

Our Psychic Connections to Nature

Now there is a name for the emotional distress caused by ecological destruction.

By [David Bollier](#)



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We've all seen the bumper sticker, "The Earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth." A pithy tagline meant to point out that human culture must align itself more closely with ecological imperatives. But is that a simple moralistic claim or a scientific, demonstrable fact?

A handful of psychologists are starting to conclude that human consciousness has a deep interconnections with nature — and that interfering with our sense of place and love of nature can cause severe emotional distress.

A few years ago, Glenn Albrecht, a philosopher and professor of sustainability in Perth, Australia, coined a word to describe a phenomenon that he has seen repeatedly when people's local natural environments have been damaged or changed — "solastalgia." The word is a combination of the Latin word *solacium*, which means comfort, and the Greek root *algia*, which means pain. To him, "solastalgia" means "the pain experienced when there is a recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault." It is "a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'."

Albrecht coined the phrase after studying the psychological distress of people in the Upper Hunter Valley of southeastern Australia. A huge increase in open-pit coal mining in the region — complete with frequent explosive blasts of rock, airborne coal dust and rumbling coal trains — was causing a "mournful disorientation" among people. Their natural, everyday world was being radically disrupted, leaving them with a deep psychic pain despite being "at home."

A recent piece in the [New York Times Magazine](#) by [Daniel B. Smith](#) explored the growing

subdiscipline of “ecopsychology” that is attempting to chart the ways in which nature is critical to our mental health.

After Albrecht coined the word *solastalgia*, it was quickly picked up because it applied to so many similar circumstances — in Smith’s words, “the experiences of Canadian Inuit communities coping with the effects of rising temperatures; Ghanaian subsistence farmers faced with changes in rainfall patterns; and refugees returning to New Orleans after Katrina.” Home is being destroyed. You can’t leave, you can’t do anything about it, and it makes you heartsick. As global warming continues, it’s a condition that is likely to afflict most of us.

While many traditionalists in psychology regard the notion of solastalgia as empirically nebulous and spiritually vague, others regard it as a return to basics in studying the human psyche. After all, humans for millennia have lived in very close proximity with nature. Only in the past several decades has human dominance of nature reached such proportions that people spend typically more time in front of an electronic screen than in the outdoors. Children now spend more than eight hours a day in front of a screen, which promoted author Richard Louv to invent the term “nature deficit disorder” in 2005.

The most fascinating part of Daniel Smith’s article was his citation of Gregory Bateson’s 1972 book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, which, among other things, deals with human consciousness and complex systems. Bateson believed that “the tendency to think of mind and nature as separate indicated a flaw at the core of human consciousness,” in Smith’s words. “Humankind suffered from an ‘epistemological fallacy’: we believed, wrongly, that mind and nature operated independently of each other. In fact, nature was a recursive, mindlike system; its unit of exchange wasn’t energy, as most ecologists argued, but information. The way we thought about the world could change that world, and the world could in turn change us.”

Bateson argued that our epistemological fallacy is to believe that nature is separate from us, when in fact it is part of our consciousness: “You decide that you want to get rid of the byproducts of human life and that Lake Erie will be a good place for them. You forget that the ecomental system called Lake Erie is part of your wider ecomental system — and that if Lake Erie is driven insane, its insanity is incorporated in the larger system of your thought and experience.”

When we are purpose-driven, and our technology allows our purposes to be played out on a regional or global scale, and those purposes are primarily the monetization of nature, then our despoliation of nature is tantamount to despoiling our mental habitat as well. *Solastalgia* results. “There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds,” said Bateson (quoted here by Smith), “and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself.”

I love this analysis because it points out that a better kind of economics or public policy or science is not enough. None of those are likely to deal with our inner, psychic lives — how we feel. Activating that dimension of ourselves holds more answers than might be imagined.

I like to think that the commons offers a point of access to our psychic lives because it asks that we participate and feel moral and social connections to shared resources and to other commoners. We can get past the comforting delusion that “if only the EPA would get things right” or “if only we voted in more green politicians,” then the Earth could be made safe and sustainable. Surely we do need a more capable EPA and more green politicians, but it is arguably our “ecopsychology” that will be more powerful and consequential over time.

Albrecht has coined a new term for that psychological counterpart to *solastalgia* — “soliphilia.” By that, he means “the love of and responsibility for a place, bioregion, planet and the unity of interrelated interests within it.”

Ecopsychologists don’t quite know how to foster *soliphilia* but they suspect that it will hold some

important answers to reclaiming ourselves and restoring nature. Having a word at least helps us name the phenomenon and begin to grapple with it. We can begin to recognize eco-destruction is indeed a pathological force in our psychological lives, and perhaps start to imagine new “therapies” for reuniting our minds and the Earth.

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