the concept is, which makes it difficult if not impossible to find an agreed way to establish the therapeutic efficacy of contact with nature. However, “nature-connectedness” can be thought of as a manifestation of biophilia and, as I explore here, people frequently describe nature-connectedness experiences when asked, and recognise that nature-contact is good for them.

The starting point for my work in this area was Mayer and Frantz’ (2004) paper describing a self-report scale aiming to measure “nature-connectedness”. Their 14-item questionnaire appears to reliably measure where an individual is on an ideological continuum ranging from a feeling of inter-connectedness with the natural world to alienation from it. The authors report that they found “a moderately strong positive relationship between the CNS (Connectedness to Nature Scale) and eco-friendly actions” (p. 512) and offer it as “a way to monitor attempts to change people’s world-view to one that is more environmentally sensitive” (*ibid.*). Whilst this scale is a valuable tool for quantitative research, I thought that the fourteen questions took a narrow view of what nature-connectedness might mean for individuals. I wanted to find out what people’s own experiences were.

I was also interested in the implications of nature-connectedness for psychological healing. Several authors have demonstrated how nature can be used alongside other psychotherapeutic strategies. Burns (1998) is an inspiring manual for integrating nature experiences into hypnotherapy. Linden and Grut (2002) used allotment gardening as a key element in their psychotherapeutic work with torture victims. Berger and McLeod (2006: 80) present “an alternative approach to therapy, conducted in creative ways in nature, addressing the environment not merely as a setting but as a partner in the process”. Neuberger (2007) has extensively developed the “phyto-resonance theory” of Paul Shepard in his work with psychiatric patients and gives examples of specific horticultural activities that create “self-reflective processes [...that] set impulses to understand and change

personal problem solving strategies” (Neuberger, 2007: 153). More broadly, one could cite the horticultural therapy and ecotherapy movements as affirming the healing power of nature. These are examples of a tripartite therapeutic partnership between the client, therapist and beneficent nature, but I am particularly interested in this paper in how far people have spontaneously experienced nature-as-healer, and whether they seek out nature experiences at difficult times.

The work I report here, then, stems from two questions. Firstly, what are people’s everyday understandings of the term “nature-connectedness”? Secondly, do people report seeking out natural settings to feel better? I devised a simple questionnaire to find out. Here I present data from two samples, using the first version of my questionnaire (Appendix 1): a multidisciplinary sample of scientists and practitioners attending a meeting on “green care” as part of the European COST 866 action, and a group of postgraduate counselling trainees at a British University.

Method

Design

The study was conceived as qualitative, narrative, and ethnographic: I wanted to collect examples of people’s self-reports of nature-connectedness and their unprompted use of nature for self-healing. I contrast this with a “survey”, which collects quantitative data on the prevalence of particular views or experiences. More broadly, the work sits within phenomenological approaches to research. George Kelly’s (1955) “personal construct theory” is also personally influential. Kelly argued for the importance of understanding an individual’s view, or construction, of the world: a person-centred, idiographic approach to research. In this study, I reproduce verbatim many of my participants’ questionnaire responses and keep my own interpretations to a minimum.

Construction of the questionnaire

My questionnaire (Appendix 1) begins with an introductory paragraph designed to orient participants to the purpose of the research. Questions 1 and 2 ask for people’s experiences of nature-connectedness and its contrasting construct, “dis-connectedness”. Question 3 is a single Likert-scale question asking for people’s agreement with the assertion that “Being connected with the natural world is a

positive force for healing” and Question 4 invites people to share an experience of this, after a priming Yes/No question.

Study participants and procedure

Sample 1: 17 members of a European research group (EU COST 866, accessed 19th May 2010 from <http://www.umb.no/greencare/>) on “green care and health” agreed to complete the questionnaire at the end of a meeting. They were scientists and practitioners in a range of professions including social and health care, agriculture, veterinary science and psychology, from many European countries. Nine other members of the group declined to complete the questionnaire, some confessing that they felt their command of English was not sufficient. Although the topic was broadly familiar to them, they had not been introduced to my research or questionnaire before completing it.

