Ecotherapy: the benefits for young people

INNOVATIONS IN PRACTICE

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For the most part when I was young and unhappy, there was safety in the mountains and woods, and I had an implicit recognition that I would not be 'bothered', challenged or obstructed in my self-healing by the animal inhabitants and certainly not by my geological surroundings. Removing myself from 'regular' society for that short period of three/four weeks gave my own thoughts space to flow into my mind and on out the other side, instead of lodging there weightily, clogging up the thought processes, preventing clarity and flow. But most of all it was trust and a sense of safety. Inexplicably, I felt the wilderness was a place of safety for me.

An ordinary 1970s childhood

My attention to nature began with what was at the time a fairly normal childhood of the 70s: first being born into a walking, camping, family; later the freedom to roam, the freedom to connect with the environment around me. Trees and swings; meeting with friends in the green lane between the village and the Downs. The woods were our playground, the backdrop against which we played out our childhood and teenage stories. I don't feel my friends and I were special: our village was three miles from a fairly sizeable town, we weren't particularly blessed with idyllic scenery and certainly none of our families were out of the ordinary, but what we had was the freedom of the times: television was still black and white, with only three channels; few of us had video players and handheld gaming was a thing of the future. Our parents worked hard and when we had no school we were expected to entertain ourselves, with books, indoor creative projects, or the outdoors. Perhaps they were

boring times, perhaps we were deprived, but we weren't conscious of these factors, we simply did what came naturally and when there was no homework or the evenings were summertime long, we grouped up on the playing field or by the monkey puzzle tree and explored the physical and emotional landscapes of our lives.

Growing up in the green

Nature never receded into the distance for me. Horse riding, then mountain biking, took me alone into the natural landscape filling me with awe and challenging my abilities to cope with the respective risks and accidents those sports often entail. My love of wild camping and cross-country rambling gave me a sense of freedom and of pilgrimage as I traversed this and other countries on foot and by bike. When my mental health deteriorated at the age of 24, the wild natural world was where I turned for help. I had an inbred distrust of doctors and the medication they would inevitably have doled out had I taken my depression to them. Instead I took a route that was natural and straightforward to me – that others might not have chosen and certainly not a route that would have been medically prescribed at that time – a tent, a rucksack and an adventure into the beckoning mountains of western Ireland. I felt with all my animal senses, my intellectual logic having shut down completely, that I would rediscover my mental health in the wilderness of this familiar but unknown country. And I did – to some extent.

What was it about the act of disappearing into that wilderness that 'sorted my head out'? What I found, which I did not know I was seeking, was the peace and the space, free from time and social constraints, to unwind years of personal emotional and academic stress; an opportunity to unravel what was, at that time, a tightly knotted skein of jumbled experiences, successes and failures, whose complexities I could no longer keep up with. I found freedom from care and from other people's concerns; freedom from the guilt of failing and the pressure of my own and others' expectations. What interests me from an objective point of view is that, inexplicably but implicitly, I knew that in nature I would be safe. In taking myself alone into the wilderness of course I opened myself up to dangers, but natural dangers I knew I could mitigate with innate, common sense, actions that didn't take thinking about. More importantly I felt I would be safe, liberated almost, from other people's responses to me, safe from questioning and concern; safe to simply be me, in my

desolation and despair, for as long as it lasted. Perhaps I am unusual in my response to personal crisis, but I think the roots of this response are in many of us. Think of the millions of people who own a dog: in the UK alone, according to the PDSA (People's Dispensary for Sick Animals), 24% of the population own a dog (PDSA, 2019). While dog owners walk for the benefit of their canine companion, for many the partnership is the veiled recognition that the presence of the dog gives legitimacy and purpose to their walk. They feel comfortable walking abroad, at any time of the day or night, as long as their four-legged friend is beside them, something they would not feel comfortable doing were the dog not there. Thousands of people every day take themselves and their dogs to spaces where the human partner is free to think, or not think; to unravel or to plan; where there is peace, or a wonderful view, wildlife or changing colours. The dog is the gateway to respectably losing ourselves in our natural surroundings.

Ecopsychology

So what of nature therapy – ecotherapy as it is becoming known – the conscious use of nature as an essential factor in a process of recovery from ill-health, be it mental or physical. In the mid 1990s a few psychologists and environmentalists began to link rising levels of mental illness with the increasing degradation of our planet. If the planet is 'unwell', they theorised – being mistreated in fact – then inevitably it would contribute to our species' unwellness, since humans can never feel truly healthy while the planet that gives us life is being systematically destroyed. Ecopsychology is the name for the blend of those two disciplines and ecotherapy is the resulting discipline's practical therapeutic response.

