Guest Introduction

by **Nick Totton**

Ecopsychology in the UK is growing with great speed: branching, flowering, fruiting – and, of course, competing for resources like any healthy ecosystem. Even in the short period since the anthology *Vital Signs*, which I co-edited with Mary-Jayne Rust, came out three years ago (Rust and Totton, 2011), there have been striking new clarifications and consolidations of theory and practice; and this special issue (together with its sequel next year) tries to represent that process.

Many authors included here also wrote for *Vital Signs*; others were omitted, either through lack of space or through the editors' oversight. No doubt the same holds true of this selection. But ecosystemic thinking teaches us to be wary of completism: every system nests within a larger system, and no linear enumeration will exhaust the network of mutual effects and connections. The Ecopsychology UK website (ecopsychologyuk.ning.com) has over 1,300 members; not all of these are from the UK, and not all of them write about their work, but I guess that a very high proportion are doing unique and interesting things. Hopefully what we have in these two special issues is a fair sample; and it includes several of the longer-standing and more influential ecopsychologists on this island.

For the benefit of readers coming to it for the first time I should say something about what ecopsychology actually is: for those of us who have been deeply involved for years, it can be hard to remember that this is a new and unfamiliar field. Theodore Roszak, whom I believe coined the term, wrote this in 1992:

> Psychology needs ecology; ecology needs psychology. From this partnership a new profession can be born: an ecopsychology that combines the sensitivity of the therapist with the expertise of the ecologist. The value of such a new body of professionals reaches well beyond individual healing. Just as past therapies have achieved wide-ranging, cultural influence by redefining the roles that sexuality, aggression, family ties, and spiritual alienation have in human nature, ecopsychology, too, has a greater cultural task: to redefine the relationship of the natural environment to sanity in our time. The political implications of such a trans-valuation of human nature should be clear.
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> (Roszak, 1992: 8)

Although one might take issue with some of Roszak's points, I think this passage contains the seeds of most of what has developed since. All of the authors below take up and explore aspects of this partnership between ecology and psychology, and aspects of the task which Roszak defines, 'to redefine the relationship of the natural environment to sanity in our time'.

What I think has changed since Roszak, and continues to change, is our understanding of the role of human beings. Roszak pretty much assumed the centrality of humans to ecopsychology, and indeed to existence; many ecopsychologists would now say that 'sanity' involves a *de-centring* of humanity, and especially of Western human culture – a recognition that the other-than-human and more-than-human have value in their own right, independent of their usefulness or otherwise to us. Indeed, an alternative question might be: is humanity useful to the other-than-human?

What has also changed since 1992, of course, is that we are two decades closer to runaway climate change; two decades poorer in biodiversity; two decades more overpopulated; two decades less hopeful. The 'political implications' of which Roszak speaks are now desperately obvious; and ecopsychology in the UK speaks strongly to them. The work here mainly addresses the politics of the personal rather than the public sphere, recognizing how personal, cultural and political change need to synchronize. There are many unresolved questions about how the individual and the collective mesh; and these are, of course, exactly the questions which ecosystemic thinking addresses. Here are samples from a joint cooperative–competitive work which will be in progress for some time.

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References

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