Sample 2: 26 university postgraduate counselling students ranging in age from 22-62 years completed the questionnaire as part of a workshop on general research methods. Students had a range of personal and professional backgrounds but had a common interest in supporting and helping others. The workshop included exercises on research methods and students were asked to volunteer to complete the questionnaire at the end of the session. Ecopsychology had not featured in their course, and was not mentioned in that session, so the experiences that they drew on in completing the questionnaire were from their personal or professional backgrounds. All completed the questionnaire.

Data analysis and presentation

People in both samples seemed to find the questionnaire interesting and stimulating. Whilst some people answered the questions with just a few words, others wrote lengthy personal accounts of experiences and emotions. Some were moving and poetic.

I considered at length how best to convey this richness and diversity of experience here. I felt that a detailed, reductionist content or thematic analysis, whilst potentially of interest, would destroy the flow and immediacy of individual narratives. I therefore decided to present the answers question by question, and to quote from them as fully as space allowed.

A striking initial impression for me was just how much people wrote, particularly for Question 4. I convey this by a brief analysis of the word count for each question and between each sample. Secondly, it was clear that there were many similarities in people's accounts. I highlight these at the beginning of my analysis of each question. Finally, I reproduce a representative selection of people's answers, grouped into categories or themes that appeared during my extensive reading and re-reading of the data.

Results

In the following extracts respondents are identified by group (GC = Green Care group, sample 1; CP = counsellor psychology trainees, sample 2) and by an arbitrary index number. Personal details such as age, nationality and gender were not identifiable.

Connectedness (Question 1)

Everyone answered this question and indicated that connectedness did have resonances for them, with contributions that ranged in length from a few words to paragraphs. The median length of contribution was 20 words (range 3-61) in the European Green Care sample and 24.5 (range 4-71) in the UK counseling psychology sample. This difference, however, is not statistically significant (Median test, $\chi^2(1) = 1.12$, $p = 0.29$, 2-tailed).

The shorter responses convey a positive response to the idea of connectedness but tell us little about the individual respondent. Examples include:

Silence, grace, wholeness. (GC8)

Beauty, growth, outside, countryside, view therapeutic, oxygen, escape, healthy. (CP7)

Pleasure generated from nature. The positivity that nature can evoke. The wonder of natural beauty. Respect, well-being, relax, empathy, more senses in use, pleasure, learn new skills. (GC11)

Feeling at peace with nature. Feeling calmness and acceptance of nature, slowness. (CP23)

Relaxation, release, feeling free. (CP25)

The longer contributions disclose more of the individuals' views and thinking about the topic of connectedness, for example:

I like the idea of being connected with nature, to me it means being a part of my natural surroundings and particularly where there are no buildings. For me it is important to be by the sea and I find this refreshing, calming and de-stressing. I also find these feelings when working in my garden, or on a lesser scale, watching the birds in the garden before I go to work. (CP1)

CP1's contribution has a number of elements that were echoed in many others. There is an overall positive tone, here stated explicitly (he or she "likes the idea" of a connection to nature). This connection involves an identity ("being a part of") with nature. This is a natural, not constructed environment ("natural surroundings and particularly [...] no buildings"). A personally-important location is mentioned ("for me [...] important to be by the sea"), and there is a positive emotional effect ("refreshing, calming, de-stressing"). The final sentence generalises the experience to other natural settings. Similar elements can be seen in many accounts.

The positive emotional tone runs through all the contributions to Question 1 (in contrast to Question 2, as we shall see, which asked about disconnectedness). Participant CP1 above mentions explicitly a relaxing effect, and implies a personal value gained from being part of natural surroundings. Other mention similar feelings, that connectedness is spiritually meaningful, God-like and emotionally helpful, as in the following examples.