Environmental consciousness has proliferated over the last 20 years and ecotherapy has gathered momentum. Too late some would argue. Nevertheless, for many people the experience that being more involved with nature supports and improves their mental and physical health is undeniable. Research is plentiful, evidence is available. Craig Chalquist (2009) gives a fascinating summary of ecotherapy in different settings. Chalquist concludes that 'reconnection to the natural world... brings a larger capacity for health, self-esteem, self-relatedness, social connection, and joy.' Another study on ecotherapy in the UK, commissioned by Mind, followed the work of 130 ecotherapy projects across the UK. The concluding report 'Feel

better outside, feel better inside: Ecotherapy for mental wellbeing, resilience and recovery' (Mind, 2013) states conclusively that ecotherapy 'can improve physical health and mental wellbeing' and advises health and wellbeing boards, and public health and social care commissioning services to make sure it is available to people seeking support. At this point in time, ecotherapy interventions and associated research is predominantly focused on adults.

The Scouting movement (scouts.org.uk) maintains its affiliation with the outdoors, and the forest school movement that took root in the UK in the mid 1990s champions the needs of young children to learn through play in outdoor settings (www.forestschoolassociation.org). However, researchers seem less curious about the impact of nature on children and young people, and though schools have incorporated environmental issues for discussion as learning topics, the curriculum has been slow to recognise the young human's need for actual real-time nature connection. Chalquist called this inherent disregard for young people's developmental need for nature connection 'an old cultural blindspot' (Chalquist, 2009, p3). Ten years since these words were written, and it is more widely understood that children's mental health is intricately affected by their early social and emotional landscapes, there is still too little institutional awareness of how – arguably even more so than in 2009 – disconnection from nature is impacting on sensitive young people. More than ever I believe the mental health of our young people is now clearly affecting our education system (and vice versa), yet in secondary schools the academic curriculum remains paramount, and the performance tables imposed by government policy demand ever more quantitative rather than qualitative results.

'When my mental health deteriorated, the wild natural world was where I turned for help'

Loneliness in the 21st century

'In recent years youth loneliness and isolation have been increasingly identified as a matter of significant public concern' (Batsleer *et al*, 2018). Many people, not just the young, turn inwards when faced with tough situations. This is a natural response to feeling vulnerable, but for a young person it can be incredibly hard in times of stress

to find someone to trust. Uncertainty may be exacerbated by puberty, sexual orientation, ‘tribal’ affiliation, family breakdown, and emergence into independence financially and domestically. All these immediate frames of reference are likely to be changing just as they are trying to decipher who they actually are. These stresses have been the same for centuries of course. To greater or lesser extent, puberty, independence and growing responsibilities have exerted pressure on all individuals as they move from child to adulthood. Today, however, there are considerations for our young persons that were not present even 20 years ago. On an hourly, certainly daily basis, the social and popular media makes much of climate change, climate destruction and humanity’s primary role in our planet’s downfall. The truth of these claims is debated the world over, but the implication for our youth remains the same: this planet, that is our home, is dying and it is your parent’s and your grandparent’s fault.

Living with Doomsday

Is this the same crisis of fear that US citizens lived with when convinced of the scale of the ‘Communist threat’ in the 1950s? Or perhaps more pertinently, is the distress similar to that experienced during the increased nuclear threat in the 1970s and 1980s, in the face of button-happy presidents on opposing continents? Many people remember the sense of impending disaster that motivated protest marches, with flags and banners demanding disarmament. But how much did impending doom affect the everyday personal lives of young people in the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s, given that our generation grew up during these ‘crises’, in a world that in the end was not destroyed by megalomaniacs. How then might we relate our experience to what our children are going through? Children and young people are more sensitive today to the needs of the environment and our fellow creatures than generations of children before them. Over the last 10 to 15 years, many young people have been brought up on a diet of television, social media, and in-school or home-driven education that stresses personal consciousness of recycling, purchasing, environmental and animal issues in the name of ‘saving the planet’. With the never-sleeping ‘eye-in-the-sky’ voyeurism available, they have a window into the lives of our incredible planet’s animal, vegetable and mineral worlds. It is possible that children and young people understand the lives of a lion pride in the Serengeti better than the lives of the family across the street. They have fingertip access to

information the older generations only dreamt of and are supremely aware that, for instance, their choice of peanut butter will have a direct impact on the lives of orangutans in Borneo; from a harmless breakfast ingredient to wholesale species extinction in one fell swoop! Do adults – with the benefit of longevity and experiences that gives us the ability to deny, rationalise or ignore these facts, and who have the resilience to keep on keeping on – cope with the emotional implications? The answer to that is contentious. But how is a young person, with all the idealism and excitement of youth and without appropriate means to self-soothe, able to manage the destabilising dread that seeps into a juvenile heart when faced with these intimations of inevitable doom? At the time of writing, following the publication of a report by the International Panel on Climate Change, media everywhere are asserting that we have '12 years left' (IPCC, 2018). What does it mean? At 47 I find it hard to take this in and move forward while staying emotionally in touch with a world which schedules somehow to self-destruct when I am 60. How then would I move forward emotionally if I were 14 or 18?