Not being religious in the traditional meaning I do feel a larger meaning with life or being part of a larger being when I am close to or feel part of Nature. It is like being part of life, being real, being active. (GC1)

Connection with something bigger something powerful, uncontrollable, growth, longevity. Relaxation. Feeling of not being alone. Greater power – beyond. Grounded. Peace. Beauty. Being part of something. (CP2)

My strongest experience is the undersea environment when you become part of the environment. (GC2)

Come closer with my real self, or God. (CP5)

This resonates with me. Nature is calming, helps put the rest of life in perspective. Seasons link us with the seasons of life – Spring – growth. Winter - death and loss. Links us with natural cycles and our own life cycles. (CP8)

Involvement of many senses. Feeling “at home”. Feeling of being supported. Stress relief. Drop shoulders. (GC9)

Spirituality – idea of seeing God in creation – that as humans we are all part of creation. By being close to nature [you] can connect with God and the inner life. (CP9)

Link to “from where all life starts”. The nature of things – how things really are. (GC10)

At peace in natural surroundings such as open air – green fields, trees, particularly woodland – touching wood – natural, berries, bringing me back down to earth – something pure, safe and real – something which has always been there. (CP12)

That humans are connected to nature with all their physiology, culture, emotional and social context but are not aware of it any more most of the time. (GC13)

A spiritual connection with the universe through nature. Encouragement from “alternative” gurus to get in touch with nature and as means of balancing, healing, calming the spirit. (CP17)

I feel that we are a part of nature, because the creator of nature is also the one who may have created us (no, I don't think it's God). Connectedness with nature for me would be being in the presence of our own i.e. what was made with us. (CP20)

Not everyone's passage conveyed a deeper spiritual link, however: some just reported that being in nature felt good, or was associated with pleasant feelings.

Trees, relaxation, animals, fresh air, long walks, brightness, mountain, picnic. Relax, being calmer, clearing thoughts, catharsis, get in touch with inner self and soul. (CP6)

Autumn colours, short winter days, snowing, bright winter days – sun is shining and snow is full of diamonds, spring time when nature is awake – all getting green, garden in the warm evening when seeds are sown and the earth is black and warm, summertime with flowers, rain and sun – long bright days, butterflies in sunny forest and in meadows. (GC7)

Pleasure generated from nature. The positivity that nature can evoke. The wonder of natural beauty. (CP13)

Peacefulness, walking, mushrooms, swim in the lake, weekend, summer, skiing. (GC15)

I think natural elements are very therapeutic i.e. walking through woods, fields is calming and relaxing and allows me to unwind and think freely. I feel particularly drawn to the sound of a

river or even the water feature in the garden. Away from the house and chores I feel more relaxed and stress free. (CP16)

Another theme was that individuals were drawing on activities they regularly took part in, such as walking and gardening (below), or underwater swimming (GC2, above), that brought them satisfaction.

Gardener – touching plants / soil is calming, grounding. Watching sunlight on leaves is spiritual. Gardening – the garden reflects my personality. Bird watching – new exciting fulfilling. Walking in the woods – life-giving. (CP14)

Being connected with nature makes me think of health, walking, exploring, wildlife, beautiful scenery, calmness and purity. (CP21)

When I go for walks in the lake district I feel very calmed and relaxed by being surrounded by nature. (CP24)

Walking in mountains remote from areas of population. I find that wildness and rugged nature of this type of environment very challenging and stimulating. (CP26)

There were contributions that seemed to convey very deeply-held principles:

“Nature never did betray the heart that loved her” (...Shaw) It is important to me that I live in rhythm with nature, not cut across the natural grain. (CP4)

I wish the world was “constructed” differently so that it wasn’t such an effort to be physically connected to nature. The modern world is too mechanical. I feel “connected” with nature is the way we were meant to be. (CP11)

Mother Earth and the fact that we only have one earth, can’t grow more land and that land provides food sources and nurture. (CP18)

Finally, some were idiosyncratic or enigmatic:

My everyday life, working on our own ecological farm or advising farmers to solve their problems in ecological farming. (GC3)

Tree hugging, Green man, Robin Hood, Lady Chatterley, Ancient woodlands, National Trust. Inevitability of death, numinosity, chaos theory, primordial swamp, elemental weather. (GC22)

Empathy, Goethean phenomenology. (GC17)

Only one contributor wrote that she did not feel connected with nature, although enjoyed it:

I don't really feel "connected" with nature but I like spending time in nature (relaxation) and enjoy nature and wildlife. (GC4)

I have quoted in full many of the 43 responses to Question 1 above to give a representative picture of what respondents contributed. The choice of those to include was in a sense arbitrary, as any of them could have been included, and those omitted were similar. Although the above examples reflect personal and individual experiences, the overall content is consistent. Participants are reporting emotionally positive experiences that have arisen whilst they are in touch with natural places or things, that are frequently associated with activities (such as walking or gardening), and which often have a deeper, spiritual meaning for them. The associations "disconnectedness with nature" (Question 2) that people described are in clear contrast. Disconnectedness seems to imply many negative emotions such as tension, isolation, bleakness, emptiness, stress, meaninglessness and fear.

Disconnectedness (Question 2)

Everyone replied to this question. Contributions were briefer than to Question 1. The GC sample made shorter contributions (Median = 10.5 words, range 1-28) than the CP sample (Median = 15 words, range 4-32) and the difference approaches statistical significance (Median Test, $\chi^2(1) = 2.83$, $p = 0.09$, 2-tailed).

The overall tone of the responses to Question 2 which, as one might expect since it is asking for the opposite pole of the construct "connectedness", is distinctly different than the answers to Question 1. This contrast is illustrated by Participant CP16 who specifically linked questions 1 and 2:

Q1: I think natural elements are very therapeutic i.e. walking through woods, fields is calming and relaxing and allows me to unwind and think freely. I feel particularly drawn to the sound of a river or even the water feature in the garden. Away from the house and chores I feel more relaxed and stress free.

Q2: Conversely, to be in a cluttered room or a room full of objects and people with no natural light or fresh air can feel stressful, draining and tiring.

Another contributor (GC12) offered a string of word-associations for questions 1 and 2 which again shows a clear contrast:

Q1: Tree-hugging, Green Man, Robin Hood, Lady Chatterley, ancient woodlands, National Trust [UK charity preserving nation's heritage]. Inevitability of death, numinosity, chaos theory, primordial swamp, elemental weather.

Q2: Urban warrior, yuppie, metropolitan, reductionism, medical model, dead animals on the road, high-tech, steel and glass buildings.

Contributor CP6 also feels the two are very different:

Q1 Trees, relaxation, animals, fresh air, long walks, brightness, mountain, picnic. Relax, being calmer, clearing thoughts, catharsis, get in touch with inner self and soul.

Q2 City life, fast-moving society, pollution, cars, busy, moody faces, being practical.

Many answers to this question had similar elements to the above three, illustrated in the examples below. Contributions frequently referred to contrasts in place (outside, contrasted with being inside), in activity (walking against being in a room), to the qualities of place (the “sound of the river” versus “room full of objects[...] with no natural light”), and to the effects on the individual (“more relaxed and stress free” in contrast with “stressful, draining and tiring”).

The built, urban environment as a place was cited by many people, particularly in the CP sample:

Disconnected from my core nature, from my first environment. Be closer to technocratic world, materialistic world. (CP5)

City life, fast-moving society, pollution, cars, busy, moody faces, being practical. (CP6)

Inside, no view, imprisoned. (CP7)

Disconnected – cities. Crowds of people. Doing rather than being. Alienation from self and other living things. Materialism. Out of sync with time. Time-driven. (CP8)

Being disconnected suggests the idea of the absence of living things - the metaphor of the concrete jungle – sick building syndrome etc. (CP9)

Urban context. Stress, fatigue. (GC14)

Being in the city – no trees or open spaces, noise, fumes, no quiet places. (CP18)

Factory, cars, every kinds of pollution, fashion. (CP19)

“Being disconnected” reminds me of my city life, where nature is missing and is replaced with synthetics and man made instead of original and natural. (CP20)

In the above examples the urban environment is mentioned but the emotions that people associate with it are largely implied. Other contributions focus less on place than on the feelings that they associate disconnectedness with, as the following examples show.