The small but compelling body of research into the impact of nature on young people suggests there are valuable positive outcomes to be gained. One study, into the benefits of a rural residential week for urban young persons, showed that following the stay 'teachers report that: 83% of children have reduced truancy; 94% of children show increased motivation at school; and 90% of children show improved engagement at school' (Feilden and Carney, 2010). Another study looks at the stress reduction and increased social and academic resilience achieved when children have access to a 'green schoolyard' (Chawla *et al*, 2014). A third that looked at the change in young person's behaviour and mood when in a forest school setting compared with a conventional school setting found 'greater positive change in the forest school setting.' Importantly the findings suggest that the greatest change is observed in young people who initially show the most challenging behaviour (Roe *et al*, 2011).

The Centre for Ecotherapy

Based on the high probability that young people will benefit from ecotherapy, the Centre for Ecotherapy has over the last two years determinedly grown its youth programme, with the aim of providing a strong youth service to the community.

Initially we offered opportunities for youth offenders to work off their community hours. The accompanying restorative justice support worker told us:

'Ecotherapy engages the young offenders in nature and the community simultaneously... (It) *works particularly well at engaging young people who are failing to attend school, or who display extremely challenging behaviour in the classroom. The young people learn and stay focused doing the practical work and keep calm and relaxed in the open, outdoors environment.'*

Note the similar response to the research paper looking at forest schools versus conventional schools (Roe *et al*, 2011).

We have now extended our provision to offer weekly sessions for groups with particular educational needs from local colleges and pupil referral units. They usually come with education, health and care plans (EHCPs) stipulating that the individual needs special attention in a particular area of their life, be it with learning, emotional or behavioural difficulties. For us, however, the reason these young people have an EHCP is less relevant than simply getting them to attend, because once on site, the effects of being in an open, green, tree-filled environment with a practical, easygoing programme designed to stimulate conversation and learning, are so undeniably positive that they speak for themselves. One 16-year-old gave this feedback:

'Being at [the Centre for Ecotherapy] puts me in my safe zone. It lets me be open-minded and try new things. It's a place where I can speak my mind and listen to others, and talk about my problems in a safe place... Now I come to ecotherapy, it feels like nothing can get in my way.'

This young man has picked up on that same feeling I had during my breakdown...that being in nature, far from being frightening or threatening, actually gives him a feeling of 'safety'. It must be acknowledged that not *all* young people take to the work, but in my experience it is the majority.

Why does ecotherapy offer such 'safety'? More to the point, why does nature itself offer this sense of safety? First, I suggest it is the freedom of being in an open space, without the confining walls of the conventional class or therapy room: you can run away if need be. Most creatures when cornered will come at you all teeth and claws, but given room will flee. Similarly a threatened or stressed human has the option of walking or running away from the perceived threat. And this is what we see,

for as they grow accustomed to the space, they take advantage of it, moving into it, using it to protect themselves. One young person spoke specifically about the appeal of sitting by the pond, where other people's voices were distant but still audible. It was important to him because it made him feel 'at ease, not isolated... I can sit here and hear people's chat, hear people talking in the background'. A young person who feels isolated or out of place in society, or socially uneasy, who might be under pressure at school or insecure at home, may lack the emotional resilience they need to manage the confrontational style so often present in schools, whether at the hands of other young people or sadly overstretched staff members. Spending some curriculum time in an open, de-pressuring environment that offers respite from overwhelming emotions, and release from turbulent thoughts, can nurture a growing inner sense of self, out of which balance and strength may emerge.
A parent of one young man commented:
'My son really liked the calm atmosphere of being in the woods and learning outside the classroom, taking pressure and stress away from him, therefore enabling him to learn more. He liked the course sessions because it showed him how to do things differently with things around him, so I believe this helped him to "think outside the box" and could be used in different situations and would give him confidence to try other new things and believe in himself.'

Something as simple as cooking over a fire affords opportunities for many positive interactions that activate and affirm a young person's capacity for 'good' behaviour: appropriate discussion, generosity and helpfulness, learning and doing together, giving and sharing. When skills and attention are developed in this natural setting they can be taken up cleanly as practical and emotional lessons received without distraction.

Conclusion

Young people are sensitive and passionate creatures. They are driven instinctually, by the newness of existence and the determination to survive and thrive. When their world is darkened by stressful times, the opportunity to reconnect with something inexpressible can be deeply attractive. Ecotherapy offers this reward, a feeling of comfort and 'rightness'. It works on a level that young people are still unconsciously in touch with. My strong impression is that the benefits I have seen positively affect a

young person's ability to tolerate and regulate emotions, and to choose how to behave. This of course is fundamental at a stage of life when schools, parents and society are demanding self-discipline, focus, engagement and academic achievement; a time when external forces and emotions are dragging their attention elsewhere, and even an emotionally secure and well-balanced young person may be finding it hard to focus. My hope would be that further funded research could substantiate these benefits, to provide nationally accessible ecotherapy services to many more young people who are facing almost incomprehensible insecurity and threat to their physical and emotional lives.

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