Being alone, being petrified, being unhappy, being isolated, being outside. (GC1)

Alone, isolation, stressed. Ugly, Soulless, empty. Frightening. Overwhelming. (CP2)

Being disconnected = sadness, loneliness, a big part of the life quality missing. Routine life, driving a car. (GC2)

Lonely isolated afraid rejected. (CP3)

Not fully living. A loss of spirituality. Unhappiness. A bleakness. (CP4)

Anger, isolation, speechlessness, being upset, loneliness.(GC9)

Spiral-ing away from the meaningful. Over-rationalisation, over economisation [*presumably meaning in the sense of economics as material gain*]. (GC10)

No resonance – feeling separate almost alien. Not understanding or feeling meaning – alone – untouched – untouchable. (CP12)

Cut off – from part of myself. Dark nights – withdraw from life into myself. Not aware [of being] connected to natural rhythms i.e., seasons/changes in bird migration. (CP13)

Loss and fear – alone in my own inner wilderness – I am invisible to the world. Disconnection relates to the safety where no-one can get me or hurt me, my emotions have left. (CP22)

Sadness, confusion, feeling different from other individuals, hopefulness that things may change, feelings of aloneness. (CP25)

The above contributions focus on how disconnectedness made them personally feel. Only three contributors focus on other people:

For me, being disconnected with natures makes me feel that that people don't care about nature, don't respect nature or don't have the opportunity to spend time in nature. (GC4)

Not appreciating nature. Not respecting nature, for instance, by damaging trees that [have] spent many years growing. (GC5)

I have little respect for people who feel disconnected with nature. (GC15)

I conclude this section with two of the longer answers to this question. They make personal as well as more general points.

I think my generation (I am 27 years old) is really disconnected with nature. Especially when you are living in the western part of the Netherlands. I even live in the "countryside" with lots of forest but nature is for me more a kind of "theatre" or "background", where you can walk in it or run in it. It rushes you along and you do not have the time to see the details for instance how things grow. (GC6)

Busy, unhealthy, fake, out of touch with what's really important. The thought makes me wish for time-out. I connect time-outs with nature cos you get to just appreciate everything around you. (CP11)

The answers to Question 2 hint at those to the final question, showing that people found nature-contact personally meaningful and emotionally valuable. Asking them specifically about the value of nature-connectedness produced a wealth of additional detail, as we see in the next section.

Connectedness and self-healing (Questions 3 and 4)

Having encouraged respondents to think about the idea of connectedness to nature, the questionnaire ends with asking them how far this is linked to their wellbeing. It seemed to find a strong resonance. Thirty-eight of the 43 respondents said that they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement in Question 3 (3 circled "neutral" and 2 "disagree"): "Being connected with the natural world is a positive force for

healing”. Three people wrote nothing in the follow-up question to this (Q.4) which asked them to share personal experiences. The remainder wrote more in response to this question than to the others: the median word length for the GC sample was 29 words (range 5-97) and for the CP sample, 42 words (range 10-121). The median difference between the two samples, although apparently large, is not statistically significant (Median test, $\chi^2(1) = 1.12$, $p = 0.29$, 2-tailed).

The answers make fascinating reading and many have similar features. For example, consider the following two extracts:

When I am particularly stressed or run down I feel better able to cope and feel better in myself if I am able to be in nature in some way – this means taking time out to just “be” outside sometimes. (CP1)

Walking outside for calming down, relax, recreate, feel better when depressed. Instead of walking outside, these effects can also be reached by spending time with animals, doing sports outside. (GC13)

These accounts talk about the occasions on which nature was used and the specific nature of the problem (“when[...] particularly stressed”, “when depressed”), the activity engaged in (“taking time out to ‘be’”, “walking outside”), the place in nature accessed (“outside”, “spending time with animals”), and the therapeutic effect (“better able to cope”, “calm down”). One can see these themes in many of the following accounts:

Every time I have to live in an urban environment etc for shorter or longer periods (study-years, work etc) especially in big, loud, stinky cities coming back into farming (practically, hands-on) is healing, makes breathing free again. (GC4)

If I am lacking clarity, inspiration or feel “closed down” I walk high hills / mountains – it is where I re-connect. Relaxation – near water, especially moving water, rivers, falls, sea. Trees – give them a hug, their energy is powerful and giving. Colour – flowers, leaves – invigorates. Meditation involves these things. The above are all a part of me! (CP4)

During the winter days with sunshine makes me much better. Outdoor activities, walking, cleaning up your garden etc. stabilises my mood. (GC5)

I walk regularly in the countryside which I feels provides me with an opportunity to de-stress and escape and it feels very healthy and therapeutic. (CP7)

To stay alone in nature and wilderness for some hours or days to feel contemplation, reflection, meditation and relaxation. (GC8)

Family members who are depressed go to Scotland to walk. This always has a healing outcome. When feeling stressed I always find a walk in nature helps. When you are alone in Nature you can finally listen to yourself. Nature helps us to leave the busy world behind. (CP8)

Just simply walking by a lake or river, being under trees and looking up at a mountain fills me with joy and revives me spiritually. I can't really explain it other than a spiritual experience or being in touch with creation – and perhaps the creator! (CP9)

Too many to count but it's mentally therapeutic to be placed somewhere you NATURALLY belong (in nature) away from all the technology. Meditation is an example of every-day-stress-relief-therapy sort of thing. Although you can meditate away from nature, it facilitates and inspires the process. There's just something about the smell of mountain air or freshly cut grass isn't there? (CP11)

I have since a child taken a huge comfort from being in the countryside – just a certain smell in the air can literally transform the way I am feeling. I am choosing to walk in the countryside for 2 hours each day in order to prove a fruitful area for meditation and reflection. (CP12)

Walking outside for calming down, relax, recreate, feel better when depressed. Instead of walking outside, these effects can also be reached by spending time with animals, doing sports outside. (GC13)

Yes: I use nature and garden to balance my mind. (GC15)

I find that walking in the fresh air cures my migraine attacks better than taking tablets/medication. It also makes me feel very happy on days when I am run down. (CP21)

I often go on a long walk in hills or open countryside when I want to clear my mind and/or when seeking inspiration. (CP26)

Looking across all the answers to this question, I was struck by the fact that three times as many people described their use of nature for self-healing in a way that was habitual, as distinct from relating a particular incident or time in their life. Of the nine in the latter category, the following are vivid examples.

I had had an argument with my mum which was vicious. I opened my back door and a hawk had brought down a pigeon. The pigeon was bleeding at the neck and the hawk just stood and stared at me before it flew off. The pigeon died. This made me recognise how cruel I had been

to my mum - I wanted to hurt her. I felt vicious but did not want her to die. I later apologised for how I had treated her but not for what I had been trying to say. Who was the pigeon, who was the hawk? (CP3)

For about 10 years ago I was very tired of too much work and responsibilities with work and family. It was late summer and the doctor gave me two weeks free from the work [...] I went to the forest and picked blueberries for the first 3-4 days. I needed to do something different but I had to do something! Nowadays I grow willow (different parts for weaving) and harvesting the different colours from yellow to purple and making baskets is a great recreation for me. (GC7)

Whilst visited by the family finders whilst in the process of adopting our son. They picked and ate a strawberry from the hanging basket outside the back door. They commented on its sweetness and how lovely to find strawberries in September. I still have those strawberries, they come back every year, they relate to an important part of my life. They helped me connect to two strangers who were important in their decision to match us to our son. The visit went extremely well and it was a powerful and positive experience. We had a fire recently which took away most of my garden and the loss of the strawberries was greatly felt more than anything. Thankfully they have re-emerged! (CP13)

When I wanted to die and had lost all hope, I went to the [place is named] and sat high on a hill, when I looked around me I felt life growing in me, I experienced a deep sense of connection and freedom with all the beauty surrounding me. I felt cleansed and fresh, hope and wonderment leapt into me and I wanted to live. This place is now symbolic for healing to me and I believe my life was saved from direct contact/experience with nature. (CP22)

I have lived in Central London for 2 years because I was bored with country life as the pace was slow and boring. In the 2 years I have been away I have been doing everything – (from actions to emotions) – at a speedy pace – has not been good for my health – as I need to slow down – and “go back to basics”. I have been back two and a half months. I find it hard to adjust to the slow pace yet have realised how calming nature can be. I appreciate it more and take more time to appreciate and respect it. I has allowed me to take my time and slow down and look after myself more. (CP23)

Most contributors wrote in the first person, but two contributors in the Green Care sample wrote about their work experiences, or made more general points:

Violent patients never damaged plants during last years. The ones that participate in the horticultural therapy respect the plants: they have never been object of a violent aggression. (GC2)

More in the converse – how unnatural environments particularly psychiatric wards are clearly

detrimental to healing unless a holistic view is taken. How much difference things like green space, running water, wooden furnishings, outdoor seating, natural light etc. have. (GC12)

Discussion

I have illustrated, by extensively quoting in full, a wide selection of responses to a simple questionnaire on how people experience nature-connectedness, nature-disconnectedness, and nature as healer. Although these two samples (a scientific group studying green care, and a counselling group studying therapy) were positively biased by their interests and professional orientation towards the two concepts I am exploring, I feel that their answers support the notion that connectedness to nature is a concept that is in at least some people's everyday experience and that they can relate it to their health. Furthermore, their responses show that some individuals regularly seek out nature-experiences to help their emotional or physical health, or link a nature-connected experience to an important psychological time in their life.

Of course, these are preliminary findings. Further research is necessary to investigate how far such experiences apply in other cultures, with younger people, and in people with different kinds or degrees of contact with nature, such as participants in outdoor sports, or those who regularly work in natural settings, perhaps contrasted with people who have very little contact at all. A major limitation is that it is not possible completely to exclude experimenter effects: how far my personal enthusiasm for ecopsychology and nature-based therapy, as well as the wording of the questionnaire, led to the findings reported here. Nevertheless, at least for these samples, and with the limitations of this questionnaire, I feel we have revealed a wealth of genuine personal experience which people seemed pleased to share.

The GC group wrote less on their questionnaires than the CP group, possibly because, for many of them, English was not their first language, or they were tired at the end of a long day. However the median differences did not reach statistical significance and the general content and tone of the contributions from the two samples were broadly similar. As noted above, there is considerable scope for further research; however, participants from Spain, Greece, and the United States who completed the questionnaire since this study report similar experiences to those presented here. I tentatively suggest that these experiences are widespread.

Based on the data reported here, nature-connected experiences seem to be strongly emotional, and positively so. Emotions include not only relaxing and pleasant ones but also those which are described as religious. Other researchers have found this too. An important and original work by Paffard (1973) describes the responses of 400 sixth-formers and university undergraduates to a literary extract describing a powerful nature experience. Over half of these young people (55.5%) described experiences of “nature-mystical joy, awe and fear” (p. 102) they had encountered through contact with nature. Paffard embarked on the study after wondering whether young people could identify with the nature-poetry of William Wordsworth in which he details many experiences he had whilst growing up in the English Lake District. Paffard painstakingly categorised his respondents’ accounts according to the kind of emotion they describe (for example, joy, fear, awe), and noticed that many could be described as akin to religious experiences, even transcendental. He decided that the word, “numinous” (implying the experience of God in nature) was particularly appropriate to describe these transcendental moments.

Understanding the developmental growth of nature-connectedness is important. Kahn’s (1999) detailed work on children’s moral reasoning about nature is relevant, whilst Cynthia Thomashow (2002) describes work she has done with children on nature projects such as the design of a zoo exhibit or the protection of a wildlife sanctuary. She found them ready to engage with environmental projects and felt that it gave them a chance to explore their “raw, wild nature” (p. 266) and indeed manage the tensions of adolescence. The children’s narratives she has collected show their contact with nature and she powerfully argues for the educational value nature has in emotional growth:

Through nature, adolescents are privy to models of living other than the cosmetically-driven world of magazines and movies and to rhythms and cycles that are different from those imposed by the constructs of a school day. Through nature they gain access to the wild and untethered, the naked realities of life and death [...] and come face to face with their biological origins and the underpinnings of human purpose and meaning (Thomashow, 2002: 264).

The recent surge in interest (in the UK) of giving children a school lesson in nearby woodland each week (‘Forest School’) is a practical instance of how this can be done in practice, and evaluation reports show not only the strong support this idea has from teachers, parents and children but also the value it has for children’s personal growth and physical health. For example, O’Brien and Murray (2006: 4)

recommend from their detailed study: “Forest School should be used on a wider basis as a vital part of children’s outdoor learning experience”.

I wondered, at the beginning of this article, whether one could more usefully take one’s therapy client for a walk in the woods, if connectedness-to-nature experiences were already in place for clients and emotionally positive, than stay in the consulting room. I think this idea should be thoroughly explored, given what my participants have shared in this study. It is not without its difficulties of course. Moving the focus on counselling and psychotherapy from the dyad or group in a room to natural settings outside a building is a challenge because it changes the client and therapist expectations about how to conduct therapy, moves the physical dynamic from face-to-face contact to side-by-side (as on a walk) or one that is even more distant (as in adventure therapy), alters the commercial relationship (can one charge the same fee for a walk in a wood to an hour in a consulting room?) and is subject to physical constraints such as closeness to natural settings, bad weather, and the client’s ease of mobility. As a compromise, one can use guided meditations (imaginal as opposed to *in vivo* experiences) and 'homework' nature-contact exercises for clients. Experience suggests they are useful ways of linking with nature, if not quite as good as the 'real thing'.

Yet if one looks away from conventional psychotherapy models to ones that specifically use nature as a healing medium, one can see many examples where benefit is gained from starting in the woods, rather than the consulting room, so to speak. 'Green care' is a useful phrase that includes a variety of nature-approaches to therapy. Sempik, Hine and Wilcox (2010) have edited the contributions of 15 researchers, therapists and practitioners drawn from the COST 866 scientific panel to a “conceptual model” of green care. This reviews a wide range of therapy and care approaches to the needs of different client groups from practitioners across many disciplines in a variety of international settings that include agricultural holdings ('care farms'), city and school farms, social and therapeutic horticulture gardens and allotments, and wilderness experiences.

Outside the domain of social and health care, there is an increasing interest in connecting (or reconnecting) with nature through gardening, travel to more natural places, 'green shifting' to country living and so on. This seems to echo the theme of this paper that we intuitively know that we need nature-contact and that it is good for us. As well as gardens, parks and holidays, community-supported agriculture

(Relf, 2006) and community land ownership through community land trusts (for example, Fordhall Farm: Hollins & Hollins, 2007; Hegarty, 2008) are ways to increase opportunities for many people to visit farms and natural places, whilst the growing movement of care-farming (Hassink & van Dijk, 2005; Dessein, 2007) makes such access possible for older people, those culturally-disadvantaged, and many clients with special-support needs.

I have used the term, 'self-healing' in this paper. I think that this deserves especial further study. If people have inner resources that they can turn to at times of trouble that arise in freely-available natural settings, health and social-care professionals have a cheap and plentiful resource to offer their clients. Instead of relying on expensive pharmacological or other resource-intensive treatments, people may find confidence in using more traditional approaches that they themselves can access and control. Even in helping people to recall previous important nature-experiences, the therapist may find his or her work effortlessly augmented.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Nature-connectedness and self-healing survey

I'm interested in how people feel “connected” with the natural world, or “disconnected”, whether people see this connectedness as linked with health and wellbeing, and whether they “self-medicate” in any way by seeking natural experiences. If you are happy for me to use information anonymously in my research, then please leave your completed questionnaires behind at the end of the session.

Many thanks,

Dr John Hegarty, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Keele University

[N.B. blank lines for people to contribute their responses to each question are omitted here]

“Connectedness”

1. What resonances if any does the idea of “connectedness with nature ” have for you? [please share any words, ideas, phrases, or personal experiences]
2. Conversely, does the opposite idea – of “being disconnected from Nature” seem to suggest words, phrases or experiences for you personally?

“Nature-connectedness and healing”

3. How far would you agree, for you personally, with the following: “Being connected with the natural world is a positive force for healing”

(Circle one of the following, from Strongly Agree through to Strongly Disagree”)

SA A N D SD

4. Do you have any personal experiences that fit in with the idea of nature and self-healing? If “Yes”, it would be interesting to share any experiences of this kind that you have had.....

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